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Changing Spaces and Border Regimes: A Central Borneo Trajectory of 'Globalisation'

Dave Lumenta

Abstract

Introduction

Outside the ideological connotations of 'globalisation', Southeast Asia has always been 'global' throughout its history. Strategically situated on the major maritime trade routes linking ancient Europe, India and China, Southeast Asia has a long dynamic history marked by shifting power and the intense movement of people, commodities and cultural flows. The region's fluidity and cosmopolitanism is amply demonstrated by the abundance of crosscultural influences, shared within the region, such as technology, religious syncretism, language, diaspora, and even food.

The arrival of colonialism and the subsequent emergence of postcolonial nation-states in the region have significantly reconfigurated and reordered the patterns of human flows within the region. Border regimes have become prominent regulators for the movement of people and commodities across boundaries, such as the establishment of customs and immigration controls, designated for international routes and port of entries.

On the other hand, numerous upland regions across mainland Southeast Asia, peripheral maritime regions such as the Sulu Sea, the Celebes Sea, and the internationally-partitioned island of Borneo, remain quasi-open and fluid spaces where people and commodities traverse international boundaries relatively unchecked by border controls. This indicates that states rarely reach that idealised omnipotence to exercise total and coherent power over space and societal mobility. This is especially true for postcolonial states around the world. State borders throughout Southeast Asia have generally been established in an arbitrary fashion, where ethnic, linguistic, social and economic borders never neatly intersected with formal state boundaries drawn on maps. As a result, shared ethnicity, language, identities and economic interconnectivity remain to transcend many state boundaries. As such, the nation-state remains to be an alien and contested idea in many upland borderland regions around Southeast Asia (see Scott, 2009; Van Schendel, 2005). However, this does not imply that national identities have made no inroads in these seemingly 'stateless' and 'unruly' backyards. Even a remote but culturally fluid region such as central Borneo has not escaped, since the 1980s, the onslaught of identity differentiation between 'Indonesians' and 'Malaysians'. I have chosen to follow a materialist approach linking the differentiation of national identities to the process of capitalist globalisation, based on a multi-sited ethnographic study focused on mobility history conducted from 2000 to 2007 among the Kenyah, an ethnic group residing in central Borneo.

The history of Kenyah mobility from the Apokayan highlands (in today's Indonesia) into Sarawak (Malaysia) provides a tragic example of how an ethnic group became gradually alienated from Sarawak's social and economic fabric in which they were an integrated and of which significant part. My final examination looks at the capitalist-based structural ordering of the Sarawak space itself, which has been an effective substitution to any organizational power of the state in bringing social demarcations between 'Indonesians' and 'Malaysians' in central Borneo.

Theoretical Setting

Traditional mobility practices and spatial orientation of the most remote communities throughout the world were often tied to efforts in seeking shorter and favourable trade routes to the nearest markets. The persistent mobility practices in borderland regions in defiance of today's state boundaries are often rooted in ancient trade routes that may have been the most efficient

links between supply regions to regional markets. These very same routes may be as efficient as today and as it has been in the past, serving the same purpose under contemporary capitalist modes of development and it has been under maritime-trade regimes of the ancient past. During the early stages of mercantilist capitalism in Southeast Asia, traditional mobility practices such as trading expeditions were increasingly suppressed by colonial power exactly because it was all too compatible and responsive to the demands of the capitalist system itself – bypassing trade monopolies, colonial tax barriers and inefficient trading routes. Up to this point it appears that both capitalism and people who freely move around are not conveniently compatible to state projects - each having their own logic and praxis of space.

