Multi-Functional Lands Facing Oil Palm Monocultures: A Case Study of a Land Conflict in West Kalimantan, Indonesia

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This paper presents an ethnographic case study of a palm oil land conflict in a Malay community in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. The conflict occurred in the preparatory phase of a large-scale plantation, before any oil palms were planted. After protest from local communities, the project was canceled. This case enables an empirical enquiry of land tenure as well as the meaning of land and associated resources for people's livelihoods in a pre-plantation situation. The article aims to understand how people's responses to the oil palm plantation project are rooted in the way they give meaning to the land that is targeted for conversion. Using a functional analysis of property relations, the article shows that people value multiple functions of land, including food security, income security over generations, flexibility to respond to crises and opportunity, and the ability to retain autonomy and identity as farmers. One of the factors that contributed to the conflict was the expectation that a conversion of diversified agricultural land and forest into a monoculture plantation, run by a company, would change the functionality of land and associated resources in a way that would negatively impact livelihood opportunities, lifestyles, and identity.

Keywords: Land Conflict; Meaning of Land; Oil Palm; Property and Access; West Kalimantan

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INTRODUCTION

When the green paddy fields turn yellow, it is time to harvest the rice. Farmers in Kebun Hijau[1] village put rubber tapping on hold and work in a race against time to harvest their staple crop. The first harvest is celebrated with a ceremony for the new rice; a nightly event where villagers gather to make a sweet dish of roasted unripe rice with coconut sugar. After the harvest month, the farmers return to their rubber gardens to generate cash income. People in Kebun Hijau have produced crops for the world market since colonial times, including rubber, copra, pineapple, and a variety of pulse crops. Recently, several farmers have started to plant pepper plants and oil palms to try out new cash crops. However, after a company planned to establish a large-scale oil palm plantation, the oil palm became part of a violent land conflict.

This article presents an ethnographic case study of a conflict about an oil palm plantation project in Kebun Hijau, a Malay village in a littoral (*pesisir*) dis-

1 Due to the sensitivity of the subject and ongoing conflicts, all names and village names are pseudonyms.

trict in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Since the beginning of this millennium, oil palm plantations have been expanding rapidly throughout Kalimantan.[2] The expansion of oil palm plantations leads to the conversion of vast areas of agricultural land and forest into monocultures. This has triggered violent land conflicts between plantation companies and rural communities, as well as conflicts within communities.[3] In 2014, palm oil watchdog Sawit Watch reported 717 ongoing conflict cases in Indonesia. The conflict presented in this article started in the preparatory phase of a plantation project. I analyze the case from a property rights and access to resources perspective, looking at how people's responses to the plantation project are related to the way they give meaning to land and associated resources that are targeted for conversion to oil palm.

In brief, the conflict started in 2008, after a plantation company received a 10,000 ha land concession from the district government. The concession area included a large part of the village lands of Kebun Hijau and the lands of 13 other villages. The plantation project was met with resistance from local communities because people feared that they would lose their land to the company. After four years of conflict, the district government ordered the company to cease its activities; the plantation project was canceled before any oil palms were planted. The conflict had led to violent confrontations between the company and its supporters and opponents in the villages. A mass demonstration against the company ended with protestors throwing stones at the office of the district head. During a second protest, they set fire to the base camp of the company. The conflict created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust between opponents and supporters of the plantation within the villages. Although the company has now left the area, the situation remains tense. New companies are scouting the area and conflict is likely to reoccur.

With this case study, the article contributes to an ongoing debate about palm oil production and land conflicts. The global debate on palm oil production started after several international NGOs began mobilizing around palm oil issues in response to the major forest fires of 1997 in Indonesia (Pye, 2010, p. 858). Most academic literature on palm oil concentrates on environmental issues, such as deforestation, peatland destruction, (water and air) pollution, and biodiversity loss (Fitzherbert et al., 2008; Wilcove & Koh, 2010). Gradually, more attention has been paid to socio-economic issues such as labor conditions, challenges and opportunities for smallholders, gender differences, and (indigenous) land rights (Julia & White, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Li, 2015; McCarthy, 2010). Companies, development institutions, and governments have asserted that the development of plantations is an opportunity for rural development, job creation, and the development of infrastructure in isolated areas (Word Bank & IFC, 2011). Scholars have recorded cases in which farmers have indeed been able to benefit from cultivating oil palm, either independently or through contracts with a company (Castellanos-Navarette & Jansen, 2015 ; Jelsma, Giller, & Fairhurst, 2009). However, particularly for large-scale plantations, scholars and ac-

2 Oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan grew from 522,508 ha in 2010 to 929,360 ha in 2014 (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2015).

3 In using the term 'community', I am aware that communities are not unified groups of people, and that there can be major power differences within communities. Moreover, I recognize that members of communities can have conflicting interests and opinions.

tivists have reported land acquisitions without free, prior, and informed consent and cases in which local communities have been expelled from their lands without receiving compensation or the promised smallholder plots (Milieudefensie, Lembaga Gemawan, & Kontak Rakyat Borneo, 2007; Sirait, 2009; Vermeulen & Cotula, 2010).

White and Dasgupta (2010) warn not to fall into the trap of blaming the crop; the problem is not the oil palm. Rather, they argue that the outcome of land conversion for plantations depend on "the manner in which crops are grown, under which property arrangements and labor regimes, and in what kind of commodity chains" (p. 605). McCarthy (2010) calls this the "terms upon which people are incorporated and integrated into globalized oil palm markets" (p. 823). In addition, the outcomes of land conversion depend on pre-existing "crops, property arrangements and labor regimes, and commodity chains" (White & Dasgupta, 2010, p. 605), that is, on socio-economic relations *before* oil palm plantations are established. While this is recognized in most research, some researchers and policy makers subsequently argue that palm oil related land conflicts originate from a lack of 'clear' land rights in rural areas (Rist, Feintrenie, & Levang, 2010; World Bank & IFC, 2011, p. 20). Hall (2011) effectively refutes this presumption by stating that land rights insecurity "does not necessarily imply that land relations were insecure before a (crop) boom; who controlled what may have been well understood. It does mean that once the boom begins and the value of land rises, these relations are thrown into question" (p. 9).

