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Flouting the Law: Vigilante Justice and Regional Autonomy on the Indonesian Border

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After the Asian Economic Crisis in 1997 and the fall of president Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, rural and urban Indonesia experienced a surge in vigilante killings and the rise of non-state forms of authorities working within the twilight of legality and illegality, assuming the role of the state. Institutional uncertainty, large-scale decentralisation reforms and the deterioration of formal legal authority in post-New Order Indonesia encouraged these processes. This apparent 'lawlessness' became especially evident along the fringes of the Indonesian state where state authority has continuously been contested and in a state of flux. This paper argues that observing these processes of lawlessness and vigilantism from the borderlands provides us with an exceptional window to understand the ambiguous relationship between law and order in post-New Order Indonesia.

Keywords: Vigilantism; Illegality; Borderlands; Kalimantan; Indonesia

Nach der Asienkrise 1997 und dem Sturz des autoritären Regimes Präsident Suhartos 1998 waren sowohl in den ländlichen Regionen Indonesiens als auch in den Städten eine Zunahme an Bürgerwehrmorden und ein Anwachsen nicht-staatlicher Behörden zu beobachten. Zwischen Legalität und Illegalität übernahmen sie vielfach die Rolle des Staates. Institutionelle Unsicherheiten, groß angelegte Dezentralisierungsreformen und die Verschlechterung der formellen Rechtssprechung förderten nach dem Ende der „Neuen Ordnung“ diese Prozesse. Diese scheinbare Gesetzlosigkeit wurde besonders in den Grenzregionen des indonesischen Staates deutlich, wo die staatliche Autorität permanent in Frage gestellt wird und umstritten bleibt. In diesem Artikel argumentiere ich, dass die Beobachtung dieser „Gesetzlosigkeit“ und Selbstjustiz in Grenzregionen eine außergewöhnliche Möglichkeit bietet, die mehrdeutige Beziehung zwischen Recht und Ordnung in Indonesien nach dem Ende der „Neuen Ordnung“ zu verstehen.

Schlagworte: Selbstjustiz; Illegalität; Grenzregionen; Kalimantan; Indonesien

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Introduction²

For those living in the borderland, it is a zone unto itself, neither wholly subject to the laws of states nor completely independent of them (Abraham, 2006, p. 4).

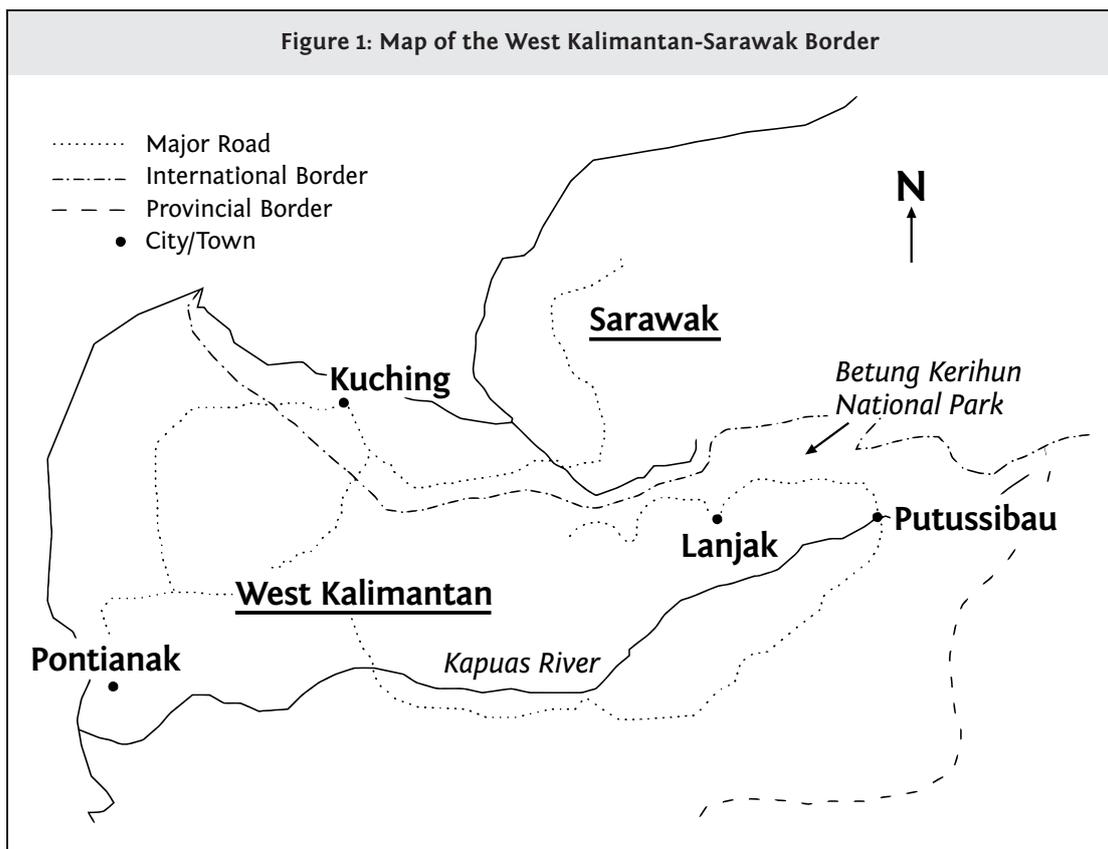
Borderlands have long been the sites of violence, the consequence either of government incapacity or disinterest in marginal regions, or of occasional attempts by states to assert control over ‘recalcitrant’ border peoples. Borderland lawlessness, or the ambiguous space between state laws, often provides fertile ground for activities deemed illicit by one or both states – for example smuggling and tax-evasion (Tagliacozzo, 2002; 2005). Border space may also allow the growth of local leadership built on those illegal activities and maintained through patronage and violence (McCoy, 1999; Sturgeon, 2005; Walker, 1999). In such situations, border peoples often enjoy a fair measure of autonomy from state interference, which may further complicate their already ambiguous relations with either state (Martínez, 1994a). This paper examines issues of lawlessness and autonomy in Indonesia along the stretch of the West Kalimantan borderland inhabited by the ethnic Iban, focusing on incidents of vigilantism and gangsterism, and how the ambiguity and separateness engendered by the border promote and enhance these practices.

