

# Borderland livelihood strategies: The socio-economic significance of ethnicity in cross-border labour migration, West Kalimantan, Indonesia

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores cross-border ethnic relations as an important socio-economic strategy for the borderland Iban population in West Kalimantan, Indonesia. Iban seeking more lucrative wage work have long used their ethnic identity to facilitate circular labour migration across the international border into Sarawak, Malaysia, a strategy which has also compromised their claims to Indonesian citizenship. Drawing on long-term field research among the West Kalimantan Iban, we examine the close interconnections among cross-border labour migration, ethnicity, identity, and citizenship, and how this plays into contemporary issues related to Indonesian political and economic change.*

**Keywords:** *borders, citizenship, ethnicity, identity, labour migration*

## Introduction

The creation of colonial borders over the past several hundred years and the subsequent partitioning of ethnic populations did not entail an end to migration and interaction between ethnically related communities now residing on each side of the borders. On the contrary, economic, social and political interactions have continued post-independence. In many cases, ethnic relations are a crucial component in these interactions which include cross-border labour migration, and partitioned peoples of these borderlands are continually involved in practices that transcend the territorial line of the state, effectively questioning its regulations by their construction and maintenance of tight socio-economic relations with people on the other side.

The Iban of West Kalimantan, Indonesia, are a case in point. They have long negotiated the border with Sarawak, Malaysia, especially to overcome economic disparity by engaging in cross-border labour migration. Much of this migration is mediated by cross-border kin rela-

tions. Ethnic identity and affiliation have thus come to play an important role in labour migration, and borderland Iban strategically play upon those ties. What it means to be an Indonesian citizen becomes blurred as identity is actively and continuously modified to fit changing situations in the borderland; 'post-national belonging' might be a more suitable term to describe the social reality of these borderlanders. As noted by Donnan and Haller (2000: 8), a focus on borders can show us how 'citizens relate to "their" nation-state . . . how competing loyalties and multiple identities are managed on a daily basis.'

However, this strategic borderlander flexibility is driven largely by long-term economic disparity between Indonesia and Malaysia. As we will show, when lucrative wage-earning opportunities present themselves on the Indonesian side, West Kalimantan Iban forego cross-border migration, while some of their Malaysian cousins may cross into Indonesia. This parallels the observation by Firth *et al.* (1969: 14–16) that when people can do without wide networks of kin, they do so, reducing their reliance on kin to

obtain economic opportunities (see also Leyton, 1975). In this paper, we examine these fluctuating realities and the Iban's strategic responses with attention to the close interconnections among cross-border labour migration, ethnicity, identity and citizenship, and how these play into contemporary issues related to Indonesian political and economic change.

In our analysis, we draw on the anthropology of borderlands,<sup>1</sup> with special focus on the burgeoning literature on borders and agency in Southeast Asia (e.g., Walker, 1999; Bala, 2002; Horstmann, 2002a, 2006; Lumeta, 2004; Amster and Lindquist, 2005; Sturgeon, 2005; Wadley and Eilenberg, 2005, 2006; Horstmann and Wadley, 2006). Compared to earlier border studies in the region, the primary focus has now shifted from the state level, and concomitant issues of state-related security and sovereignty, to a focus on the praxis and narratives of border people themselves. These approaches share an understanding that borders create unique physical, political and economic circumstances not seen away from the border. Such circumstances give rise to special borderland strategies that often result in ambiguous attitudes towards the state. Furthermore, life in the borderland creates common interests among people living there, thus promoting cross-border practices that borderlanders consider acceptable (licit) but that, more often than not, are declared illegal by their states. It may not always be possible to attribute a single category of 'legal' and 'illegal' to practices and flows across borders as border people constantly weave their way in and out of intersecting and often ill-defined spheres of legality and illegality. Transnational practices that are considered acceptable (licit) by participants are often illegal in the formal sense (van Schendel and Abraham, 2005).

### The borderland Iban

As an ethnic label, Iban refers to a widely distributed portion of the population in northwestern Borneo.<sup>2</sup> Self-described Iban make up the largest single ethnic group in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, while across the border in the province of West Kalimantan, the Iban constitute a small minority, primarily residing in five subdistricts along the border (Fig. 1). The Iban



Figure 1. Iban population distribution throughout Borneo

number over 600 000 in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, making up slightly more than a quarter of the state's population; smaller Iban groups live in Sabah (Malaysia), the Sultanate of Brunei and along the international border in the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan (Sather, 2004: 623). Approximately 14 000 Iban live in West Kalimantan (Wadley and Kuyah, 2001: 723). The Iban as a whole have a long history of migration and a well-established network of trade, communication and kinship dating back to pre-colonial times. After independence in the mid-twentieth century, as with many former colonial territories, the old colonial borders of Borneo stayed on to demarcate the new post-colonial states, and the Iban subsequently became Indonesian and Malaysian citizens. Following the thinking of the former colonial administration, the new national governments embraced the idea of borders as being clear and exclusive (Wadley, 2003).

