

# Customary-State Authority Contestation in Forest Governance: Mechanisms, Sustainability, and Local Community Welfare in Aceh

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Forests are central to ecological sustainability and local livelihoods, yet forest governance in Aceh is characterized by persistent contestation between customary institutions, such as Imuem Mukim, Geuchik/Reje, and the Aceh/Gayo Customary Councils on the one hand and state authorities on the other, despite legal formal recognition of customary rights through Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/2012 and the Aceh Governance Law No. 11/2006. This study examines how customary-state authority contestation is produced and negotiated through concrete governance mechanisms rather than overt conflict. Drawing on political ecology, legal pluralism and governance theories, this qualitative case study employs interviews, participant observation, focus group discussions, and document analysis in selected sites in Aceh. The findings suggest that contestation operates primarily through technical and procedural mechanism, including spatial mapping and zoning, permit regimes, documentary requirements, and social forestry programs. While customary authorities govern forests through socially embedded norms emphasizing moral obligation and collective stewardship, state actors exercise authority through bureaucratic instruments privileging legality, documentation, and development-oriented rationalities. These interactions generate an asymmetrical configuration of authority, in which customary institutions persist through negotiated and conditional incorporation. The study contributes to global debates on political ecology and legal pluralism by showing that forest sustainability and local community welfare depend on how institutional pluralism is managed in practice through negotiated co-governance arrangements.

**Keywords:** Aceh; Customary Authority; Forest Governance; Legal Pluralism; Political Ecology



## INTRODUCTION

Forests play essential roles in maintaining ecological balance, sustaining social systems, and supporting economic livelihoods, making them central to both human and planetary sustainability. Beyond their ecological functions, forests constitute complex political, economic, and social landscapes in which multiple actors, states, corporations, as well as local and indigenous communities, assert competing claims and interests (Agrawal, 2008, p. 32; Peluso & Vander-

geest, 2020; Pichler & Ingalls, 2021, pp. 186-187). In many developing countries, including Indonesia, forest areas have become enduring sites of contestation between state and customary authorities that hold historical and moral claims over land and resources (Latif et al., 2024, p. 56; Myers et al., 2017). These contestations shape not only patterns of forest use and conservation but also directly affect the welfare of local communities whose livelihoods are deeply intertwined with forest ecosystems (Fisher et al., 2019, p. 159).

Indonesia's forestry governance framework formally acknowledges the rights of indigenous and customary communities through several legal instruments, including Law No. 41/1999 regarding Forestry, the Constitutional Court Decision No. 35/2012, which clarifies that customary forests are distinct from state forests, and Law No. 11/2006 on the Governance of Aceh, which grants asymmetric authority in natural resource management. Drawing on Afiff and Rachman (2019) analysis of institutional activism, where indigenous actors seek recognition of customary forest rights from within the Indonesian state and debates on indigeneity in Indonesian politics are further elaborated, this seemingly progressive legal architecture is shown to coexist with persistent conflicts of authority in practice. State institutions tend to privilege formal legality, administrative control, and standardized regulatory frameworks, whereas customary authorities emphasize local ecological knowledge, inherited norms, and value-based relationships between humans and forests (Butt, 2014, p. 65; Safitri, 2015, pp. 37-40). These divergent governance logics frequently generate tensions that undermine both forest sustainability as well as the social and legal legitimacy of governance arrangements at the local level (Afiff & Rachman, 2019; Schleicher et al., 2018, p. 43).

Aceh offers a particularly distinctive context within these broader dynamics. Alongside its special autonomy status, Aceh formally recognizes customary institutions such as the *Imuem Mukim* and *Pawang Glee* as legitimate socio-political actors in the governance of natural resources. Customary law in Aceh operates alongside formal state law and Islamic law, creating a dense landscape of legal pluralism in which multiple normative systems coexist and interact (Mahmuddin & Januar, 2020). Customary authorities seek to uphold forest governance based on religio-cultural values and collective stewardship, while the state advances universal forestry regulations grounded in positive law. These differing orientations frequently generate conflicts of interest, especially when state-led initiatives, such as social forestry, conservation programs, or extractive investment, are implemented without fully engaging local governance systems (Asteria et al., 2024; Astuti & McGregor, 2015; Camacho et al., 2012; Harly, 2023).

The dynamics of forest governance in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia have become more complex following the decentralization reforms initiated in 1998. Decentralization, while intended to empower local governments and enhance participatory governance, in practice often reinforced local oligarchies aligned with economic interest, thereby marginalizing indigenous and customary communities (Firman, 2009, pp. 146-147; Hall et al., 2013). Across many regions, indigenous claims to forest ownership and management have clashed with the objectives of the forestry sector, large-scale plantations, and international conservation initiatives such as market-oriented REDD+ schemes (Astuti & McGregor, 2015; Dressler et al., 2017; Williams, 2023). This has produced a paradox in which policies framed as inclusive simultaneously generate new forms of exclusion through top-down approaches that insufficiently account for local, social, and institutional contexts (van Oosten et al., 2014).

Recent scholarship in political ecology emphasized that forests are deeply shaped by political processes, with the state frequently asserting exclusive control over forest territories to advance national economic and political agendas (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020). Empirical studies from Indonesia, such as those conducted in West Papua (Sopaheluwakan et al., 2023) and

among the Kajang in South Sulawesi (Fisher & van der Muur, 2020), demonstrate that, although there is formal acknowledgment of customary rights, forest management practices remain highly susceptible to shifting power dynamics and elite interest. Similar dynamics are evident in the research by Mulyoutami and associates (2009) on indigenous forest management systems in West Kalimantan, where ecologically sustainable local practices persist despite their continued marginalization within national legal frameworks. Against this backdrop, this study demonstrates the capacity of indigenous knowledge to sustain ecological resilience and extends this body of work by empirically examining how such knowledge systems navigate and contest overlapping state, market, and intra-community power hierarchies in contemporary forest governance.