Vigilantism here refers to the taking of or advocating the taking of the law into one’s own hands (that is, the circumvention of established channels of law enforcement and justice) in the face of the apparent failure of state authorities to deal effectively with criminal matters. According to Abrahams, acts of vigilantism often appear in ‘frontier zones’ and here constitute a criticism of ineffectual and corrupt state institutions (Abrahams, 1998, pp. 1-9). While organised vigilante groups seem to have been on the rise throughout Indonesia since the late 1990s, as a result of the Indonesian state’s inability to tackle crime, such acts of vigilantism often come with state recognition and are integrated into the broader state apparatus of surveillance and social control (Barker, 2007). Most of these vigilante groups are to an extent legitimated by state authorities, either by assuming the role of informal neighbourhood policing units or by serving as tools of political manipulation of religious and

² This paper is a revised version of an article co-authored with Reed Lee Wadley and first published in the *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* (Wadley & Eilenberg, 2006).

nationalist sentiments for economic or ideological gain, often with implicit police approval. Vigilante groups in Indonesia have multiple underlying motivations that rely on moral rectitude based on ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation (Wilson, 2006). Vigilante groups are also widely used in conflict areas as paramilitary units (see East Timor, Maluku, Papua) (Coppel, 2005; Hedman, 2008; Thorning, 2005; Wilson, 2010).

However, as I will elaborate on below, acts of vigilantism are not necessarily recognised by the state but instead viewed as disorderly and illicit acts that challenge state authority. Along the fringes of the Indonesian state, where state authority is especially weak, local moral codexes and norms have long collided with formal legal standards resulting in acts of vigilantism. Reinforced by the fragmentation of state authority, such self-help efforts frequently resulted in extra-judicial violence and executions of suspected criminals in the remote borderlands of Indonesia during the first decade following the regime shift in 1998.



Source: Author

Historical heredity

Persons who find it politic to hurriedly shift from one side of the border to the other can hardly be considered as valuable citizens of either State.³

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, with their efforts to suppress cross-border headhunting and define colonial citizenship, British and Dutch colonial authorities on Borneo partitioned the Kalimantan Iban from the larger population in Sarawak, Malaysia. The Iban borderland was often the focus of contentious inter-colonial relations, and the Iban did their best to take advantage of differing terms and conditions that colonial rule offered on either side; for example, by using the border to escape taxes and resist colonial authority (Wadley, 2004). The independence of Indonesia and the formation of the Malaysian federation in the mid-twentieth century only furthered the partition, particularly under the heavy militarisation along the border during confrontation in the early 1960s and the subsequent Communist insurgency into the 1970s (Eilenberg, 2011). It was not as if this cut off border populations or the rest of the province from the other side; on the contrary, cross-border flows continued largely as they had for decades. However, the building of a road network along the border in the 1980s to 1990s facilitated an increased flow of people and goods – legal and illegal – back and forth across the border (Wadley, 1998).