These arbitrary borders were drawn on maps and imagined in the minds of colonial administrators as sharp lines and impenetrable barriers separating colonial possessions, but the actual situation was and often remains one of continued interaction between partitioned ethnic groups: People so divided continue their normal activities, ignoring the separating line (Asiwaju, 1985), though they also adjust to its presence as

manifested in national citizenship. Throughout the world, partitioned people find ways to manipulate, circumvent, or simply ignore such borders. They take advantage of borders in ways that their creators had never intended nor anticipated (Baud and van Schendel, 1997). The Iban of the West Kalimantan borderland provide a vivid example of this through their continued socio-economic relations with kin across the border. This in turn is coupled with and reinforced by a strong sense of belonging and identity, which does not correspond easily with the national border and its notions of citizenship.

In almost every West Kalimantan Iban community, every family, in one way or another, is closely related to people living on the opposite side of the border, and these relationships are strategically used to engage in various border-crossing activities (Wadley, 1997; Eilenberg, 2005b). (A similarly high degree of cultural similarity among people along adjacent borderlands is found throughout Southeast Asia and plays a crucial role in local borderland strategies (Skeldon, 1999)). Well aware of their special 'border advantage,' the Iban continually exploit state inconsistencies on both sides. Indeed, border residents find it difficult to imagine life without the special opportunities that the border gives them. In addition, having been absorbed into two very different states, the two Iban populations have been exposed to different political-economic regimes. These experiences have coloured their lives greatly and the border has also come to define economic inequality. In fact, the Iban of the Sarawak borderland do not show the same strong borderland mentality as their cousins in West Kalimantan and seldom cross the border with the intention of taking up labour activities, other than for the occasional socialising and visiting of kin.

As a large percentage of the Sarawak population is ethnic Iban, the Iban language is widely spoken and understood throughout the state. Iban culture, in various forms, permeates Sarawak society as a consequence of sheer numbers, size and they are widely recognised as having played a key role in the state's history. Not only were they centrally involved with the early British Brooke kingdom but also they later became important political players after Malaysian independence (Jawan, 1994). The Sarawak Iban population has thus had a greater amount

of freedom of cultural expression than their cousins in West Kalimantan, something of which the latter are often envious.

For many generations of Kalimantan Iban, life strategies have been based on the ambiguity of this border, and for most people, life without it is hard to imagine: Their relation to the international border is embodied in daily practice. Everyday actions and discussions implicitly involve the border in some way or another, but rarely have either of us come across people mentioning or discussing the border as an institution of exclusion. On the contrary, as Iban tell their life stories, working in Malaysia, trading with Malaysians, marrying Malaysians, joining Iban celebrations in Malaysia and using Malaysian hospitals when ill are ubiquitous topics. Many men and (less commonly) women hold both Indonesian and Malaysian identity cards; some even have two passports, which are proudly displayed despite most having expired.<sup>3</sup> All of this has been made possible by the duality of the border and the help of Malaysian Iban kin.

#### *The ethnographic context*

The traditional economic foundation of the Iban is subsistence agriculture and agroforestry, with its fundamental component being rice farming in hill and/or swamp swiddens. As a supplement to farming, the Iban hunt, fish and collect different kinds of forest products. To further supplement the household economy, to be able to buy sought-after consumer goods and to pay for children's schooling, people engage in different kinds of wage labour (Austin, 1977; Padoch, 1982; Kedit, 1993; Wadley, 1997, 2000b). Although they are highly dependent on subsistence rice farming, the flexibility of Iban social organisation has made it possible, for certain periods of the year, to free up men for often long-distance wage labour. Such dual and flexible household economies are often successful life strategies in the ever-shifting borderland milieu: Iban women have traditionally played a dominant role in rice farming, which has made it possible for (mostly) men to leave on extended labour journeys without it having severe repercussions on subsistence farming, as men's responsibilities to farming are periodic (Wadley, 2000b: 131).