When land conflicts are attributed to a situation of unclear land rights, the solution focuses on 'clarifying' what belongs to whom. During fieldwork (see next section), I encountered a company that invited villagers to go to court if they did not agree with the plantation, in order to determine what land belonged to whom. In this way, the company rendered the conflict a matter of disagreement about ownership and land borders, which could be 'fixed' by looking at law documents, thus disregarding concerns about the consequences of a plantation on livelihoods. The villagers refused to go to court because, lacking formal documents, they feared they would lose the land to the company. Such a narrow focus on clarifying what 'belongs' to whom fails to see why and how land and associated resources are meaningful to people and will not help to address conflicts. On the contrary, its focus on the formal legal status of land might even exacerbate the problem. Earlier research on land conflicts in Indonesia has shown that responses to agrarian change are to a great extent conditioned by how people perceive land tenure in relation to livelihood needs, opportunities, and threats. Furthermore, these conflicts have environmental, socio-economic, cultural, and political dimensions (Banks, 2002; Cramb et al., 2009; Dove, 1983; McCarthy, 2006). Building on this literature, I argue that, in order to understand oil palm related land conflicts, it is important to analyze the different ways in which people give meaning to land and associated resources that are targeted for land conversion.

The article proceeds as follows: In a theoretical discussion on the meaning of land and associated resources, I build on the functional analysis of property relations of Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann (1999) as well as a theorization of access of Ribot and Peluso (2003). This approach allows an empirical inquiry into how people distinguish between different land types, what kind of benefits they derive from them, and why these are significant to different people, beyond a focus on economic

benefits only. The article proceeds with a brief discussion of oil palm expansion in West Kalimantan. The main section of the article presents a case study of a conflict about an oil palm plantation project in littoral West Kalimantan. I analyze the meaning people give to agricultural land, rubber gardens, and forest against their expectations on the consequences of the establishment of a large-scale oil palm plantation. This article shows that land and associated resources targeted for oil palm conversion are meaningful to people in various ways, including for food security, income security over generations, flexibility to respond to crises and opportunities, identity, and the ability to retain autonomy as farmers. The opponents of the plantation expect that an oil palm plantation may change and limit this multi-functionality of land and thereby negatively impact their livelihood opportunities, lifestyles, and identities.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork in coastal villages in West Kalimantan during several research visits between 2013 and 2015. During my first visit to the region, I spent three months as a guest at a local NGO in Pontianak. For the following visits, I returned to conduct fieldwork in one of the villages that I had earlier visited with this NGO. I lived with a farmer family for three months and followed the villagers in their daily routines, such as planting and harvesting rice, preparing for festivities, or chatting on verandas.

I conducted about 58 semi-structured interviews (some more formal than others) with village authorities and villagers without formal political positions.[4] My host family and their network of family and neighbors were an important source of information on the daily life in the village and the organization of land tenure and natural resources. For interviews with people who had been involved in the conflict, either as leaders or as participants in meetings and demonstrations, I was assisted by the chair of a farmers' group, who had also been a leader of the resistance movement.

Doing research in a village with a history of violent conflict, where tensions are still high, proved to be a challenge. It took time before people were convinced that I was not working for a company. During my stay, two motorcycles of visitors were nearly set on fire because they were (falsely) suspected of being 'company people'. In this context, it was difficult to talk about the possible advantages of the plantation project, though people shared why they were initially in favor of the plantation and why they later changed their mind. I was not able to speak to leaders of the supporters of the plantation. Moreover, these supporters were less organized than the opponents, and since 'being in favor' (*berpihak*) is now strongly criticized, it was difficult to identify these people. Another limitation of my research was that I could not interview company staff as they were no longer present in the area.

Hence, this article explains the resistance and the different perceptions people had about the plantation plans. I do not dismiss the possibility that some people still support the plantation project. The purpose of this article, however, is not to show that people are either in favor or against oil palm. Rather, I intend to demonstrate

4 I counted all conversations in which I discussed topics related to the research questions. With several people I had multiple conversations; I counted these as one. Interviews were often conducted with more than one person; I counted these as one interview.

how people's responses to oil palm plantation projects are crucially rooted in the way they give meaning to the land that is targeted for conversion.

THE MEANING OF LAND IN OIL PALM LAND CONFLICTS

A literature review of land use in Kalimantan shows a variety of land use and tenure practices that goes beyond the notion of land as a mere location for agricultural production or infrastructure. Land, and the benefits people can derive from land, can concurrently be valuable for socio-economic, cultural, spiritual, ecological, and political reasons. For example, Dove (1983) demonstrates that farmers' choices for certain crops can be a strategy to seek acknowledgement for land claims from authorities. Haug (2014) points out that land tenure in Kalimantan is subject to spiritual and ritual procedures. Peluso (2009) explains that land tenure is an important factor in the construction of ethnic identities and kinship relations. A legal-anthropological perspective, which allows an empirical inquiry of land tenure, helps to grasp this complexity of the meaning of land to people's livelihoods.

People who are dependent on land need tenure security to be protected against involuntary removal (Reerink, 2011, p. 1) or exclusion from the ability to benefit from land (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). This requires negotiations with other people; therefore relations between people and land (or other valuables) are above all "relations between people about land" (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 1999, p. 21). Such relations become manifest in property, that is, "the ways in which the relations between society's members with respect to valuables are given form and significance" (Benda-Beckmann, Benda-Beckmann, & Wiber, 2006, p. 14). Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann (1999) propose a functional analysis of property. This approach acknowledges that people attribute meaning to property in multiple ways – many more than sheer economic meanings. Functions of property are important to people in different ways and can become more or less important over time. A functional analysis of property requires an empirical inquiry of property holders, objects of property (people's conceptualizations of their environment), and bundles of rights and responsibilities in different times and places (Benda-Beckmann & Benda-Beckmann, 1999; Benda-Beckmann et al., 2006).