Nonetheless, along with the remoteness of the region from Indonesian centres, the economic disparities between Indonesia and Malaysia that developed during this period kept the Kalimantan Iban economically oriented toward Malaysia, reinforced by their cultural and historical roots in Sarawak. The Asian economic crisis of 1997 and the dramatic political changes it spurred in Indonesia, including de-militarisation of the border, have only intensified this orientation (Fariastuti, 2002; Riwanto, 2002; Siburian, 2002). The Iban position on the borderland, adjacent to a more prosperous and politically stable neighbour, has meant that their interests lie partly across the border, where they find temporary employment and occasionally immigrate to permanently (Eilenberg & Wadley, 2009). As part of the fallout of the central Indonesian government's loss of power, the on-going boom in 'illegal' logging has also figured

³ Quote from *Sarawak Gazette* (1 October 1895) in Report from Assitant Resident Burgdorffer, 2 December 1914, Verbaal 20 Augustus 1915 No. 41, Politieke Verslagen en Berichten uit de Buitengewesten van Nederlands-Indië (1898-1940), Ministerie van Koloniën, Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Netherlands [hereafter ARA].

into a mixed, local economic strategy. Yet a critical element in this boom has been the presence of Malaysian Chinese timber entrepreneurs with their local sawmills, logging operations, and Malaysian Iban workers (Wadley & Eilenberg, 2005).

However, the term ‘illegal’ poses a semantic problem. Especially when understood from the point of view of borderlanders, it glosses too easily over a complex picture (Schendel & Abraham, 2005). ‘Illegal’ implies a sense of wrongdoing, which may be quite adequate for state-level concerns, but it does not necessarily “represent the ways in which border residents proudly stake their economic claim in transborder trade movement” (Flynn, 1997, p. 324). On the contrary, although aware of being involved in something defined by distant politicians as illicit, borderlanders may feel no moral wrongdoing and regard such laws as unjust and unreasonable (Schendel, 2006). Thus, what is illegal as defined by state law is usually straightforward for agents of the state (though they too may circumvent their own laws), while borderlanders may more routinely engage state regulation with flexibility, not feeling as beholden to adhere to laws they see as imposed from the outside and against their interests (Schendel, 2006). This is most clearly seen in logging operations in the borderland since 1998 – deemed illegal by the state but legitimate by local communities now back in control of their traditional forests.

Case 1: Vigilantes

The border area is faced with many problems; in order to deal effectively with these problems I was elected as local judge in settling these local matters. People here do not trust the police and government judges. They believe in customary rule (hukum adat) (temenggong⁴ in Lanjak, personal communication, 25 March 2007).

The above quote clearly illustrates local suspicion towards external legal authorities, a suspicion that more often than not leads to the internal resolution of local disputes. State law is only recognised to the extent that it is considered to fit local norms of fairness and justice. As I will describe in the case below, when state law and local norms collide, local communities are not slow to actively resist encroachment upon their legal orders.

4 The *temenggong* is a Dayak tribal-head/*adat* leader.

In early December 2000, a courtroom in Putussibau, the district capital of Kapuas Hulu, became the scene of murder as a group of around 300-400 men, armed with shotguns and bush knives, avenged the death of their kinsman.⁵ The victim, a Malay man named Usnata, was on trial for the January 2000 murder of an Iban moneychanger named Sandak. The courtroom killing hit the national press as the first vigilante killing inside an Indonesian courthouse. Then-president Abdurahman Wahid met with the victim's family, and provincial officials promised to bring the perpetrators to justice ("400 Massa bersenjata", 2000; "Keluarga Usnata lapor", 2000; "Malaysia belum tanggap", 2000). Yet in the following months and years, the incident fell 'off the radar' of local and national authorities, and no one of the several hundred who participated has ever been, nor will likely be, charged in the murder.