Forest governance conflicts extend beyond questions of land tenure to everyday management practices. Government authorities often frame shifting cultivation, an integral component of many indigenous livelihood systems, as a driver of deforestation. Yet, empirical research demonstrates that such practices can contribute to forest regeneration and landscape sustainability (Wollenberg et al., 2001, 2007). Likewise, participatory initiatives such as social forestry are frequently promoted as a solution but often remain rhetorical, with limited transfer of authority to local communities. In many cases, technocratic actors and local elites consolidate control, reinforcing existing power asymmetries (Astuti & McGregor, 2015; Fisher et al., 2019). Consequently, legal pluralism in forest governance often produces contradictory outcomes: recognition of customary actors on paper alongside renewed constraints on their practical authority.

Within the Acehnese context, legal pluralism is further shaped by the coexistence of Islamic law and long-standing customary governance systems. Previous research indicates Acehnese customary institutions possess considerable capacity to link environmental conservation with community welfare (Mahmuddin & Januar, 2020). Nevertheless, policy implementation frequently encounters obstacles arising from limited institutional capacity, regulatory inconsistencies, and external political and economic pressures. In this regard, adaptive collaborative management approaches offer a useful framework for fostering more balanced forms of shared governance between state and customary authorities (Colfer et al., 2021, pp. 87-88). At the same time, critical perspectives such as feminist political ecology, highlight that power relations and inequalities, including gendered hierarchies, are often reproduced with both state and customary governance systems and therefore require explicit analytical attention (Siscawati, 2014). Yet, few studies have examined how these overlapping legal, institutional, and gendered power relations shape everyday decision-making over forest use in Aceh, a gap that this article addresses by analyzing contemporary customary forest governance through an integrated political ecology and legal pluralism lens.

While existing studies on political forests and legal pluralism largely emphasize either state dominance or the symbolic recognition of customary authority, they remain limited in explaining how customary institutions continue to exercise influence under conditions of bureaucratic and legal domination. This article argues that in Aceh, contestation between customary and state authorities produces a form of conditional hybrid governance, in which customary authority persists not primarily through formal recognition, but through strategic institutional bricolage embedded in everyday practices, moral claims, and negotiated compliance. By examining empirical interactions between customary institutions and state agencies in forest governance, this study contributes to debates in political ecology, legal pluralism, and governance by demonstrating that hybrid governance arrangements are inherently asymmetrical and contingent, shaped by power relations, documentation regimes, and competing epistemologies of

authority. In doing so, the article addresses a significant empirical and conceptual gap in the international literature on forest governance in contexts of institutional.

### **CUSTOMARY AUTHORITIES INVOLVED IN MANAGING FORESTS IN ACEH**

This section examines the customary and state authorities involved in managing forests in Aceh, outlining their respective roles and significance, as well as the tensions and conflicts that arise in their interactions.

#### ***Pawang Glee (Pawang Uteun/Pengulu Uten): Customary Forest Authority in Aceh***

Within Aceh's socio-cultural system, the *Pawang Glee* – also known as *Pawang Uteun* in coastal areas and *Pengulu Uten* in the Gayo highlands – is a customary authority with a central role in maintaining, regulating, and supervising the use of customary forest areas (*uteun*), particularly with regard to access, extraction, and conservation. The term *pawang* does not merely denote spiritual expertise, but refers to an authoritative figure entrusted with socio-ecological responsibilities, especially the maintenance of balance between human livelihoods and forest ecosystems. Historically, the *Pawang Glee* emerged during the Aceh Sultanate period, when forest governance was deeply embedded in local economic systems, religious beliefs, and political authority (Aswita et al., 2022, pp. 58-59; Nasution, 2017, p. 26). From an institutional perspective, the *Pawang Uteun* occupies an intermediary position between customary governance and the state. Normatively, its authority is formally recognized under Aceh Qanun No. 10/2008 concerning Customary Institutions, which grants functional customary institutions jurisdiction over specific domains, such as forests, seas, and agriculture. This legal recognition positions the *Pawang Uteun* as a tangible manifestation of Aceh's cultural autonomy as stipulated in Law No. 11/2006 concerning the Governing Laws of Aceh (*Undang-Undang Pemerintahan Aceh*, UUPA). In practice, the *Pawang Uteun* formulates and enforces customary rules governing forest use, designates prohibited forest zones (*glee*), mediates land and boundary disputes (Hasnitaria et al., 2022; Suganda, 2024), and performs rituals, such as the *kenduri uteun* and *peusijuek uteun* (Muslihin et al., 2022, pp. 6-7). These practices reaffirm the moral and spiritual relationship between communities and forest landscapes while simultaneously functioning as regulatory mechanisms.

Empirical studies from Central Aceh and Gayo Lues demonstrate that *Pawang Uteun/Pengulu Uteun* play a pivotal role in community-based forest management. Through strong moral and social authority and social legitimacy, they enforce ecological norms that regulate logging, hunting, and land conversion, thereby contributing to the sustainability of tropical forest ecosystems (Aswita et al., 2022; Muslihin et al., 2022). These practices illustrate a form of *de facto* co-management, in which customary norms interact, sometimes cooperatively, sometimes tensely, with state forestry regulations and bureaucratic procedures.