The functionality of property can be contested, especially in Indonesia, where land relations are embedded in a context of legal plurality and competing authorities. Sikor and Lund (2009) stress that different authorities strive to obtain legitimacy by recognizing or denying property claims. The composition of bundles of rights and responsibilities, and also the question of who can be a property holder and what legitimate property objects are, is therefore subject to power struggles. This means that the endorsement or limitation of property functionalities depends on the authority that legitimates property claims. The functionality of land is also conditioned by access to land. Ribot and Peluso (2003) highlight that having property rights to land does not yet guarantee the ability to derive benefits from this land. They argue that the actual ability of people to derive benefits from land or associated resources depends on various mechanisms of access, including technology (tools, but also infrastructure), capital, market, labor, knowledge, authority, *and* property. However, property is an extraordinary mechanism of access because it can legitimize or dele-

gitimize other mechanisms of access. In this article, I talk about functions, meanings, and values. While these concepts are closely related, there are also differences between them. The functionality of land is composed of property holders, objects, and different bundles of rights and responsibilities in different times and places as well as the different ways in which people give meaning and form to it. Examples of functions are environmental, economic, cultural, political, and religious functions. When I discuss the meaning of land or associated resources, I refer to people's interpretations (expressed in narratives and practices) of land and associated resources; either positive or negative. Finally, value or valuation refers to people's perceptions about the appreciation of land and associated resources in relation to their livelihoods, lifestyles, and identities.

OIL PALM EXPANSION IN WEST KALIMANTAN

With an annual production of 33 million tons, Indonesia has become world leader in palm oil production (Sheil et al., 2009). In Sumatra, the cradle of the Indonesian palm oil industry, the number of oil palm smallholdings (both contract farmers and independent smallholders) is catching up with private and state plantations (Ditjenbun, 2014). However, in West Kalimantan, oil palms are mostly grown in large-scale plantations run by private or state companies (BPS, 2015; Li, 2015). The first oil palm plantations in West Kalimantan were established in the interior district of Sanggau in the 1980s. At that time, Indonesia maintained a plantation system known as *nucleus-plasma* (NES). In a NES plantation, 20% of the plantation area (*nucleus*) is managed directly by state or private companies. The land is owned by the government and leased to a company through a Land Cultivation Rights permit (*hak guna usaha*, HGU) for 35 years. The remaining 80% of the concession (*plasma*) is managed and cultivated by smallholder farmers (transmigrants or locals), for which they can receive formal land certificates (Semedi & Bakker, 2014, p. 380). In the 1980s, *plasma* plots often included 0.5 ha for homes and subsistence gardens. Local landowning communities could be included in the smallholder schemes by contributing land to the plantation. The plantation sector was strongly supported by the state, which provided credit, infrastructure, migrant labor, and land.

The Asian crisis of 1997/1998 which led to the fall of the Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime and far-reaching political, administrative, and economic reforms, announced a new episode for palm oil production. McCarthy (2010) defines this episode as the *laissez faire* phase. The central state withdrew direct support for the plantation sector and smallholder inclusion and left control to the market (McCarthy, Gillespie, & Zen, 2012). The economic and political reforms contributed to a favorable investment climate, and district governments in so called 'frontier areas' like Kalimantan and Papua regarded oil palm as an opportunity to attract investments (Pye, 2010). The issuance of plantation permits became a source of income for district governments, and companies and district governments engaged in reciprocal relations (McCarthy et al., 2012). Pichler (2015) observes that "as a result, local governments privilege the expansion of oil palm plantations rather than focusing, for example, on replanting existing plantations or supporting smallholders" (p. 526).

Various scholars have pointed out that the conditions under which people and

their lands are incorporated into the oil palm sector have deteriorated since the beginning of the reform period in 1999 (Gillespie, 2011; Li, 2015; McCarthy, 2010; McCarthy et al., 2012). The Plantation Law Nr. 18/2004 allowed companies to use a reversed *nucleus-plasma* ratio with a minimum of only 20% percent for smallholder plots (Gillespie, 2011). Companies were also no longer required to designate land for subsistence farming (Pichler, 2015, p. 522). Companies are now responsible for directly negotiating with local communities about the transfer of land and *plasma* arrangements. The specific terms of land acquisition are no longer regulated by the central state, but by district regulations. The most recent plantation scheme called 'partnerships' (*kemitraan*) allows companies to control and manage both the *nucleus* and *plasma* plantations under a so called 'one roof' (*satu atap*) or 'one management' (*satu manajemen*) system (Potter, 2015). McCarthy et al. (2012) highlight that in West Kalimantan companies that use such a plantation scheme do not actually return *plasma* plots to smallholders, but rather offer them "the share of the production from the 20% *plasma* area which the company retains under its own management" (McCarthy et al., 2012, p. 560). The profit for *plasma* holders is reduced by various costs for transportation, management, fertilizer, and credit. Many *plasma* holders complain that these costs are too high and the monthly income is too low.[5] At the two plantations that I visited, it was not clear what would happen to the *plasma* plots after the concession expired. People also did not know how much they owed the company and when their debts would be repaid (also observed by McCarthy et al., 2012). In theory, *plasma* holders receive land certificates for their plots after they have repaid their debts for the investment in oil palms. Remaining land contributed to the plantation then becomes state land, which is leased out to the company (Julia & White, 2012). According to McCarthy et al. (2012) this is not always clear to people who surrender land. They observe that "villagers believed they were lending land that would later be returned to them rather than selling it for perpetual alienation under a state plantation concession (HGU)" (p. 560). In the one-roof scheme, local communities often work at the plantation as day laborers. Indeed, an argument in favor of plantations is that these could create jobs for rural communities who do not have many other job opportunities. However, Li (2011) shows that oil palm plantations are less labor intensive than frequently promoted. According to her, "an established plantation uses only one worker per four to ten hectares of land" (p. 284).

OIL PALM LAND CONFLICT IN KEBUN HIJAU VILLAGE

The exact terms under which people are incorporated into the palm oil sector vary from place to place. As companies are now directly negotiating with rural communities, outcomes largely depend on power relations and the ability of communities to organize. The case study that follows illustrates people's responses to an oil palm plantation project in a rural community in West Kalimantan. Opponents of the project refused incorporation into the oil palm sector, partly based on their valuation of current land tenure arrangements which they regard as more favorable to their livelihoods and lifestyles.