At its surface, this appears to be another case of *amuk massa*, the seemingly spontaneous killing of people accused of petty crime in the context of an ineffectual justice system (Colombijn, 2002). But its underlying structure and motivation, something not addressed in the press, reveals the interplay of borderland identity, diminished state power, and official corruption.⁶ Sandak, the Iban moneychanger, was in fact related by marriage to Usnata, the latter having married Sandak's cousin. It was understandable then that Sandak, his bag filled with 70 million rupiah from his transactions on the border, would board a speedboat with Usnata. On the long journey to the bank, Usnata and the driver, a Padang man named Edi, apparently killed Sandak and dumped his body overboard. It was only after several months that Sandak's body was discovered, and the police began to suspect Usnata (Edi having fled the province): not only was he one of the last people seen with Sandak, but he had also purchased expensive consumer goods after Sandak disappeared.

Sandak's Iban kin demanded that Usnata pay *pati nyawa* or blood money in accordance with Iban customary law (*adat*). He refused, and so the case was passed to the district court for trial. After the first day of the trial, the Iban decided that Usnata would likely be acquitted as they suspected he had bribed the presiding judge, and so they organised the attack, drawing Iban connected to Sandak from both sides of the border. Part of their rationale, besides revenge, was that the court was corrupt

5 The police, who had been on hand to prevent the rumoured attack, were out-numbered and hence retreated. They later negotiated with the vigilantes after the killing and persuaded them not to cut off the victim's head.

6 The following account comes from correspondence with local Iban who were not involved in the incident.

and justice from the government unattainable; they were also incensed that Usnata had refused to adhere to Iban *adat*. Indeed, had he paid the *pati nyawa*, Usnata would probably still be alive.

Thus, though stemming from common perceptions of an ineffectual and corrupt criminal justice system, this vigilante killing is far different from the usual *amuk massa* killings in places like Java, which occur almost spontaneously when someone identifies a thief or similar petty criminal on the street or marketplace; *amuk massa* killings are rapid and immediate following identification and accusation. In contrast, Usnata's killing was planned and organised over several days, involved a force of men mobilised from a wide social and geographical network, occurred in a court of justice which is unique to vigilante killings in Indonesia, and involved direct but non-violent confrontation with police.

Case 2: Gangsters

In January 2005, a team of 26 government officials⁷ and one television journalist were investigating illegal logging in the vicinity of the Betung Kerihun National Park on the Indonesian side of the border (“Kail sesali pembiaran”, 2005; “Wartawan TV5”, 2005). Six weeks prior to this, police had arrested three Malaysian Chinese involved in cross-border logging and confiscated both equipment and timber (“Empat warga Malaysia”, 2004), though the ‘ringleader’, a Malaysian Chinese timber boss named Apeng (“Tangkap Apeng”, 2004; “Tangkap Apheng”, 2004), had escaped. The new team set out with the hopes of apprehending Apeng but found that their Kijang vehicles could not negotiate the bad roads. So, they commandeered Toyota Land Cruisers (with Malaysian license plates) that were among the equipment confiscated earlier.

After the team had stopped to make camp for the night, two pick-ups with Malaysian license plates and carrying around 20 armed men approached. The leader of the group, a local Iban man, began to interrogate the team, apparently unintimidated by its police and military members. Upon discovering the team's purpose and its use of confiscated vehicles, the man grew angry and blamed them for the loss of local jobs. He ordered his men to seize the vehicles in order to leave the team on foot. But in

⁷ These officials included district forest rangers, prosecutors, police, and military personnel, some of them well-armed.

a curious twist, the team negotiated transport to the local subdistrict police headquarters in Lanjak, to which the local group agreed. Upon arrival in Lanjak, the locals refused to return the vehicles and fled with them across the border to Malaysia.

The journalist was dumbfounded by the inability or unwillingness of the police and army to intervene; he reported that the security force members of the team had agreed with the Iban leader not to step in, perhaps to avoid further conflict with local communities. Indeed, district officials later told him that the incident was a local matter, with no need to involve outside parties and that there was no need to make it public. Meanwhile, the provincial coordinator of *Kail Kalbar* (an anti-illegal logging consortium) expressed his lack of understanding of how locals could be more loyal and cooperative to a foreigner (Apeng) than to their own government. He suggested that the provincial police would have to take over from the district police if the latter were unable to perform their proper duties.