From a perspective of ecological anthropology, the *Pawang Uteun* exemplifies indigenous environmental governance rooted in collective decision-making and moral accountability (Hasnitaria et al., 2022; Latif et al., 2024, pp. 4-5). Violations of forest rules are understood not only as ecological transgressions but also as moral breaches that may result in *meusibah* (misfortune or disaster) for the wider community (Trinita et al., 2025). Within Indonesia's plural legal landscape, the *Pawang Uteun* thus represents a form of living law, whose decisions frequently inform village governance and are occasionally referenced by state actors, illustrating the everyday negotiation between customary authority and formal law (Mansur et al., 2024; Suganda,

2024). At the same time, however, this position is inherently fragile. Although formally recognized, the authority of the *Pawang Uteun* is often subordinated to state-issued permits, spatial planning maps, and conservation classifications. As a result, customary forest governance operates within a structurally asymmetrical relationship, where moral and social legitimacy must continuously be negotiated against the legal and administrative dominance of the state. This tension forms a key arena of contestation in Aceh's forest governance.

### ***Peutua Seuneubok*: Customary Authority in Agrarian and Land Governance**

The *Peutua Seuneubok* is the customary authority responsible for regulating and managing the use of dry agricultural land (*seuneubok*) in rural Acehnese communities, particularly in East Aceh, Aceh Tamiang, and North Aceh. *Seuneubok* areas are collectively cleared and cultivated by village residents and have long served as the material foundation of subsistence and communal livelihoods. Predating the modern state, this institution governs relations between people, land, water, and agricultural production within a customary-Islamic normative framework. As Zikri (2017) notes, post-tsunami social transformations in Aceh further demonstrate the adaptive capacity of institutions such as the *Peutua Seuneubok* to reorganize the community's agrarian system based on collective responsibility and local autonomy. Selected through community deliberation and legitimized through social recognition, the *Peutua Seuneubok* regulates land allocation, cropping practices, and access to control of agricultural resources. Its formal recognition under Qanun No. 10/2008 confirms its position within Aceh's customary legal system (Kurniawan, 2012, p. 63). Functionally, the institution operates as an intermediary between village administration and customary mechanisms, particularly in land-use planning and agrarian dispute resolution. Agrarian governance under the *Peutua Seuneubok* reflects a broader worldview in which land and forests are understood not merely as economic assets, but as social and spiritual entities requiring restraint, care, and intergenerational responsibility (Apriana, 2015).

Following the institutional strengthening of customary governance after Qanun No. 10/2008, the role of the *Peutua Seuneubok* has become more visible within local governance structures. Andriyadi (2015) argues that the reinforcement of the Aceh Customary Council (*Majelis Adat Aceh*, MAA) has enhanced the political relevance of functional customary institutions in public decision-making. Nevertheless, empirical research from Aceh Jaya indicates that the division of authority between state regulations and customary norms remains complex and contested, particularly in the governance of land and natural resources (Latif et al., 2024). Similar dynamics are observed in the Gayo highlands, where integration between customary authorities and local government can enhance efficiency and legitimacy, but remains dependent on negotiated arrangements rather than equal power relations. Thus, the *Peutua Seuneubok* represents more than a traditional agrarian institution: It embodies a form of community-based governance that integrates Islamic spirituality, customary norms, and environmental stewardship, yet it is also marked by uneven power relations, internal hierarchies, and tensions that arise as its customary legitimacy intersects, often unequally and sometimes contradictorily, with state authority.

### ***Keujruen Blang*: Customary Authority for Irrigation and Water Management in the Acehnesse Agrarian System**

*Keujruen Blang*, a traditional institution in Aceh, plays a pivotal role in governance and social order, particularly in managing agricultural practices and community empowerment. This institution is instrumental in coordinating agricultural activities and enhancing the welfare of community members. For instance, it is responsible for organizing clean-up activities, managing water distribution to rice fields, and aiding local leaders, such as the *Geuchik*, in community events and problem-solving related to agricultural operations. Its significance is underscored by its focus on local customs and community needs, reflecting the integration of traditional governance systems with contemporary agricultural practices (Budi et al., 2019; Mardhiah et al., 2023). The societal importance of *Keujruen Blang* is evident in its function as a mediator in conflicts that may arise within agricultural communities. It creates a framework for resolving issues based on local wisdom, which is crucial for maintaining social harmony and ensuring inclusive farmer participation in agricultural governance. The establishment of *Keujruen Blang* has led to the formation of clear regulations regarding rice field management and provides legal protection for farmers, fostering a sense of security and stability (Mardhiah et al., 2023, 2024). Moreover, as a local governance body, it enables farmers to exercise their rights and participate actively in managing agricultural resources, thereby contributing to food security and economic stability in the region (Syahputri et al., 2023).

However, conflicts may arise between *Keujruen Blang* and the Department of Agriculture and Plantations (*Dinas Pertanian dan Perkebunan*), particularly when their roles and responsibilities overlap, or when there is a discrepancy in their approaches to agricultural management.