Nation-state spaces operate on the principle of fixity and bounded homogeneity. It is indeed the inherent obsession of states to tie people down into places and to assign them coherent identities, or 'geobodies' (e.g. Scott 1998; Migdal 2004; Thongchai 1994). While states are inherently constructed to function as spatial barriers, capitalism on the other hand perpetually strives to annihilate spatial barriers. (e.g. Marx 1973) One major theme to the discussion of border regimes often revolves around two dialectical historical trajectories – partitionary nation-state building that calls for spatial partitions and sedentarization of people on one hand; and capitalist-driven globalisation calling for open borders to facilitate the unhindered circulation of capital and labour on the other hand.²

The particular focus of Marxist geography (e.g. Lefebvre, 1974; Smith, 1984) has been the mechanisms through which space is appropriated - how it is constructed, visualized, designated, and seized, and projected back - to serve capital (or class) interests. In order to overcome natural barriers in the landscape to accelerate the extraction of resources, the re-organization of space is then a prerequisite. Capitalism requires its own efficient order of space that is relatively autonomous from the inefficiency of national space orders on one side; and natural barriers on the other side. The invention of new modes of production, technology and collaboration with states enable the speedy reconfiguration landscapes to accelerate the efficiency of bringing resources from its natural deposits to markets. Terrestrial developmentalism has been a major undertaking throughout the world. The invention of roads, logging roads, ports, dams, towns, the sedentarization of human settlements, transmigration schemes are all manifestations of capital drive to subject the landscape. With these inventions come the embedded social structures that are designed to conform to the maximization of capital accumulation.

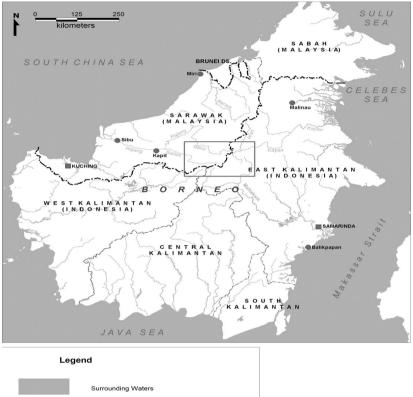
state' and 'the structural power of capitalism'.

For example, the diaspora of Bugis merchants towards the Malacca Strait was at a certain stage the direct result of Dutch efforts to surpress direct trading links between Makassar and British merchants which undermined Dutch trading interests in the region (see Poelinggomang, 2002). Ishikawa (2008), for example, referred to these two forces as 'the organizational power of the

Riverine Spaces:

Central Borneo's Past Social, Economic & Political Organization

Figure. 1. Research Site: Central Borneo (the Apo Kayan plateau marked by the square box)



Surrounding Waters

Major Rivers

International Boundary

Provincial (Indonesia) / State (Malaysia) Boundaries

Provincial (Indonesia) / State (Malaysia) Capitals

Major Towns

State borders throughout Southeast Asia have generally been established in an arbitrary fashion, where ethnic, linguistic, social and economic borders never intersected neatly with formal state boundaries drawn on maps. As a result, shared ethnicity, language, identity and economic interconnectivity remain to transcend many state boundaries.

The island of Borneo is not only a fitting example of these arbitrary state partitioning processes (being partitioned into three different nation-states), but it serves as an ideal site of inquiry to examine the seemingly absence of

effective state border regimes and the far penetrating effects of the capitalist reordering of the landscape.

The area of inquiry is focused on a continuous geographical and social space that I will loosely define as central Borneo, which encompasses parts of the Malaysian State of Sarawak and the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan (see Fig. 2.). This region constitutes a transnational social-cultural continuum that is rooted in the continuing flows of people, commodities and ideas between river basins for at least three centuries. The colonial partitioning of Borneo by the 1891 Anglo-Dutch Boundary Agreement was primarily based on the division of river basins.³ It soon became evident that the mere division and control over river basins did not effectively brought the smooth integration of these basin societies into the sphere of colonial states consistent to the partition agreement.