5 I visited two plantations which used a one-roof scheme and I interviewed plasma holders during village meetings.

Kebun Hijau

Kebun Hijau village is located a two hour drive on a run-down road from the district capital to the coast. The village has a population of approximately 3500 inhabitants. The majority of the population identifies as ethnic Malay and is Muslim. The Malay have lived in this area for at least a century.[6] In the early 20th century, the colonial government encouraged farmers in this region to plant rubber trees and coconut palm to respond to the rubber and copra boom. Elderly villagers remember that the colonial government encouraged their parents to plant rubber trees in exchange for food and luxury goods. Roads as well as rivers and sea routes connected the provincial capital Pontianak with Malaysia to facilitate the trade in these commodities (Seavoy, 1980). Rubber and copra production have remained key sources of income in the littoral regions. In Kebun Hijau, farmers also produce rice, fruits, and vegetables for subsistence and cash crops and products like pulse crops, corn, pepper, sugar, edible bird's nests, and oil palm. In times of a low rubber price, remittances from labor migration to plantations in Malaysia or logging companies in Kalimantan, Sumatra, and Papua become important sources of income.

The village is divided into four parts, reflecting the village history. The oldest part of the village is the residential area, which stretches along the main road. Until the 1960s, the rest of the village area was covered with peat forest and tree gardens. In 1965, the village head decided that the colonial rubber trees had to be cut down to make rice fields and that new rubber gardens could be opened in the forest. Behind the residential area, the rubber trees made way for an open *ladang* area: rain-fed agricultural fields suitable to use as rice fields (*ume*) and vegetable gardens (*kebun kacang*). In the 1980s, the population started to grow and young families were encouraged to move into the forest to make a new settlement. Nowadays, this *kampung* consists of about 80 households. It functions as a gateway between the *ladang* area and the hinterland (*darat*), where tree gardens (rubber and coconut), fruit gardens, and forest (*hutan*) are located. Due to several forest fires, large parcels of forest and tree gardens have been burned. Now this is open grassland where gradually people are replanting tree crops and vegetable gardens.

The *ladang* fields and the tree gardens are divided into plots separated by ditches. By clearing forest and making gardens and fields (*merimbah*), families could claim ownership over the plots. Over time, these plots were passed on through inheritance (*warisan*) or sold to neighbors and family (*jual-beli*). Plots can also be used under leasehold (*sewa-menyewa*) or share-cropping arrangements (*bagi-hasil*). Ownership is monitored by the 'head of plot boundaries' (*kepala parit*),[7] who keeps record of who owns or uses what. He assists the village head in case of internal disputes about land. There are four *kepala parit* in the village. If plots are left uncultivated for some time, other people can make a claim. The *kepala parit* is in charge of supervising and allocating the uncultivated plots. Uncultivated plots are mostly found in the hinterland.

6 See Peluso (2009) and Davidson and Kammen (2002) on the many ethnic conflicts that have occurred in this area.

7 *Kepala parit* literally means 'head of ditches', which refers to the narrow ditches which indicate the boundaries of plots. Other villages in the area may use other names for this position, such as *kepala hutan* (head of the forest).

The *ladang* area is seldom uncultivated because ladang plots can be leased out in case the owner does not cultivate the land. Several plots in the ladang area have been registered through land certificates issued by the National Land Agency. I have not encountered people who hold such certificates for their tree gardens or other plots in the hinterland. The *ladang* fields, the tree gardens and parts of the hinterland are classified as non-forest area subject to the Basic Agrarian Law. These gardens can be classified as 'non-registered occupied land' or as 'administratively registered occupied land' in case people hold a letter of land clarification (*Surat Keterangan Tanah*). This type of land is available for agricultural use, including oil palm cultivation. The rest of the hinterland is state forest land (production forest) subject to the Basic Forestry Law. This type of land cannot be used for oil palm plantations (Bedner, 2016).

The local land tenure arrangements that have developed over time allow for a diversity of livelihood strategies. The next paragraphs describe the introduction of an oil palm plantation, which requires specific land tenure arrangements. The plantation project led to conflict, not only about whether or not to accept oil palm, but all the more about the functionality of land and the distribution of benefits under different land tenure arrangements.

Evolution of the Conflict

In 2007, an agribusiness company met with village authorities from several villages, including Kebun Hijau, to discuss a plan to establish a large-scale oil palm plantation of approximately 10,000 ha, using a *nucleus-plasma* partnership scheme. The company obtained permission to organize 'socialization' meetings[8] in the villages to explain more about the project. In 2008, the district government granted a location permit which allowed the company to start with land transfer negotiations with the communities. A leader of a farmers' group[9] in the *kampung* in Kebun Hijau was present at the first meeting with the village authorities. Afterwards, he gathered the members of his group to discuss the project. After discussing advantages and disadvantages, this group decided that they were against the plantation. My hosts, who are members of this group, recall a heated discussion between opponents and supporters of the plantation plans at the first socialization meeting in an elementary school. Several people that I interviewed about this meeting explained that they had prior information about the reputation of palm oil companies in Kalimantan, from family members in other districts and RUAI TV, a local television station run by the NGO AMAN.[10] Moreover, several villagers were in contact with a regional farmers' movement which was established after a conflict with an oil palm company in a nearby area. The farmers' movement helped to organize the opponents of the oil palm project. The sub-

8 Socialization meetings (*sosialisasi*) is an Indonesian concept which refers to an event wherein companies or the government announce (development) projects to communities and inform them about the procedures.

9 Farmers' groups are common in the region. By registering as a group with the sub-district government, farmers can apply for government aid for resources like fertilizer, seeds, or hand-tractors. Usually, farmers' groups cultivate a rice field, vegetable garden, or rubber garden to try out farming techniques, sometimes assisted by government extension officials.

10 *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (Alliance of the Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago) is an NGO that focuses on indigenous rights issues. AMAN was founded in Pontianak in 1999.

district government issued an official letter stating that the sub-district rejected the plantation project plan. The company meanwhile started to place land marks and made preparations to build a seed nursery in one of the villages and roads up to Kebun Hijau. According to villagers, rubber gardens and rice fields were damaged during these activities. In 2010, the farmers' movement organized a demonstration in front of the office of the district government. The demonstration ended violently with people throwing stones at the building. A few weeks later, people organized another demonstration at the base camp of the company. Company assets were damaged, two police motorcycles were burned, and the house of an (allegedly pro-palm oil) village head was damaged. Two villagers were convicted for the violence and sent to jail for six months. Eventually, the company withdrew from the area and moved to another district. The conflict left a deep impact on the communities, as opponents and supporters of the oil palm plan had verbally and physically attacked each other. This is not the end of the story, however; after these events the new district head issued a new location permit for a new company. Again, Kebun Hijau was included in the permit. Company staff has been spotted to inspect the location and visit village authorities. At the time of writing, no further actions have taken place.