Perhaps the Kail Kalbar coordinator had ‘inside knowledge’, because within two months, provincial and national police launched *Operasi Hutan Lestari*, resulting in the arrest of several Malaysians and Indonesians (Chinese, Iban, and Malays) involved in cross-border logging. The operation also placed a ban on transporting already cut timber across the border, a move that upset locals who had derived income from the trade. They sent a large delegation (around 200 people) to the district capital, Putus-sibau, to promote a lifting of the ban, arguing that the timber came from community forests (*hutan adat*) and that Indonesian markets were prohibitively distant. To date, there has been no resolution; the border towns that had boomed from the cross-border flow of people and goods have become ghost towns. The Indonesian Minister of Forestry, M. S. Kaban, has said that local communities have no legal basis to permit commercial timber cutting (“Masyarakat Kapuas”, 2005; “Masyarakat perbatasan”, 2005; “Warga protes”, 2005).

Vigilantes and Gangsters in Wider Perspective

These two cases illustrate important processes of borderland life that must be understood in order to address the economic and social problems facing the border area in general. But the principal motivations of these instances of ‘people’s justice’ are embedded in a long history of legal autonomy as a consequence of weak state

authority in the borderland.

The Kalimantan Iban have become accustomed to considerable autonomy in dealing with local civil and criminal matters and have not been bashful in challenging attempts to reduce that autonomy. A late nineteenth-century Dutch official referred to them as *een levendig en strijdlustig volk* (a lively and pugnacious people),⁸ and though we should be cautious about an essentialised perspective such as this, it does speak to a certain cultural vitality and confidence that has been fostered, in no small part by the unique relationship the Iban on both sides of the border have crafted with the state over the past century and a half. It is no accident that the Iban-inhabited stretch of the border between Dutch West Borneo and British Sarawak produced the most continuous border tensions between the colonial powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,⁹ because the Iban were so difficult to contain and pacify (Kater, 1883; Niclou, 1887).

Even after formal pacification in 1886, the colonial governments treated the Iban with caution in order not to antagonise them. For example, on both sides of the border, Iban paid less in taxes than other native peoples – in Sarawak, because they were obligated to serve on government expeditions, and in Dutch West Borneo, probably to keep things equivalent with Sarawak practice.¹⁰ In addition, the system of Dutch-appointed leaders – *temenggong* and *patih* – became increasingly autonomous over time, particularly during the great political turmoil and transition of the 1940s to 1950s. Furthermore, the Kalimantan Iban's special affinity for Sarawak was encouraged by the Sarawak government: In 1882, Charles Brooke, the second British ruler of Sarawak, unsuccessfully offered to take the Kalimantan Iban under his control, “even if a certain portion of the land adjoining the frontier where these Dyaks are located, were transferred to the Sarawak rule”¹¹ – a fact that is retained within Iban historical narratives.

It is not surprising then to see the Kalimantan Iban asserting their interests in particular situations, even when it may be dangerous: During the counter-insurgency militarisation of the border in the 1960s to 1970s, the Iban rejected the Indonesian

8 Letter to NI Governor-General from Resident Tromp, 10 June 1891, Openbaar Verbaal 12 June 1894 No.13, ARA.

9 Letter to NI Governor-General from Resident Tromp, 4 April 1894, Openbaar Verbaal 6 June 1895 No. 12, ARA.

10 The official reason was that Iban “earning capacity” was lower, but this makes no sense as other Dayak groups in the Upper Kapuas District were also poor and distant from good markets (Letter to NI Governor-General from Resident Tromp, 4 April 1894, Openbaar Verbaal 6 June 1895 No. 12, ARA).

11 Letter to NI Governor-General from Charles Brooke, 25 September 1882, Mailrapport 1882 No. 1066, ARA.

military's order to turn in their shotguns. Descending on the army headquarters in full ritual regalia and led by their *temenggong* and *patih*, the several-hundred-strong group of men said that they would turn in their guns if the army promised to post soldiers in their fields to protect them against marauding forest pigs and monkeys. To this day, the three subdistricts dominated by the Iban are the only places in Kapuas Hulu district, and perhaps the province of West Kalimantan, where citizens are allowed to keep their shotguns at home and not registered at the local police stations (Eilenberg, 2012).