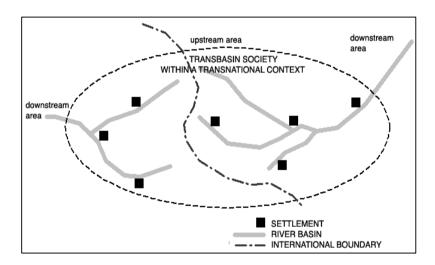
Social and economic transbasin relationships between present day Kalimantan and Sarawak, characterized by interbasin trade oriented westwards - hence, through Sarawak - towards the South China Sea, was a feature that pre-existed the arrival of colonial states in Borneo. Forest and animal products such as gutta percha, India rubber, rhinoceros horns, bezoar stones and later eaglewood were primarily catered towards Chinese market demands throughout Southeast Asia. Social networks surrounded these chains of commodity flows, which in turn determined the mobility orientation of many interior peoples in Central Borneo towards the South China Sea (see Ooi Keat Gin, 1997). This may also explain why many borderland communities in present day of West and East Kalimantan on the Indonesian side of the border, maintain closer social affinities with riverine communities in Sarawak. In addition, the absence of any hegemonic Sultanate on Sarawak's coastal estuaria may also have been an attraction for the westward flow of trade. This is in total contrast with Borneo's east coast where coastal Sultanates like Kutai, Bulungan and Berau heavily taxed commodities coming from the interior. For example, as our case study will demonstrate, the Kenyah of the Apokayan were particularly reluctant, if not defiant, to Dutch efforts in the early 20th century to reorient their trading activities eastwards away from Sarawak. (Elshout, 1923)

Colonial Sarawak (1841-1946) on the other hand, under its regime of three successive 'White Rajahs' (James Brooke Charles Brooke and Vyner Brooke) sits as an anomaly among its colonial contemporaries. Compared to British and Dutch colonies in the region, Sarawak was immensily poor in terms of mineral deposits (oil was only discovered in the 1920s) and soil fertility. Lacking significant export revenues, Sarawak's bureaucracy was small and

³ See "Convention Between Great Britain and the Netherlands Defining Boundaries in Borneo - Signed at London, June 20, 1891" in Staatsblad van het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden.

underfunded. As a result, its style of governance was largely personal and informal, enabling Sarawak officials to have close rapport with its indigenous subjects. Viewing themselves as protectors for the status quo of 'native' traditional ways of life, the Brookes resisted any attempt to bring Sarawak under the influence of land-hungry British plantation capitalists. They believed that loss of native lands to capital interests would bring turmoil to Sarawak. The sole solution to Sarawak's dire economic situation was to promote the free trade of jungle products – which the Brookes believed would bring a sensible and nondestructive pace of 'civilization' to the native ethnic groups of Sarawak. The logical prerequisite to boost the free trade of jungle products was to keep transbasin traffic of people and commodities open.⁴

Transbasin trade, interethnic social interactions and migrations have been a constant feature of social organization among Central Borneo's communities (Rousseau, 1990; Sellato, 2001; Eghenter, 1999). Rousseau (1990: 301-302) suggests that Central Borneo societies can be better analysed as river basin societies instead of as closed village units. Rousseau's model can be applied to transnational transbasin societies to analyse many Central Borneo groups that have extensive transbasin relations under the current international partition.



The establishment of the international boundary had for a longtime, at least until 1985, failed to disrupt the close social and economic interconnections between the Apo Kayan plateau with Sarawak. In fact, continuing trade with Sarawak was a major income for the Kenyah that enabled them to pay Dutch door-taxes. The dismal possibilities for integrating the Apokayan's

⁴ See Reece (1988), Ooi Keat Gin (1997)

economy into the Dutch and subsequent Indonesian space has so far rendered the region as an economic liability, and all successive governments on the Dutch / Indonesian side tacitly acknowledged that the Apokayan's economic survival rests largely on profits and revenues generated from neighboring Sarawak.⁵

Kenyah Mobility from East Kalimantan to Sarawak (1900-2007)

The Kenyah, an umbrella ethnic identity for several swidden agricultural groups who are culturally, historically and linguistically related, constitute the majority of the population in central Borneo, a large area encompassing the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan and neighboring Sarawak. Originating from the Baram river basin in Sarawak, the Kenyah have dispersed into other river basins, resulting in their current distribution in both Indonesia (approx. 40,000 - estimates in 2000) and Malaysia (7,000 in 2000).