Land Tenure and Livelihoods

In the next sections, I follow the livelihood strategies of my hosts in the *kampung*, Sri and Yadi, and their family and neighbors. This analysis shows how they give meaning to the different lands in their village, including agricultural fields, rubber gardens, and forest, and how their land use is constrained by mechanisms of access. I argue that these meanings and the land tenure arrangements related to them are of utmost importance to understand the palm oil related conflict.

Agricultural Fields: Food Security and Flexibility

The term *ladang* refers to rain-fed agricultural fields. Most households cultivate plots of 0.5-2.0 ha. Some households obtained locally recognized ownership over their plot through inheritance, land purchase, or clearing forest. However, like Sri and Yadi, many households do not have a plot of their own and they lease from neighbors and family members or use share-cropping arrangements. Sri and Yadi lease 0.5 ha from a cousin who lives in another village. A *ladang* can have multiple functions, depending on who uses it, in what ways, and in which season. First and foremost, a *ladang* provides food security. From September to February, *ladang* plots are used as an *ume*:[11] a field for dry rice cultivation. An *ume* plot of 1 ha can produce between 1.5 to 5 tons of *padi* per harvest.[12] Sri and Yadi usually obtain enough rice from their 0.5 ha plot for themselves and their two sons for one year. However, sometimes they need to sell rice to obtain cash. When people have surpluses, these are sold to the local market or given to family members living in urban areas.

The ability to derive benefits from an *ume* depends on several factors. First, cultivating rice is labor intensive because land preparation, planting, and harvesting are

11 *Ume* is the local term, Bahasa Indonesia uses *huma*.

12 According to a government extension official, yields are low compared to other regions.

done manually. Therefore, the amount of hectares that one is able to cultivate depends on access to labor. There are two ways to harvest rice: with a small hand knife or with a scythe. Using a scythe is much faster because one cuts the *padi* from the root instead of cutting the rice grains from the stalks. However, this takes more energy. Yadi's sister, Siti, is unable to use a scythe. As her husband works in Malaysia, she has to take care of the harvest by herself, using a hand knife.[13] To solve this labor problem, people hire farm workers (*upah*). However, during the harvest time there is a high demand for farm workers. During my visit, Sri and Yadi tried to find workers to help with the rice harvest but they failed to find anyone still available.

Second, technology is an important mechanism of access to an *ume*. Tools to speed up the harvest allow people to cultivate more land (e.g., a thrasher or a hand-tractor), and technology might improve the quality of the soil. Contrary to government banners in the village that state: "Let's plant rice twice a year!", Sri does not plant rice twice a year because, according to her, her land is sour from the latex residue in the groundwater. The lack of a functioning irrigation system precludes the proper drainage of water which damages the quality of the soil. Furthermore, the paths to the rice fields are unpaved and can turn into knee-high rivers in the rainy season. This is the condition under which the farmers have to transport bales of *padi* on bicycles, motorcycles, and on foot to the threshing factory in the village. This indicates that although people have different kinds of rights to benefit from an *ume*, actual benefits are limited due to lack of technology. After the rice season, the *ume* fields are converted into *kebun kacang*: gardens where pulse crops, corn, cucumber, and watermelon are grown. Hence, the *ladang* fields become a source of cash income. The limited access to markets is a challenge to generate an income from these crops. The poor condition of the infrastructure makes it difficult to transport crops quickly to the nearby towns.

Another function of the *ladang* area is that land use and crop choices can be adapted to needs, and the availability of capital, time, and labor. This implies two things: First, with seasonal crops, people can adapt their crop choice to market demands, labor availability, and ecological circumstances. Second, land rights are flexible; people can buy one plot this year and sell, lease out, or lease even more the next year. For example, Mrs. Ngah told me she did not rent a *ladang* plot this year because she was pregnant and her husband worked in Malaysia. She may rent again next year. Even selling land is perceived as flexible; people often sell land when in need of direct cash, for example, to pay for the education of children, medical expenses, or make the Islamic pilgrimage (*hajj*). They do this with the expectation that it will be possible to buy new land or open up new land in the future. However, this flexibility is challenged because due to population growth, land is becoming scarcer and it is not easy to regain land once it has been sold.

The low yields that are derived from *ladang* fields in this region may reduce the status of such land to 'unproductive' in the eyes of the district government, which emphasizes the economic function of the land when promoting plantation development. However, despite the low yields and the farmers' focus on production

13 Taking care of the rice fields is mostly a women's job because many men migrate to Malaysia for work. A man who just returned home confirmed to me that he was stressed because he had to take over the harvest from his pregnant wife and, not being used to this work, he was too slow and the *padi* became overripe.

for subsistence, *ladang* fields are meaningful to farmers for providing food security and additional cash income, in accordance with conditions set by mechanisms of access. Further, the analysis of rice fields has demonstrated that current land tenure arrangements provide a variety of options to obtain land rights other than through ownership. This allows people who do not hold ownership rights over land to cultivate rice and other crops. A plantation system would threaten this variety of land tenure and eventually affect people's access to land.

Tree Gardens: Security for Future Livelihoods

After the rice harvest season, and if it is not raining, Sri can be found working in her rubber garden. The garden was planted some 45 years ago by her father-in-law. He is too ill to work in his gardens now and allocated them equally among his children. Yadi and Sri received 0.5 ha. Sri admits that life as a rubber farmer has become more difficult. During a price boom around 2008, rubber prices were up to IDR 20,000 (USD 1.5) per kg but dropped to IDR 4,000 to 8,000 (USD 0.3 to 0.6) at the moment. The global rubber price crisis is 'the talk of the village'. I often discussed with the villagers why they wanted to maintain their rubber gardens despite the low prices. The diverse answers to this question reveal multiple functions of rubber gardens. First, people indicate that they consider it important that rubber gardens have a long history in the village. People said they maintained the gardens because these were made by their ancestors and passed over from generation to generation (*turun-temurun*). By clearing forest and planting rubber trees, these ancestors claimed land and created a source of income for the next generations. During a conversation about the history of the family, Sri said: "My rubber garden is an inheritance from my parents-in-law. We cannot sell it; we have to maintain the garden for the grandchildren. If my son asks 'whose land is this?' I will say: It was granted by your grandfather". Her statement shows that she wants her son to know the history of the garden which he and his brother will inherit one day. Moreover, her statement about maintaining the garden for the grandchildren reveals that land is an important asset to ensure an income for the next generation. Sri and Yadi have no money to provide for a higher education for the children and chances are that they will follow in their parent's footsteps and become farmers. The framing of rubber gardens as *turun-temurun* helps to make people reluctant of land transfers to outsiders like oil palm companies. This discourse was strongly promoted by opponents of the oil palm project plans.