The Department of Agriculture and Plantations, which operates under broader government policies, could implement initiatives that may not align with the local customs upheld by *Keujruen Blang*. For example, while the Department may prioritize certain agricultural techniques or crops based on national objectives, *Keujruen Blang* focuses on what is practical and culturally acceptable within the community. In situations where government policies do not resonate with local practices, misunderstandings or friction may occur, leading to disputes over resource management and agricultural policies. Furthermore, the participatory governance model advocated by *Keujruen Blang* can clash with the top-down approaches often employed by formal government entities, such as the Department of Agriculture and Plantations. This can lead to a lack of trust among community members if they perceive that their customs are being disregarded in favor of bureaucratic efficiency. Thus, the potential for conflict between these institutions highlights the need for collaborative governance approaches that respect traditional practices while integrating them with formal agricultural policies (Mardhiah et al., 2023, 2024).

In conclusion, the position of *Keujruen Blang* within the governance and social order of Aceh is characterized by its dual role as a facilitator of agricultural management and a custodian of local customs. Its importance lies in its ability to foster community cohesion and implement practices tailored to the needs of farmers. Nonetheless, it must navigate the complexities of working alongside more formal government agencies, requiring effective communication and mutual respect to mitigate conflicts and enhance cooperative governance in agricultural development.

## State Authorities in Forest Governance in Aceh

State authority over forest governance in Aceh is primarily exercised by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (*Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan*, KLHK) at the national level and by the Provincial Environment and Forestry Service (*Dinas Lingkungan Hidup dan Kehutanan*, DLHK), alongside the Department of Agriculture and Plantations (*Dinas Pertanian dan Perkebunan*), at the subnational level. These institutions are responsible for enforcing environmental regulations, implementing forest zoning and management plans, and overseeing conservation and utilization strategies. Through regulatory oversight, licensing systems, and compliance mechanisms, they play a dominant role in shaping forest governance and sustainability agendas in Indonesia, often in ways that intersect, and sometimes conflict, with customary authorities' claims to land and resources (Butarbutar, 2023; Ramadhan, 2024). Beyond regulation, state authorities act as mediators between competing interests, particularly between conservation objectives and resource extraction. The forestry sector under ministerial authority controls access to economically valuable commodities, such as timber and plantation crops, frequently generating tensions between economic development and environmental protection (Apresian, 2025, pp. 83-84). The Ministry also administers international climate-related funding and conservation programs, further consolidating its institutional power over forest governance (Ramadhan, 2024).

Conflicts between state authorities and customary communities commonly arise around land tenure and resource rights. Although indigenous groups assert ancestral ownership and stewardship over forest territories, such claims are often subordinated to state-issued permits and concessions favoring corporate or development interests (Madiung et al., 2023, p. 689; Myers et al., 2017). Importantly, the recognition of indigenous land rights in Indonesia follows a multi-level process: Indigenous communities must first obtain formal recognition from district (*kabupaten*) governments, before the Ministry of Environment and Forestry can issue legal titles or designate customary forests (*hutan adat*) (Tamma & Duile, 2020). This layered recognition process reinforces state control while rendering customary rights contingent upon administrative approval. Moreover, empirical studies demonstrate that state interventions can intensify tensions when customary practices are ignored or overridden by formal regulations (Deli-ana et al., 2023, p. 2; Hidayat et al., 2018, p. 2). Large-scale concessions for plantations, mining, or infrastructure development often disregard indigenous land claims, resulting in dispossession and prolonged conflict (Sufriadi et al., 2024). These dynamics reveal how state-led development priorities frequently clash with customary norms of sustainable resource use (Asriadi et al., 2023).

In sum, while the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and its subnational counterparts are central actors in forest governance in Indonesia in general and in Aceh in specific, their interactions with customary authorities are marked by enduring tensions rooted in legal pluralism, economic priorities, and asymmetrical power relations. At the same time, the Ministry also serves as the key state body that issues indigenous land titles following regency-level recognition, adding another layer to the politics of recognition and authority over customary territories. These institutional configurations form the backdrop against which contestations over forest governance in Aceh unfold.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a case study approach, which is particularly suitable for examining interactions, contestations, and negotiations between customary

and state authorities in forest governance in Aceh. A case study framework allows for an in-depth and context-sensitive analysis of how authority, legitimacy, and power are constructed and exercised in specific socio-political and ecological settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2017). An interpretivist approach is employed to capture the meanings, experiences, and everyday practices through which actors understand and enact forest governance.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to capture key perspectives from four groups: (1) customary authorities, including *Imuem Mukim*, *Pawang Glee*, and representatives of the Aceh Customary Council; (2) state actors from relevant government agencies; (3) non-governmental organizations involved in environmental and community-based initiatives; and (4) indigenous and local community members directly interacting with forest resources. Snowball sampling was used to reach additional informants who were difficult to access. Secondary data were obtained from policy documents, legal texts, government reports, academic publications, and relevant media sources, serving as triangulation to strengthen empirical interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, following the interactive model proposed by Huberman and Miles (2002). This involved transcription of field data, coding, categorization, and the identification of recurring themes. The analysis was guided by frameworks from political ecology, governance studies, and theories of power contestation, enabling an examination of patterns of domination, resistance, and hybrid governance arrangements between customary and state actors. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through member checking, the maintenance of an audit trail, and the application of qualitative rigor criteria, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Configuring Authority in Aceh's Forest Governance

Empirical findings from this study demonstrate that forest governance in Aceh is constituted through the coexistence and interaction of multiple authorities that operate with distinct sources of legitimacy, regulatory logics, and ecological rationalities. An *Imuem Mukim* of Blang Birah (Bireuen Regency) explained during fieldwork that “the forest is not ours to sell; it belongs to our ancestors and to our grandchildren. We are only entrusted to guard it” (personal communication, 27 July 2025). Such statements reveal that governance claims are articulated not first in legal language, but in moral and intergenerational terms. Rather than forming a coherent or unified governance system, forest management in Aceh unfolds within a plural and fragmented institutional landscape shaped by post-decentralization reforms, asymmetric legal recognition, and historically embedded customary institutions. Authority over forests is thus neither singular nor fixed, but continuously configured through everyday practices, negotiations, and contestations between customary actors, state agencies, and local communities.