The cluster of Kenyah groups occupying the Apo Kayan plateau in East Kalimantan, for short 'the Apo Kayan Kenyah', is one among numerous 'Dayak' groups who have witnessed the state-partitioning of their homelands since the emergence of colonial states and boundaries. What places the Apo Kayan Kenyah in a geographically unique situation is their close proximity to at least five major Bornean rivers (the Baluy, Balleh/Rajang, Kayan, Baram and the Mahakam), and their extensive transbasin extent of social relations encompassing the international boundary.

Being strategically located at the headwaters of major river basins that flow from the Apokayan - Iran highlands in centrifugal directions to Borneo's west and east coasts, the Kenyah played a central role in bringing forest products (and later agricultural labour) from the interior to downstream commercial centers. This was undertaken through a traditional mobility practice, principally undertaken by males, called *peselai* (lit. 'to go on a long journey'), which was previously rooted in both headhunting trips and the prolonged collection of jungle produce. *Peselai* also evolved into massive trading expeditions wherein 100 to 500 males would usually participate in completing 3 - 6 month roundtrips to coastal areas by canoes.⁶ A *peselai* trip was socially significant to the education of young males, not only as a rite of passage where they could prove their bravery and worthiness as future husbands, but also where they learned about the social world at large, the intricate networks of rivers, ethno-history, commerce and dealing with other ethnic groups.

The Apo Kayan's centrality to the flow of jungle products flowing from the uplands was noted by Charles Brooke, the second 'White Rajah' of

⁵ Lumenta (2008: 112-132).

⁶ See Lumenta (2008), Whittier (1973), Conley (1978).

Sarawak. He invited several Kenyah leaders on a *peselai* expedition to Kuching in 1899 and encouraged the Apo Kayan Kenyah to migrate to Sarawak under his protection. In turn, the Kenyah leaders who looked at the advantage of trading with Sarawak in the west as opposed to the Kutai sultanate in the east, welcomed Charles Brooke's invitation. The Apo Kayan's integration into Sarawak was coincidently cancelled due to the arrival of Dutch explorer, Dr. Nieuwenhuis in early 1901, who offered direct Dutch protection for the Kenyah against Sarawak Iban raids, which the Kenyah leaders duly accepted.⁷

Despite Dutch reservations, Kenyah *peselai* expeditions from the Apo Kayan persisted in trading with Sarawak, although intertribal hostilities, particularly with the Sarawak Ibans, remained a major obstacle that reached a peak in 1921 when major headhunting incidents occurred.⁸

The 1924 Kapit Peacemaking Agreement between Sarawak, Dutch, Iban, Kayan and Kenyah leaders had far-reaching impact for the Apo Kayan Kenyah. Peace with the Sarawak Ibans not only secured the liberalisation of Kenyah access to Sarawak river basins and coastal markets, but also enabled the Kenyah to enter sharecropping agreements with Sarawak Ibans, and the labour markets in Sarawak's coastal logging and oil industries.

The period from 1924 to 1985, with brief disruptions during the Japanese occupation (1941-1945) and the Konfrontasi (1963-1966) marked the 'golden years' of peselai expeditions from the Apo Kayan into Sarawak. The Kenyah not only established themselves in the aforementioned important economic niches, but also managed to extert important cultural influences over other indigenous ethnic groups throughout upriver Sarawak. Peselai groups from the Apo Kayan brought not only influence over the arts (to a point where they were even invited to decorate the walls of the Sarawak Museum in Kuching in 1959-60), but also influence over religion.9 The Bungan faith, a reformed version of the original Kenyah belief system invented in the Apo Kayan, quickly spread and won massive converts in Sarawak from 1947 to 1955. This was soon followed by Christianity, which Christian Kenyah from the Apo Kayan brought over to Sarawak during the same period. They were also responsible for the translation of the first Kenyah-language Bible, sponsored by the Borneo Evangelical Mission, widely used in Sarawak until today. 10 As agricultural and logging labourers, the Apokayan Kenyah enjoyed equal status as Sarawakians, particularly during the British period where they were paid equal wages as Sarawakians, received health benefits, and legal protection as workers. It was easy for those coming to Sarawak without border passes to secure work permits from British residents.