Second, tapping rubber allows a diversified livelihood. Sri works in the gardens from dawn to around 10 am. This enables her to spend the afternoon in the rice field or the vegetable garden. Third, rubber needs little input, the trees grow without fertilizer and pesticides, and tapping rubber only requires a small knife and coconut shell to collect the latex. Rubber does not require good infrastructure; people can transport latex on bicycles over the muddy roads. Latex can be preserved a long time, so there is no need to transport it quickly for processing. Farmers can postpone selling until prices are higher. Furthermore, the harvest cannot fail the way other crops can. Fourth, tapping rubber is light and easy work, which can be performed

by anyone, including children, elderly, and people with weaker health conditions.[14] This means that rubber provides an income to various parts of the population. Fifth, rubber is valued as a source of daily cash. Even though the price is low, rubber can be tapped and sold every day, except when it is raining. Rubber trees' only enemies are fire and rain. Sri argues that even with low prices and a lot of rain, rubber still provides income security.

> If it rains, then we have no money but we can anticipate that. We can save money in the dry season. We can take a lot of food from the forest. When it is like that, we are fine. The vegetables are still fresh and natural. If we tap rubber one day, we can still get 50,000 rupiah, even with this low price. If we are laborers, we have to work every day and our salaries are fixed and small. We like to live like this without coercion; it is no burden to work.

In an interview with Mrs. Miza, an elderly lady, I asked why she maintained the rubber trees despite the low price. I consider her response exemplary for the functions of rubber gardens described above:

> Rubber gives us our daily food. The profit is enough for our daily costs and needs. We can send our children to school using the income from rubber. Our *padi* [rice field] is for food, our rubber is for cash. Our ancestors already planted rubber and we continue to do so. Rubber trees can be productive for 12 to 13 years. When oil palms are that old, I cannot harvest them anymore. I can still tap rubber, thank God. [I asked: Why can't you harvest oil palms?] It hurts. When we are old, we can still tap rubber. With oil palm, if it is far from the road, we have to carry the thorny fruits. And the older and taller the trees, the harder it gets. [I said: But the rubber price is so low.] Yes, too low. But we maintain our rubber. If we sell our land, we will have to eat stones. With rubber we can eat. Rubber does not need fertilizer; we don't need money to produce rubber. If there is oil palm, there is no firewood. And we cannot grow vegetables. Even *padi* cannot grow close to oil palm. I can't be someone's coolie. It is best we have rice and rubber.

Her answer demonstrates the variety of factors that motivate the choice for crops, beyond price and yields. While oil palm may provide higher income, in the perception of people like Mrs. Miza, rubber provides a more *secure* income, now and in the future. Though many people are keen to plant oil palm, they do not want to cut their rubber trees in exchange for it.

So far, the analysis of rice fields and rubber gardens demonstrates that these lands are valued because they provide food security and income security for a variety of property holders over several generations. In addition, people value the current flexibility in bundles of rights and responsibilities. This flexibility allows them to uphold

14 The depiction of rubber tapping as light and easy work in comparison to the description of harvesting oil palm fruits as labor intensive contrasts the findings of Semedi and Prasetya (2014). The difference may be explained by a different perception on what is heavy labor: The people in my case study measure this in physical exercise needed, whereas Semedi and Prasetya seem to measure in hours required for the labor.

a large variety of crop choices and respond to crises and opportunities caused by fluctuating prices and new markets. While these functions of land are related to economic benefits (food and cash), at the same time, these benefits are related to social continuity from past to future generations and identities. Land is important because it enables a connection to the ancestors and is an investment for future generations. A change to monoculture production would fix property objects, property holders, and bundles of rights and responsibilities according to *nucleus-plasma* arrangements and reduce the meaning of land to a mere economic function.

Forest: Safety Net and Threat

At the western end of the village, behind the tree gardens, the forest – or what remains of a peat forest – begins. The first time I went there, I was surprised to find that what people call 'forest' includes a large open space damaged by forest fire. Many villagers lost part of their tree gardens in the fire. Hence, forest refers to land that is uncultivated or not yet in full production, including land that is left (temporarily) uncultivated. Many people told me that they own a plot in this area, which they do not cultivate because they lack time, labor, or capital. Behind the burned forest lays a peat forest, where once a logging company harvested timber. Yadi said that the trees are getting scarcer and it will not take long before the forest has disappeared. Yadi is concerned about this development because the forest keeps the mosquitos and insects away from the houses and rice fields. Depletion of the forest will also affect his family because he is one of the two villagers of Kebun Hijau that harvest timber in this forest.

The forest is also a source of food. Sri and Yadi do not produce vegetables for consumption; instead they collect vegetables in the forest areas. Last year, Yadi had an accident which disabled him to work in construction for three months. This meant they had little cash income. Sri told me she had to be clever (*pandai pandai*) and find food in the forest: ferns, mushrooms, taro roots, honey, and many kinds of (medicinal) leaves. Besides vegetables, people also collect firewood and catch fish in the forest area. Yadi said that since the forest fire, there is surprisingly a lot more fish in the streams. Every day he sets out fish pots to catch snakehead murrel, carp, and catfish, which he sells to his neighbors. During my stay, Sri often prepared meals using solely 'forest food' and rice from their own stock. In particular, when commodity prices are low or people are unable to work due to illness or old age, the forest is a safety net for food security.