At the community level, customary authorities, such as the *Imuem Mukim*, *Pawang Glee* or *Pawang Uteun*, *Peutua Seuneubok*, *Pengulu Uten* in the Gayo highlands, as well as the Aceh and Gayo Customary Councils, constitute a durable normative order that frames forests as *tanoh pusaka* (ancestral heritage). Interviews and focus group discussions consistently revealed that customary leaders conceptualize forests not as commodities or administrative objects, but as moral and ancestral spaces entrusted to the community across generations. A *Pengulu Uten* in the Gayo highlands noted, “if we allow the trees to be cut carelessly, we are not only breaking a rule—we are breaking our responsibility” (personal communication, 8 September 2025).

Within this normative framework, forest governance is guided by principles of restraint, reciprocity, and spiritual accountability, which regulate access and use through socially embedded norms rather than formalized written rules. These principles are operationalized through concrete customary institutions and practices, most notably *larangan glee* (forbidden forest zones) and *ulee uteun* (upper catchment forests).

Customary leaders explained that the designation of such zones is typically decided through community deliberation at the mukim level, where elders and forest custodians identify ecologically sensitive areas. As one *Pawang Uteun* in Blang Birah stated, “there are places where even we cannot enter freely. Those areas must remain untouched so the water and the animals stay” (personal communication, 26 July 2025). Field data show that these zones function as locally legitimate conservation mechanisms that restrict extraction, protect water sources, and prevent ecological degradation. Compliance is ensured not through state enforcement, but through moral sanctions, ritual obligations, and shared beliefs regarding the consequences of violating customary rules. In practice, violations are first addressed through warning and communal admonition. As one customary leader explained, “we give warnings first. If someone repeats the mistake, the community will question them in front of others. We do not immediately bring the case to the police” (personal communication, 27 July 2025). In this sense, forests are understood as living spaces that sustain not only livelihoods, but also social identity, cosmological balance, and collective well-being.

This locally grounded governance logic corresponds to what Scott (1976) conceptualizes as a moral economy. However, rather than invoking moral economy as an abstract cultural attribute, this study demonstrates how it is empirically enacted in Aceh through specific institutions, rituals, and decision-making practices. Moral economy here refers to a practical system of regulation in which ecological stewardship is inseparable from moral obligation and communal accountability. This finding resonates with earlier studies on indigenous and customary forest governance in Indonesia that emphasize the role of socially embedded norms in sustaining ecological practices (Fisher & van der Muur, 2020; Mulyoutami et al., 2009). At the same time, the Aceh case complicates this literature by showing that the effectiveness of such norms is increasingly constrained by the expansion of state legal and administrative authority.

In contrast to customary governance, state authority over forests in Aceh is exercised through statutory law, spatial planning, and bureaucratic instruments administered by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry and its provincial and district-level agencies, particularly the DLHK. Within this governance logic, forests are classified into production, protection, conservation, or tourism zones, each governed by permits, maps, management plans, and technical assessments. This bureaucratic rationality reframes forests as administrative territories and economic assets, prioritizing legality, productivity, and regulatory compliance over communal or spiritual meanings.

Interviews with state officials indicate that formal classification and documentation are perceived as prerequisites for order and sustainability. As one provincial forestry official stated, “without formal classification, forest management will fall into chaos; rules bring order, and order brings sustainability” (personal communication, 5 September 2025). A district-level forestry police further emphasized that “if an area is designated as a production forest, we must follow the national zoning system. Local claims must be adjusted to the official map” (personal communication, 4 September 2025). Such statements reflect a technocratic discourse that positions the state as the sole rational and legitimate manager of forest resources. In practice, interactions between customary and state institutions frequently unfold through mapping exercises and coordination meetings. During participatory mapping processes, customary leaders

present historical narratives and locally recognized boundaries, while KPH (*Kesatuan Pengelolaan Hutan*) and DLHK officials compare these claims with official spatial plans and forest classifications. As a *Pengulu Uten* of Mendale (Gayo) in such a meeting described, “we bring our stories, histories, and our boundaries; they (state) bring their maps” (personal communication, 6 September 2025). These interactions demonstrate that recognition is not inherently bestowed; rather, it necessitates conversion into formal classifications and requires substantiation through official records. Customary authority therefore operates within a procedural framework largely defined by state institutions. Within this discourse, customary governance is implicitly framed as informal, fragmented, and insufficient for modern environmental management, despite its continued relevance at the community level. Although customary leaders are often invited to consultation forums, interview data suggest that decision-making power remains uneven. As one *Imuem Mukim* observed, “we are invited to meetings, but sometimes the decision has already been prepared before we speak” (personal communication, 28 July 2025). At the same time, at the village level, decisions concerning access to non-timber forest products are typically made collectively. A *Pengulu Uten* of Gayo explained that “if someone wants to cultivate vegetables or collect forest products, they must inform us first. We discuss it so that it does not damage the forest” (personal communication, 8 September 2025). These contrasting practices illustrate that shared decision-making exists at the local level but becomes constrained when decisions intersect with formal zoning and licensing procedures.