In light of this, and in the context of de facto governmental decentralisation, and demoralisation of the police and military following the fall of Suharto in 1998, the revenge killing of Usnata makes much more sense, and we see a number of historical continuities: The strong sense of cultural autonomy is particularly apparent, customary law should precede national law locally, and the forceful pursuit of Iban interests is deemed entirely legitimate. The ability of the Iban to mobilize rapidly also figures prominently and finds its historical parallel in nineteenth-century headhunting expeditions that could number in the hundreds and thousands (Freeman, 1961). Although changes in Indonesian political life provided them additional space to operate after 1998, the Iban involved in the Usnata incident would not have been able or willing to engage in it without the benefit of these historically precedent qualities.

With regard to the case of gangsterism, three additional factors have been at work. First, as a result of national decentralisation processes, district governments throughout Indonesia have had more power than they ever had. Second, Kapuas Hulu district officials have seen cross-border logging as a good opportunity to develop the borderland economy, which had been long neglected by the central government (Eilenberg, 2009). Third, many local Iban (along with some district officials) did and still do not share central and provincial government views on the legality of current logging activities, and they see the interference of 'outsiders', such as the government operation described above, as a breach of local autonomy. The passivity of the local district police and military can be seen then as a careful response to the economic benefits they have derived from logging and a healthy respect for the ability of local Iban to take action.¹²

12 Local civilian, police, and military officials are, by and large, not 'locals' themselves but come from a variety of places – elsewhere in the province or well beyond, such as Java and Bali. Given the link between cross-border activities and illegality, it is difficult to assess how or if local officials are involved beyond simply facilitating and

Following the fall of the New Order government in 1998, Malaysian Chinese timber entrepreneurs crossed the long and porous border into West Kalimantan in order to set up local logging operations. They have routinely co-operated with local communities in need of income and with unofficial approval of district governments. In addition to the economically and politically conducive climate and an international demand for tropical timber, easy access across the border through an improved road network (originally justified by national security concerns) has facilitated such operations. For their part, local communities have viewed the forested areas along the border as their own traditional managed forest, and the harvest of that timber as the result of locally negotiated agreements.¹³ To make their businesses run smoothly, the timber entrepreneurs have bribed important district and subdistrict officials, including police, military, and immigration agents at the border, a fact widely known by local borderlanders.

In the Kapuas Hulu District, such processes involving Malaysian entrepreneurs (known locally as *tukei*) and local Iban have been widely in play. As a consequence of their long cultural and economic affinity with Sarawak and having been long marginalised by their own central and provincial governments, many Iban borderlanders have a weak sense of commitment to their own state (Wadley & Eilenberg, 2005). They have seen no dilemma in cooperating with the more familiar Malaysian *tukei*¹⁴ (and their Malaysian Iban employees), who know much more about Iban customs and language than Indonesian government officials. Local Iban have thus felt comfortable dealing with the *tukei* and their cross-border cousins. In addition, because the Kalimantan Iban have long engaged in wage labour across the border while their Sarawak kin have felt no similar pull from Kalimantan, these activities have introduced a new set of connections among the partitioned Iban, strengthening the long tradition of cross-border ethnic relations (Eilenberg & Wadley, 2009).

In the years following the initial onset of cross-border logging, the provincial and national press reported only sporadically about these undertakings in the remote Kapuas Hulu (Bider, 2003; "Illegal logging", 2003; "Mafia illegal logging", 2003; Ranik,

collecting fees on such activities on their side of the border.

13 Although communities have been divided on the question of timber harvesting and cooperation with Malaysian timber bosses, most communities were initially happy with the arrangement, although tensions have risen as the side-effects of logging have appeared, such as water pollution ("Warga perbatasan", 2004).

14 Prior to their operations in West Kalimantan, the Malaysian *tukei* operated for decades in Sarawak Iban areas and preferentially hired local Iban, having learned to trust their honesty and work ethic.

2002). But later, as the volume of cross-border smuggling increased and the loss of resources and state revenue became too high to ignore, media attention was once more directed towards the remote border area.¹⁵ The theme then became the Malaysian exploitation of West Kalimantan resources, with provocative headlines such as “Malaysia eats our fruit, while Indonesia swallows the sap” (“Lika-liku praktik”, 2003) and “When will Malaysian ‘colonization’ of the Kalbar border end?” (“Kapan ‘penjajahan’ Malaysia”, 2004). The stronger nationalist tone to these later reports also included an explicit criminalisation of cross-border activities: The *tukei* and their Malaysian workers were now seen as gangsters armed with guns, intimidating local communities, with ‘*Gengster Cina Malaysia*’ becoming the buzz phrase (“Belum ada fakta”, 2004; “‘Gangster’ bersenjata”, 2004).