However, not only positive functions are attributed to the forest. People often referred to the forest as 'still forest' (*masih hutan*), that is, not cultivated yet. In stories about the past, the forest is associated with ghosts and djinns. Nowadays, the forest is considered as a risk of fire, which threatens the tree gardens because forest means uncultivated and therefore uncontrolled land. Moreover, land further away from the main road is regarded as less valuable because the road towards the *darat* area is in a bad condition. One villager who inherited land in this area said: "I don't care about my land in the *darat* behind the *kampung* because it is far away and not productive enough for me, it is all right if this land becomes a plantation". When discussing the oil palm conflict, people often explained to me that they were initially in favor of

the plantation because they thought it would be established in 'the forest'. People in Kebun Hijau expected that the oil palms would be planted in the area behind their tree gardens. A discussion with a village official in the neighboring village Batu Raya who had been involved in the negotiations with the company sheds light on why people welcomed a plantation in the forest.

> People are afraid of empty land. So, initially we agreed with the company, because they will manage the empty land. They will surely take care that there is no forest fire. If the plantation would be on sleeping land, we would agree because we have to think of our roads.

People hoped that, if a plantation was to be established in the forest, this would protect their gardens from fire. Moreover, they hoped that the company would build a road which they could use to transport their crops. However, after the company started placing land marks from the main road to the border of the production forest, it became evident that the plantation would not be located in the forest. On the contrary, the plantation would include the tree gardens and rice fields and exclude the forest area and the uncultivated plots located there. The village official's comments on this were: "The company never disclosed the exact location of the plantation. If they had said it was not in the forest but on our land, we would have rejected the plan before they uttered one word". The company could not, however, develop the plantation in the forest area because forest land cannot be converted into agricultural land without permission from the Ministry of Forestry. The tree gardens and *ladang* area already had the status of non-forest area and were therefore available for agricultural production, including oil palm.

In analyzing the functions of forest land, it appears that the meaning of land can be ambiguous. Forest land is appreciated as a source of food and ecological balance but, at the same time, forest land is also regarded as a threat to other farming activities. It cannot be stated in a general sense that 'opponents' of the plantation give a certain meaning to land that contrasts the meaning 'supporters' give to land. Both opponents and supporters have ambiguous conceptions of the meaning of land. What is important is, however, how the functions of land are used in narratives regarding the plantation project. For example, the company emphasized the meaning of the forest as a threat (even though the plantation would in fact *not* be located in the forest), whereas its opponents emphasized that the loss of the forest would jeopardize food security.

Land Provides Autonomy to Farmers

The preceding shows that different types of land have diverse functions which relate to food security, daily and long term cash income and resilience in times of crisis, as well as historical-cultural functions. Besides the different benefits people obtain from land by producing crops, land is also valued because it provides a sense of identity and autonomy as a farmer. People fear that if the oil palm plantation is established, there will be no land left for farming. In this case, they believe that they will have to become plantation laborers. A plantation laborer is referred to with the term 'coolie'

(*kuli*), which is a negative, colonial term for laborer. I often heard the phrase: "If the plantation is established, we will become coolies on our own land". A talk between my hostess and her friends illustrates why being a *kuli* is regarded as inferior to being a farmer:

> [Siti:] If the plantation is established then the land will not be ours: It will be the company's. We don't want to be a *kuli*. We don't want a salary from the company.
>
> [Yesa:] That would feel as if we are forced, tied. If we have our own land, we are independent, if we want to work or not. If we work hard, we harvest, if we are lazy then we don't. If you work for a company you have to go to work, whether you want to or not.

Being a laborer means that you cannot determine when you work, how hard you work, and what you plant. You lose the opportunity to improve your livelihood by creativity and diligence. Yet, many people in Kebun Hijau are keen to work on oil palm plantations in Malaysia, where they spend six months to several years. A conversation I had with Jeffrey, a young father who had just returned after six months in Malaysia, explains this apparent contradiction. I asked him if he would not rather have a plantation in his village, so he would not have to leave home to work. He replied:

> I disagree, because then we would be forced to work. Our working hours would be fixed. If I feel tired and want to stay home and the foreman came by . . . that would not be possible. Our land will no longer be ours.

While he was happy to work on a plantation in Malaysia, he did not want to have the plantation in his own village. Working in Malaysia is temporary; when people return home, they wish to return to farming, which is regarded as less heavy work than plantation labor. An identity of the 'independent farmer' against the 'tied laborer' is promoted by opponents of the plantation plans. This identity is upheld by the regional farmers' movement. Their aim is to raise awareness about the negative impact of oil palm on farmers' livelihoods and to assist farmers with farming techniques that obtain higher yields. The chair of the movement, who is also leader of a farmers' group in Kebun Hijau, believes that the better farmers are organized and the more productive they are, the stronger they can oppose the plantation plans. This makes sense because with higher yields, farmers may be less inclined to transfer their lands to companies.

People's conceptions about plantation labor versus farming demonstrates that the meaning of land is not limited to economic functions but includes less tangible meanings related to self-esteem, pride, and upholding a certain way of life and a sense of belonging. Current land tenure arrangements provide a degree of autonomy which cannot be replicated in a plantation system and therefore people's negative perceptions of plantation labor cannot be simply addressed by improving labor conditions.

The Oil Palm Project

In this final section, I relate the meaning of land to people's expectations of the plantation project. The location permit for the plantation included all agricultural fields and rubber gardens as well as parts of the forest land. Only the 'production forest', far back in the hinterlands, was not included. People in Kebun Hijau expected that a conversion to oil palm would mean a complete transition from diversified agriculture to monocrop production. There is not enough land in the area to accommodate *both* a plantation of 10,000 ha *and* mixed cropping agriculture. When oil palms have matured they cannot be intercropped because the canopy blocks sunlight (Koczberski, Curry, & Bue, 2012). Theoretically, land owners have the right to refuse conversion to oil palm and 'enclave' their land. However, in practice it is impossible to productively maintain enclaved plots of 2 to 3 ha in the midst of a plantation because isolated paddy fields suffer from pests. Furthermore, the company does not favor such a fragmented plantation because it diminishes production efficiency. Subsequently, the location of the plantation is usually not negotiated plot by plot; either all land is included in the plantation or none at all. The switch to monocrop production therefore means that people lose the opportunity to adapt their crop choice to changing circumstances. They also have no alternative sources of income during the maturing period of the oil palms and in times of price drops or harvest failures. This context distinguishes the case from other plantation projects where people submitted parts of their land to the plantation while maintaining enough land to continue alternative livelihood strategies (Jelsma et al., 2009; Semedi & Bakker, 2014).