Economic benefits derived from non-timber forest products – such as vegetables or other forest crops – are generally retained by individual cultivators. As a ranger of LPHK Putri Pukes member noted, “we sell the products in raw form; the income is for the family, not for the institution” (personal communication, 08 September 2025). This arrangement reflects a livelihood-oriented model of forest use rather than a centralized revenue-sharing system. However, the absence of formalized benefit-sharing mechanisms also limits the institutional strengthening of customary governance bodies.

To clarify the contrasting sources of legitimacy, governance logics, and power positions that shape forest governance in Aceh, Table 1 summarizes the configuration of authority between customary and state actors.

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Customary Authority</i>	<i>State Authority</i>
<i>Legitimacy</i>	Ancestral, moral-spiritual	Legal-bureaucratic
<i>View of forest</i>	<i>Tanoh pusaka</i> (ancestral space)	Administrative and economic asset
<i>Instruments</i>	Norms, rituals, taboos	Maps, permits, zoning
<i>Governance Logic</i>	Collective stewardship	Technocratic control
<i>Power Position</i>	Socially strong, legally weak	Legally dominant

**Table 1.** Authority Configuration in Aceh’s Forest Governance. (authors’ compilation)

Rather than forming a complementary or balanced system, the interaction between customary and state governance produces an asymmetrical configuration of authority. While both regimes formally coexist, empirical evidence consistently shows that state legality overrides customary legitimacy when the two come into conflict. As *Imuem Mukim* and *Pawang Glee* leaders in Bireuen remarked: “When the government comes with its map, our forest becomes theirs.” (personal communication, 27 July 2025) This pattern aligns with Lund’s (2017) argument that authority and property are produced through unequal regimes of recognition, in which the state ultimately retains the power to define what counts as legitimate governance.

From a political ecology perspective, the configuration of authority in Aceh reflects a struggle not only over material resources, but also over discursive power: whose knowledge counts, whose rules prevail, and whose vision of sustainability is institutionalized (Colona & Jaffe, 2016; Forsyth, 2018; Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Vakkuri & Johanson, 2021).

### **Mechanisms of Customary–State Authority Contestation**

Empirical evidence from Aceh demonstrates that contestation between customary and state authority in forest governance is enacted primarily through bureaucratic and procedural sequencing rather than overt confrontation. Authority is negotiated, asserted, and decided through technical instruments, such as spatial mapping, permit issuance, evidentiary standards, and state-led governance programs, most notably social forestry. These mechanisms operate not as isolated interventions, but as an interconnected chain through which state authority is territorialized, operationalized, legalized, and selectively devolved. This configuration reflects what can be understood as a graduated consolidation of authority, where the state does not directly abolish customary governance but progressively reframes its scope and conditions of legitimacy.

A central mechanism of contestation lies in spatial mapping and forest zoning, through which state authority is rendered visible and enforceable. Official cartographic instruments, particularly the Regional Spatial Plan (*Rencana Tata Ruang Wilayah*, RTRW) and national forest classification maps, divide forest areas into production, protection, conservation, or tourism zones. As critical cartography scholars argue, maps are not neutral representations of space but political technologies that produce territory and authority (Harley, 1989; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020). In Aceh, these maps function as legal instruments that determine which actors are authorized to access and manage forest resources. Field evidence indicates that customary forest territories, such as *larangan glee* (forbidden forest zones) and *ulee uteun*, are rarely incorporated into official maps unless they undergo formal administrative recognition. Landscapes governed through oral history, ritual practice, and collective memory thus become administratively invisible. This mirrors findings from other regions in Southeast Asia and Africa, where customary land-use systems are erased through state mapping that prioritizes legibility and control (Peluso, 1995; Scott, 1998). Mapping, therefore, does not merely describe territory; it establishes the baseline from which all subsequent permits and governance decisions derive authority.

Mapping practices directly enable permit issuance, which constitutes a second decisive mechanism of contestation. Permits for logging, road construction, plantations, tourism development, or conservation projects are issued by state agencies based on formal zoning and technical assessments. These permits convert abstract claims of state sovereignty into enforceable rights of access and use. Empirical cases from North Aceh and Central Aceh illustrate this dynamic. In North Aceh, customary prohibitions against timber extraction were overridden following a provincial permit for road expansion through forest land. Customary leaders invoked ancestral stewardship and ecological harm, yet their claims were dismissed because the area had already been designated as production forest. Similarly, in Central Aceh, the *Pengulu Uten's* authority to restrict coffee expansion in highland forests was undermined by district-level agroforestry policies framed as development optimization. These dynamics resonate with Ribot and Peluso (2003) theory of access, which emphasizes that control over resources depends not merely on formal rights but on the ability to benefit from institutionalized mechanisms of au-

thority. In this sense, permit regimes operationalize the cartographic order: They translate spatial classification into material access while systematically privileging actors recognized within state bureaucratic frameworks.

Thus, a mechanism of contestation lies in documentary regimes and standards of evidence. State institutions recognize authority almost exclusively through written documentation – maps, decrees, permits, management plans, and legal titles – while customary governance relies largely on oral agreements, ritual sanctions, and intergenerational memory. Empirical encounters between customary leaders and state officials reveal a recurring asymmetry: Claims lacking documentary proof are deemed unverifiable and therefore illegitimate. In Langsa, for example, an *Imuem Mukim* attempted to enforce *hukom glee* (forest laws) to halt mangrove logging. The subdistrict government rejected the claim because the area was registered under a production forest license managed by a private contractor. As one senior *Imuem Mukim* in North Aceh remarked, “if we argue with the government, we have no papers (documents), only stories. They have papers, so they always win” (personal communication, 24 July 2025). This reflects what Lund (2017) describes as unequal regimes of recognition, in which the state retains the authority to define what counts as valid knowledge and legitimate governance. Similar patterns are documented globally, where bureaucratic evidentiary standards marginalize indigenous knowledge systems (Forsyth, 2018; Robbins, 2020). Thus, documentary requirements do not merely verify claims; they constitute a filtering mechanism through which authority is selectively acknowledged or denied.

