

Who are the Alas?

The Alas people are one of the people groups located in the regency of Southeast Aceh, in the province of Aceh. The Alas area has many rivers passing through, including Lawe Alas (Alas River). The area where they live is called "Land of the Alas." The word alas means "a mat used for sitting or sleeping." The origin of these people is still a mystery, although they have similarities in common with the Batak people in relation to their language and their clan names. Folk traditions tell of a number of heathen Batak people from Lake Toba who came to the highlands under their chief, Alas. The long-held traditions and culture of this ethnic group have sometimes been identified with the Gayo. During the time of the Dutch, the government structure treated these two areas as one section (Land of Gayo and Alas). However, the Alas people are a unique people group with their own culture and language that is different from the Gayo culture and language. Since 1974, the Alas and Gayo areas have been included in the Southeast Aceh Regency.

What are their lives like?

The majority of the Alas people live in villages and make their living from farming and raising livestock. The Alas area is considered the lumbung padi (rice storehouse) of the Aceh area. Other agricultural products include rubber, coffee, and kemiri (a local spice) as well as other forest products such as wood, rattan, resin, and incense. Neighbourhoods or villages of the Alas are called kute. One kute usually consists of one or more clans that are called a merge. Extended families will live in one house and submit to the authority of the parents. They are a patrilineal society, which means they measure descent through the father's family. Their culture emphasizes two types of law. The first type consists of religious laws that are given by God and cannot be changed. The second type consists of traditional laws, which include rules that have been made by the leaders of the community and can be changed according to the times. According to marriage customs, an engagement lasts from one to three years due to the necessity of the man acquiring the bride price, and the woman the groom price. When an Alas man and woman marry, they live near the husband's family. After they have children, the young family will usually move and live separately (jawe) from the parents but stay in the same area and community of the merge. Polygamous marriages are permitted when the marriage has produced only boys, only girls, or no children at all (adak meu keu dueu).

What do they believe?

Generally, the Alas people are followers of Islam, but they still seek the assistance of a dukun (shaman/healer/occultist). They perform ceremonies so that their crops will prosper and be protected from plague. The dukun reads his mantra and uses magical potions of leaves and flowers that are considered powerful to ward off plagues.

What are their needs?

Educational and economic development are greatly needed by the Alas. Southeast Aceh has great potential for tourism, agriculture and mining, but it has not yet been tapped. Financial capital and investment (foreign or national) from these developed potentials would greatly facilitate the progress and well-being of the indigenous people.