⁷ See Beccari (1904), Sarawak Gazette (March 1, 1901), Smythies (1955)

⁸ SG (October 1, 1924)

⁹ See Langub (1997) for example.

¹⁰ See Prattis (1963) and Sidang Injil Borneo (1988)

During the mid-1970s *peselai* teams began to experience the effects of the increasing criminalization of 'illegal' entry through tightening of immigration controls, marked by the increase of police checks at major logging towns, such as Sibu, Bintulu and Miri. It was during the early 1980s when local Sarawakians, mainly Ibans, Kayans and local Kenyah, started to gradually pull out from hazardous positions in logging jobs (i.e. chainsaw operators), which further compounded labour shortages in Sarawak's logging industry. Improved education among Sarawakians also resulted in their upward mobility in occupying middle to higher level positions in the logging camp hierarchies. This left an increasing vacuum in the lower rank positions, which were most of the part plugged by the increasing numbers of Apokayan Kenyah workers from Indonesia.

Nationwide Malaysian police raids on illegal migrants, starting with *Nyah* ('Get Rid') Operations in the mid-1980s, restricted Kenyah labour migrations from heavily patrolled urban areas. Nonetheless, many Indonesian Kenyahs could pass off as local Sarawakians and police officers were usually unable to distinguish them from the local Sarawak Kenyah populace. Some even cut their hair in traditional Kenyah fashion to blend in.¹² In addition, significant proportions of the local Sarawak populace did not possess Identity Cards themselves. The ongoing citizen registration process in upriver areas was an opportunity for Indonesian Kenyah migrants to naturalize themselves with the help of local Kenyah hosts acting as guarantors. A local Kayan politician with links to Kenyah leaders in the Apokayan, Tajang Laing, accordingly provided 200 Indonesian Bakung Kenyah plantation workers at Sepakau with Sarawak Identity cards around 1985.13 Following nationwide crackdowns on illegal immigrants, the role of Sarawak Kenyahs and politicians who had personal or kinship relations with peselai team members became more prominent in providing protective measures against police checks. This, however, placed many Apokayan Kenyah in asymmetrical power relations with their Sarawak kin through debt-bondage, servitude, the rise of patronage, and the creation of an Indonesian Kenyah 'underclass' in general.

Two developments have come to alter significantly the social-economic relationship between the Apokayan Kenyah and Sarawak. First, the successive timber booms in Sarawak, which peaked in the 1970s and onwards, has marginalized the longstanding trade of jungle products into and from Sarawak. Losing one of their primary economic niches, the Apokayan Kenyah's role in the Sarawak economy was relegated to supplying the pool of labour under

¹¹ Inadequate insurance and compensation rendered logging jobs more and more unattractive in the face of better jobs that Sarawakians could find in urban areas.

¹² The traditional Kenyah hairstyle is marked by a long pigtail in the back. This has gone out of fashion in Kalimantan since the 1960s, but preserved among the Sarawak Kenyah until quite recently.

¹³ Interview with Dato' Tajang Laing, Kuching, March 2003.

the vast hierarchy of the timber industries. In addition to being relegated to the lower strata of the production hierarchy, the increased formalization of the Malaysian – Indonesian border in the 1980s placed them within the category of 'illegal migrants' without access to insurance and labour rights. It is no longer safe for Apokayan Kenyah to enter towns in Sarawak to cash in their wages at local banks without the risks of being apprehended by the increasing police checks in downriver regions. They often have to rely on camp canteen managers to cash it for them, subject to a 5% commission.

Hitching on logging pickup cars is not always a convenient undertaking. Sarawak Iban drivers, higher in the ranks within the camp hierarchy, often refuse to take the Apokayan Kenyah workers on their rides unless they pay a hefty fee of RM 50 (although camp regulations explicitly forbid any form of payments or bribes made for the utilizing of logging vehicles).