State-sponsored social forestry programs represent a more ambivalent mechanism of contestation. Regulation No. 9/2021 on Social Forestry introduces five schemes, such as Village Forests (*Hutan Desa*, HD), Community Forests (*Hutan Kemasyarakatan*, HKm), Community Plantation Forests (*Hutan Tanaman Rakyat*, HTR), Customary Forests (*Hutan Adat*), and forestry partnerships, designed to integrate sustainability objectives with community welfare. Empirically, however, social forestry operates as conditional recognition rather than full devolution. The case of Mendale Village in Central Aceh illustrates this ambivalence: Through participatory mapping supported by the Social Forestry Agency (*Balai Perhutanan Sosial dan Kemitraan Lingkungan*, BPSKL), customary forest zones were recognized under a Village Forest (*Hutan Kampung*) permit managed by Village Forest Management Institution LPHK Putri Pukes. Customary principles such as *larangan glee* (forbidden forest zones) and *kenduri uteun* (forest ritual feast) were incorporated into formal management plans. Yet this recognition remains legally constrained. The permit grants management rights (*hak kelola*), not ownership (*hak milik*), and may be revoked under shifting regulatory conditions. A ranger of LPHK Putri Pukes noted, for instance, that “we are now the managers, but the forest still belongs to the state” (personal communication, 8 September 2025). These findings align with scholarship on participatory governance, where decentralization often coexists with continued state (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Larson & Ribot, 2007). Social forestry thus institutionalizes what Lund (2017) conceptualizes as twilight institutions, hybrid arrangements where customary authority is incorporated but hierarchically subordinated. Rather than resolving contestation, social forestry restructures it within a regulated framework of conditional recognition.

Collectively, these mechanisms reveal that contestation in Aceh’s forest governance unfolds through bureaucratic sequencing rather than overt confrontation. Mapping establishes territorial authority; permits operationalize access; documentary regimes define legitimacy; and social forestry selectively incorporates customary governance under state-defined conditions.

To clarify how these mechanisms interact in practice, Table 2 synthesizes their modes of operation and cumulative effects on customary authority.

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Mode of Operation</i>	<i>Effect on Customary Authority</i>	<i>Key Reference</i>
<i>Mapping &amp; Zoning</i>	State cartography (Regional Spatial Plan, classification maps), defines forest categories and boundaries	Customary forest territories become administratively invisible unless formally recognized	Harley, 1989; Scott, 1976; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020
<i>Permit Regimes</i>	Licenses translate zoning into enforceable access for state-approved actors	Customary prohibitions overridden by legally issued permits	Ribot & Peluso, 2003
<i>Documentary Regime</i>	Written documents (maps, decrees, permits) determine legitimacy of claims	Oral histories and ritual authority delegitimized	Lund, 2017; Robbins, 2020
<i>Social Forestry</i>	Conditional recognition through management permits under state-defined schemes	Customary authority incorporated but subordinated to state regulation	Larson & Ribot, 2007

**Table 2.** Mechanisms of Customary–State Authority Contestation. (authors' compilation)

### **Implications for Forest Sustainability and Local Community Welfare**

The implications of customary–state authority contestation for forest sustainability and local community welfare in Aceh cannot be understood as unintended side effects of policy failure or cultural incompatibility. Rather, they emerge from the concentrated mechanism through which authority spatialized, legalized, verified, and conditionally devolved. Ecological degradation and social vulnerability are thus institutional effects of governance design. Sustainability outcomes in Aceh are not merely environmental conditions, but political consequences of how authority is configured in practice.

Spatial mapping and zoning directly shape ecological trajectories by redefining what constitutes legitimate forest space and legitimate conservation practice. When customary territories such as *glee* and *ulee uteun* are excluded from official spatial plans or reclassified as production forests or 'degraded lands', the conservation logics embedded in customary governance lose regulatory standing. Empirical findings from Central Aceh and Bener Meriah demonstrate that such reclassification enables new land-use expansion – particularly coffee and pine cultivation – within areas previously governed as taboo or protected zones. Although framed as rehabilitation or development, these interventions displace locally embedded systems of restraint grounded in moral obligation, ritual sanction, and collective monitoring. Consistent with political ecology scholarship (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2020; Scott, 1998), state mapping prioritizes administrative legibility over ecological and cultural complexity. Sustainability, therefore, is undermined not by regulatory absence but by the substitution of socially embedded governance with cartographic abstraction. The ecological consequence is a gradual erosion of informal but effective conservation institutions.

Permit regimes translate spatial classifications into enforceable rights of access, producing direct implications for both sustainability and equity. By granting legally protected access

to contractors, plantation holders, or tourism developers, permits operationalize zoning decisions while simultaneously invalidating customary prohibitions. In North Aceh and Central Aceh, infrastructure and agroforestry permit nullified customary restrictions even when these restrictions were ecologically justified. This reflects a paradox observed in the global environmental governance: Formally regulated activities may generate higher ecological risk than the customary systems they replace (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Robbins, 2020). For local communities, permit-based governance restructures benefit distribution. Access to forest-derived income becomes concentrated among state-recognized actors, facilitating elite capture and weakening communal control over resources essential for water security, subsistence agriculture, and livelihood diversification. Authority contestation thus reconfigures not only environmental management but also the vertical and horizontal allocation of risk and benefit.