In addition to the loss of diversified livelihood strategies, opponents of the plantation project also expect to lose access to land. There is concern that not all households would obtain a *plasma* plot. Under *nucleus-plasma* arrangements, farmers are expected to transfer approximately 10 ha of their land to the company, for which they receive back 2 ha planted with oil palms as *plasma* plots (Rist et al., 2010). However, in Kebun Hijau many households have no more than 2 ha in total. If people transfer 2 ha to the plantation and receive back 0.4 ha (20%), they are left with a *plasma* plot that is too small to be economically viable. On the other hand, if the company would uphold 2 ha as the minimum size for plasma plots, there would only be enough land for 267 plots for a village of 3500 inhabitants. Furthermore, not every household in Kebun Hijau 'owns' agricultural fields or rubber gardens. The previous section demonstrated that current land tenure arrangements allow a variety of options for obtaining land rights other than ownership, including share-cropping, leasehold, and clearing new forest land. The establishment of a plantation would require a change in land tenure arrangements in order to meet the criteria of *nucleus-plasma* schemes. People who have no land to contribute to the plantation have limited opportunities to become *plasma* holders. Meanwhile, they are not compensated for losing access to the land which they currently share-crop or lease. This would also impact livelihood opportunities for future generations (White, 2012).

Farmers whose land is incorporated into oil palm plantations often become day-laborers on the plantation. Such a change from farming to plantation labor would have profound impacts on daily lives, severely restraining people's autonomy. Particularly in a 'one-roof' plantation scheme, people lose control over decision-making

regarding production, marketing strategies, and labor time. In Kebun Hijau, many people have experience with working on oil palm plantations in Malaysia. Plantation labor is regarded as heavy labor, not suitable for women, elderly people, and people with weaker health conditions. Though in other plantations in the region, women do work as laborers, women are not hired above the age of 35 and have to retire at 55 (as observations from a visit to a nearby plantation showed). Meanwhile, those fit to work on plantations may choose to continue to work in Malaysia because of higher wages. It is therefore likely that the company would attract labor migrants from outer regions. The local population may then become what Li (2010; 2011) describes as "surplus people" whose land is needed but whose labor is not.

The explanations from the company about the plantation project did not address these concerns. Rather, the company made promises such as that the villagers would be able to make the pilgrimage to Makkah and that they would have money to improve their houses. The company also promised to improve the roads. Such promises are not related to any serious estimation of the benefits of oil palm as a crop vis-a-vis rubber, rice, and other crops. In socialization meetings, what was also not elaborated on was who will receive these benefits, how and when, or how people's lifestyles would change.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have presented a case study of a conflict in a Malay community in West Kalimantan that occurred in the preparatory phase of an oil palm plantation project. Violent confrontations arose between a plantation company and its opponents and supporters in the community, and the project was canceled before any oil palms were planted. To understand this conflict, I analyzed land tenure arrangements in the pre-plantation situation in relation to people's responses to the plantation project. The findings demonstrate that resistance – or the absence of resistance – to oil palm plantation projects is not only conditioned by characteristics of the project itself. Rather, responses are rooted in the way people give meaning to the land and associated resources targeted for conversion to oil palm. To address land conflicts, it is therefore not sufficient to improve laws and policies on plantations or set up standards for the conduct of companies. The people in the case study village expected that a plantation system as such would negatively impact their livelihoods, lifestyles, and identities in three ways.

First, people were concerned about becoming dependent on monoculture cash crop production. Current land tenure arrangements allow for a wide range of crop choices. For the villagers, this means that land provides food security, income stability (for present and the future generations), and the flexibility to respond to crises and opportunities, such as new market opportunities. In times of limited cash income, the rice fields, vegetable gardens, and foods from the forest are crucial for food security. Rubber, even with the current low prices, provides predictable daily cash income for household expenses. Rubber gardens are also an investment for future generations. Meanwhile, rubber trees require little labor and attention, so villagers can plant additional crops. In contrast, an oil palm plantation would be incompatible with these diversified livelihood strategies because oil palm does not allow intercrop-

ping and there is not enough land available for farmers to continue producing other crops alongside oil palm. A conversion to oil palm would endanger food security and make farmers dependent on one market without having a safety net in times of crisis.

Second, the functional analysis of property relations exposed how a variety of property holders, beyond 'land owners', can derive benefits from land through leasehold, share-cropping, and clearing new forest land. Past and future generations are recognized because they influence bundles of rights and opportunities of current property holders. This is in line with Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann (2014, p. 21), who argue that property relations are meaningful only if they can be preserved over time, beyond the lifespan of property holders. *Plasma* arrangements only acknowledge current property holders while there is no guarantee for future generations to obtain *plasma* plots. Furthermore, people who have no land to offer to the plantation would lose access to land because they are not able to register as *plasma* holders and other options to obtain land rights will disappear. Therefore, a plantation would limit access to land for a considerable part of the local population.

Third, this loss of access to land is not compensated by opportunities for labor. Although labor migration to plantations in Malaysia is an important part of people's livelihood strategies, plantation labor is regarded as heavy work that is not suitable for women, the elderly, and people with weaker health conditions. Those who are not able to go to Malaysia for work (where wages are higher than on Indonesian plantations), would not be able or willing to work on a plantation in the village. An important reason why people do not regard plantation labor as an option is that they regard a laborer lifestyle as inferior to the more autonomous lifestyle of farmers. People refer to plantation laborers as 'coolies' or 'tied laborers'. Moreover, being a farmer is associated with heritage from the ancestors. The establishment of a plantation would mean the loss of people's identities as autonomous farmers.

This shows that people's responses to oil palm plantations are deeply rooted in their perceptions of land tenure arrangements in the pre-plantation situation. For farmers, incorporation into the oil palm sector does not mean a mere switch to a new tree crop. Rather, by analyzing property rights and mechanisms of access, this article has shown that the incorporation of farmers and their land into the oil palm sector would lead to the loss of the multiple functions of land, particularly food security, income security over generations, flexibility to respond to crises, and opportunity and autonomy for farmers. This outcome is in stark contrast to claims that oil palm plantations bring 'development' to the marginalized littoral regions of West Kalimantan and turn 'unproductive' into productive land.

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