As a consequence of this change, national and provincial politicians demanded that district officials take prompt action. Despite district government assurances on dealing with these ‘Malaysian gangsters’, early attempts to crack down on illegal logging in the border area were few and half-hearted, and the people arrested were mostly “small fry” (“Cukong kayu illegal”, 2003; “Operasi Wanalaga II”, 2003), especially as district officials were in no hurry to end the lucrative cross-border connections. It seemed that the ‘gangsters’ would continue their activities unabated, supported by district officials and local communities (“Dukung Kapolda”, 2004; “Pengiriman kayu illegal”, 2004). *Operasi Hutan Lestari*, however, altered the previous state of affairs. Indeed, what we now see is a national and provincial attempt to wrest control of revenue streams from the districts and domesticate the ‘unruly’ and ‘defiant’ borderlands and their inhabitants (Eilenberg, 2012).

Conclusion

Located on the fringes of the Indonesian state and in close proximity to a neighbouring state with which they have long maintained cultural and economic relations, the feeling of being different is predominant among West Kalimantan Iban – a sense of separateness and otherness from the heartland and its population, economically, culturally, and historically. In addition, one of the general characteristics that per-

¹⁵ Several incidents over the last several years of border transgressing have also served to keep things ‘hot’ in the media as well as diplomatically (“Malaysia belum tanggapi”, 2000; “Sengketa perbatasan”, 2000).

meate Iban borderlander life is the feeling of being pulled in several directions at once, but the strength of the pull depends on the degree of interaction and relations on both sides (Martínez, 1994b). Indeed, the borderlanders with the weakest loyalty to their own national state are often those with the strongest cross-border ties. Politically, the Kalimantan Iban belong to a state that demands their unswerving loyalty but ethnically, emotionally, and economically, they often feel part of another, non-state entity (Baud & Schendel, 1997), the bulk of which is located in another state. For many Iban, the connections across the border remain stronger than those with their own nation state, resulting in a weak sense of national belonging or identity (Lumenta, 2005).

Often, border populations maintain cross-border economic links although they may subvert national law; in many cases, they have little other choice because their national governments have failed to integrate the borderland into the larger national economy (Driessen, 1999). Borderlanders thus exhibit a tendency to bend, ignore, and breach laws that they see as interfering with their interests and special way of life. Rigid laws governing international borders that restrict cross-border interaction may lead to diverse conflict and rule bending (Abraham, 2006). Furthermore, the sense of otherness towards the state as experienced by borderlanders is increased because their interests often diverge from and conflict with national interests. Seeing themselves as being marginal to a larger national unity, many Iban often feel that the distant political centre does not understand the special circumstances of living in a borderland.

Its ambiguous nature of both uniting and dividing characterises the special environment of the border. By its very nature in dividing two separate states with their often different administrative and regulatory regimes, the border thus may generate an 'opportunity structure' for activities, such as smuggling and immigration that both states deem illicit (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999). Smuggling and illicit trade is often described as "the borderland occupation par excellence" (Rösler & Wendl, 1999, p. 13). For example, Wilson and Donnan (1999) note how international borders can be both 'used' (trade) and 'abused' (smuggling). On the one hand, borders bring economic opportunity and generate a two-way flow of goods and people, but on the other hand they facilitate economic gain through illegal import and export, such as we have seen with the smuggling of timber from West Kalimantan. Such illicit processes

form “the subversive economy of borderlands” (Wilson & Donnan, 1998, p. 87), often highly important for the livelihoods of many borderlanders and sometimes the most important economic force in the border region.

Yet this typical ‘borderland’ scenario presents us with only part of the picture with regard to the Iban borderland, as it cannot be fully understood without reference to the special affinity West Kalimantan Iban have developed for Sarawak. Not only are they a minority group within their own province, partitioned from a much larger population in a visibly more prosperous country across the border, they have also received special treatment by successive colonial and national governments on both sides of the border. This has allowed them considerable space to develop a strong sense of autonomy, heightening the sense of separateness that appears ubiquitous with borderlands. Under the circumstances following the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997 and the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, it is perhaps not surprising to see events turn out as they have, given this critically important historical precedent.

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Note from the author: Not all newspaper articles listed here are available online. For Antara News Agency, Equator News, Kompas, Media Indonesia, Pontianak Post, Sinar Harapan and Suara Pembaruan, the online links to the articles no longer work. I hold copies on file.

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