Documentary regimes produce deeper, less visible implications through epistemological exclusion. State institutions recognize authority primarily through written evidence – maps, decrees, licenses, and management plans – whereas customary governance is sustained through oral history, ritual practice and sanction, and intergenerational transmission. This evidentiary hierarchy systematically delegitimizes customary claims, even where they have long regulated forest use effectively. Interviews from Langsa and North Aceh reveal that such exclusion is experienced not only as material dispossession but as a loss of moral relationship to the forest. As one *Pengulu Uten* in Isaq Village (Gayo) observed: “We used to enter the forest with prayer and permission. Now, we enter with a permit.” (personal communication, 7 September 2025) This transformation reflects a broader epistemic shift documented in environmental governance literature (Forsyth, 2018), whereby bureaucratic rationality displaces spiritual and ethical relations to nature. The long-term implication is a weakening of intergenerational ecological knowledge and customary ethics, with cascading effects on stewardship practices and cultural continuity.

Social forestry programs generate ambivalent outcomes by institutionalizing conditional recognition. Schemes such as Village Forests and Customary Forests create pathways for communities to regain access and participate in management, as illustrated by the Mendale case. Where customary institutions are substantively involved in rule-making and benefit-sharing, ecological protection can align with livelihoods improvement. However, this recognition remains structurally limited. Management rights (*hak kelola*) do not confer ownership rights (*hak milik*), and continued access depends on compliance with evolving technical and administrative standards. As observed globally (Agrawal & Ribot, 1999; Larson & Ribot, 2007), participatory arrangements may mitigate conflict without dismantling hierarchical control. Sustainability gains under such schemes are therefore contingent rather than structural. Community welfare remains vulnerable to regulatory change, funding shifts, and bureaucratic reinterpretation. Beyond ecological and material outcomes, authority contestation also reshapes social relations within communities themselves. In Langsa and Aceh Jaya, state-led tourism and conservation initiatives have generated internal differentiation between actors who benefit from new economic opportunities and those who prioritize customary norms and cultural continuity. This confirms that authority contestation is not solely a vertical struggle between state and customary institutions. It is also a process that redistributes power, legitimacy, and opportunity within communities. Governance interventions may therefore produce new local inequalities even as they aim to enhance participation or sustainability.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that forest sustainability and local community welfare in Aceh are shaped less by the existence of policy than by the architecture of authority embedded within governance mechanisms. Mapping redefines ecological legitimacy;

permits redistribute access and risk; documentary regimes structure recognition, and social forestry selectively incorporates customary institutions under state supervision. Sustainable forest governance, therefore, requires more than formal recognition or technical reform. It demands a reconfiguration of authority that addresses epistemic inequality, redistributes decision-making power, and enables customary institutions to function as co-governors rather than conditional managers within state-dominated regimes.

## CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that forest governance in Aceh is shaped not merely by the coexistence of customary and state authorities, but by the concrete mechanisms through which authority is produced, negotiated, verified, and operationalized. Through spatial mapping, permit issuance, documentary validation, and social forestry schemes, authority contestation unfolds less through open confrontation than through bureaucratic process that redefine territorial legitimacy and access rights.

Cases like Mendale (Central Aceh, Gayo) and North Aceh provide empirical evidence that the emergence of negotiated governance requires a substantive reconfiguration of this mechanism. In Mendale, participatory mapping was not a symbolic consultation but a multi-stage verification process involving customary leaders, LPHK Putri Pukes, and BPSKL officials. Boundaries were jointly discussed, revised, and cross-checked against both satellite imagery and oral territorial histories. As one ranger of LPHK member explained, “the map was drawn with the government, but the stories of our ancestors were used to decide the lines” (personal communication, 8 September 2025). Such interactions demonstrate that negotiated recognition depends on the procedural integration of documentary and customary knowledge systems.

Similarly, shared decision-making over land use occurred only where customary representatives were included in discussions prior to permit issuance. In contrast, in North Aceh, a road development permit was issued without such deliberation, leading a customary leader to remark that “when the permit comes first, our rules come last” (personal communication, 24 July 2025). These contrasting cases show that co-governance is not guaranteed by pluralism itself, but by whether decision-making authority is redistributed at critical procedural stages.

Conceptually, the Aceh case extends scholarship on legal pluralism and political ecology in three ways. First, it specifies the micro-mechanisms through which institutional pluralism becomes hierarchically structured, demonstrating that hybridity is sequentially produced through mapping, permits, and evidentiary regimes rather than existing as a static condition. Second, it refines Ribot and Peluso (2003) theory of access by showing how bureaucratic sequencing operates as a mechanism of access control that precedes and conditions material benefit distribution. Third, it builds on (Lund, 2017) idea of twilight institutions by showing how negotiated recognition is still dependent on documentary validation, which keeps the state in charge even in situations where people are formally involved.

Empirically, the findings indicate that forest sustainability and local welfare improve where customary norms shape not only consultation but also implementation and monitoring. However, such gains remain fragile as long as recognition is contingent upon regulatory frameworks beyond community control. Sustainability in Aceh therefore emerges not from policy design alone, but from the redistribution of authority embedded within governance procedures. Institutional pluralism is not inherently emancipatory; it becomes sustainable only when customary institutions participate as co-decision-makers rather than conditional managers within state-defined regimes.



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