Their insecure status as illegal migrants has also affected the changing preferences of cross-border marriages even among the Kenyah. It was common up to the early 1980s for Apokayan males to marry Sarawakian females. By the 1990s cross-border marriage rates in central Borneo have gone down. Even in the small numbers of recent marriages, the trends have reversed to Sarawakian males marrying Indonesian females.¹⁴

Recent younger generations from the Apokayan arrive in Sarawak with scant knowledge of the geography, such as village locations, rivers. Being confined to the logging camps, they have little contact with the outside world. Although the extensive logging roads have made travelling around Sarawak, especially to logging towns much easier, they no longer meander through the riverine clusters of Kenyah and Kayan villages that used to function as transit sites, social safety nets or sites for socializing in the past. The cosmopolitanism of previous Kenyah generations, who could freely move around, interact, socialize, negotiate, absorb and transmit cultural ideas, has been lost among the younger ones. *Peselai* journeys of today are reduced to labour migrations to logging camps.

From Riverine to Terrestrial Space Ordering: the New 'Borders'

The history of Kenyah mobility into Sarawak demonstrates the changing nature of space ordering. Since the arrival of colonial states and the resulting of impact, it has cross-border social relations and the emergence of state border regimes. The early Sarawak state under the Brookes chose to adjust itself

¹⁴ For example, in the village of Long Mekaba, a Kenyah settlement in the Baram, there was a time around 1978 when six Indonesian Kenyah males managed to legally marry with females from the local populace. Only one cross-border marriage occurred in 2000 when a Sarawak Kenyah male married an Indonesian Kenyah female, but given the lack of the bride's birth certificate or passport, the Sarawak authorities refused to legalize the marriage. (Interview with Ingkong Lahang & William Ukeng, Long Mekaba, January 2003.)

within the indigenous riverine-based social order. It did so by facilitating the improvement social relations between riverine communities that extended from Sarawak's west coast up to the Apokayan in Dutch Borneo. Pacification of the interior and the liberalisation of human traffic through open borders and rivers were viewed as essential for the Sarawak economy. By basing itself on this riverine-based governance over space, the Brookes considered the Apokayan as an integral social and economic space of Sarawak. This entailed that Sarawak under the Brookes had little interest in upholding the Anglo-Dutch international boundary. This longstanding riverine space order existed well into the transitionary period under British rule (1946-1963). The Kenyah of the Apokayan were not viewed as 'Indonesians' or 'aliens'.

Conditions started to change with the resurgence of Sarawak's logging industry which spread inwards to the interior after *Konfrontasi* ended in the late 1960s. The logging industry, Sarawak's major revenue earner, is basically a terrestrial enterprise that partitioned lands into neatly bounded concession areas. The accessibility to timber requires the introduction of new transportation modes and infrastructures such as trucks, pick ups and land roads. The extensive network of logging roads not only changed the physical landscape throughout Sarawak, but it has also increasingly shifted social organization away from the quasi-egalitarian order of riverine relationships to the highly hierarchized world of logging camps. The social order in Sarawak has gradually shifted from riverine to terrestrial based relations.

It is within this hierarchy world of logging camps where the national borders are created and reproduced. Far from being a territorial border, the border separating Indonesians from Malaysians in the central Borneo context is manifested through asymmetrical power relations in everyday life experiences: wage differences, the dependency on Malaysian Iban drivers, the small prospective of finding a Sarawakian spouse, illegal deductions from salaries, and the narrowing access to a wider social world outside logging camps in general.

Embedded in the history of Kenyah mobility is the shifting context from Sarawak as an open and fluid riverine-based on social space under colonial rule to a closed and stratified social space ordered by capital logic. It is hoped that the presented case study reverses some assumptions on the linearity of postwar 'globalisation' and its saturated jargonism about the creation of a 'borderless world' by providing contrary evidence that latter-day globalisation in the form of capitalist development has increasingly created new border regimes that increasingly equates national identities with differentiations of class.

With the blurring between nation-state and corporate interests, the most effective border regime to support the maximization of profits and minimization of (labour) costs would be a model that operates on hierarchical rather than territorial / spatial containment. The two historical trajectories, that of the nation state and capitalism, have found a working equilibrium marked by the containment of people, not through spatial partitions and borders, but through their containment within fixed hierarchies of capitalist production. •

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