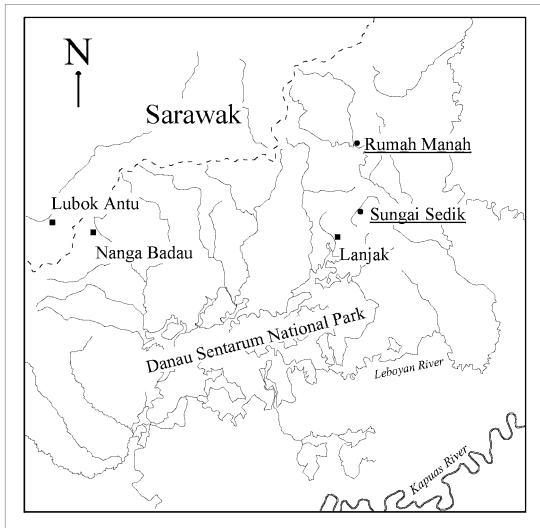


Figure 2. Study sites in West Kalimantan, Indonesia

The primary locations of field research were the longhouse communities of Rumah Manah (where Eilenberg focused), Sungai Sedik (where Wadley focused),<sup>4</sup> and surrounding communities along the Leboyon River and northeastern edge of Danau Sentarum National Park, all in close proximity to the international border within the subdistrict of Batang Lupar (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> The West Kalimantan Iban live primarily in five subdistricts along the international border within Kapuas Hulu District. The Iban in Batang Lupar Subdistrict make up the majority of the population at over 50% of 5216 people total (Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu, 2006). In 2006, Rumah Manah consisted of 10 nuclear families and approximately 100 people in all; Sungai Sedik held 19 households with over 130 people in total. The number of residents varies considerably throughout the year, and some months the in-residence population can be much smaller. There are several reasons for this: Many residents (especially young men) spend a certain amount of time every year working in Sarawak, Malaysia and older school-children stay most of the year in boarding schools as close as the subdistrict capital, Lanjak, or as far afield as the provincial capital, Pontianak, only visiting home on weekends and/or holidays.

The West Kalimantan borderland as a whole has a long history of economic underdevelopment compared to other parts of the province and is characterised by a weak socio-economic

infrastructure, isolated regional markets and scarcity of large-scale investments. Until recently, the borderland has been heavily militarised as a result of tension between Indonesia and Malaysia, initiated by an armed confrontation (*konfrontasi*) between the two nations in the early 1960s and followed by a communist insurgency in the mid-1960–1970s. Up until the early 1990s, the borderland has functioned as a security buffer zone. As a consequence, the Indonesian state purposely forestalled infrastructural and other kinds of development. This means that transport is time-consuming, unreliable and often interrupted or made impossible by seasonally restricted roads and waterways. Furthermore, the local economy has been stalled by lack of relations with and remoteness from the provincial economic centre (Pontianak), which in turn has made cross-border trade crucial for the local economy. Indeed, the borderland's closeness to main political and economic centres in Sarawak, Malaysia, has resulted in close networks of trade and social mixing across the border.

Economic development in Batang Lupar Subdistrict has long been difficult because of its relative isolation from the rest of the province, but the provincial government began constructing roads in the 1990s to connect the border region with the rest of the province. The national media has described the lack of good roads connecting the border area with the rest of the province as the main reason why border communities are less directed towards their own country than neighbouring Malaysia (*Kompas*, 2001). This slowly improving infrastructure (which now includes paved roads, electricity in many roadside communities like Sungai Sedik and cell phone towers) has cut down on travelling time for residents when going to town to sell cash crops, buy consumer goods, attend school and visit government offices and clinics as well as when crossing the border to work or visit family in Sarawak. Despite these initiatives, the Iban borderland is still seen nationally as both backward (*terbelakang*) and left behind (*tertinggalan*) the current national development and is consequently classified as an area of high poverty (*daerah miskin*) (Wadley, 1998; Kementerian Negara Pembangunan Daerah Tertinggal, 2007).

People living in such out-of-the-way places have, as a result of their weak national orientation (Martínez, 1994: 18–20), often been stamped as slowing down national development. There is a tendency from the political centre, such as the different levels of Indonesian government, to see borderlanders as less sophisticated and even uncivilised compared to more centrally located people. Such prejudiced attitudes from the state and its agents have exacerbated borderlanders' feelings of alienation from the national scene and increased their orientation towards Sarawak. This sense of separateness and otherness pervades the lives of Iban borderlanders. For many, their connections over the border are often stronger than those with their own nation. With the expansion of national schooling in the border area over the last several decades, this lack of national belonging might be changing. More and more Iban children attend boarding schools often far away from their home communities, and they are thus raised and educated as Indonesian citizens. They are becoming culturally different from their less-educated age-mates who take up labour migration across the border (Eilenberg, 2005a).

### *The border 'advantage'*

An interdependent borderland is characterised by its symbiotic relationship with borderlands in the adjacent states (Martínez, 1994: 8). International relations are mostly stable, and the border is relatively open though with shifting permeability. In ideal conditions, the economic climate is equally favourable for borderlanders on both sides because the two states contribute equally to a mutually beneficial economy. In reality, most interdependent borderlands are asymmetrically aligned, such as when one state is wealthier than the other, which subsequently affects the terms of trade and border-crossing patterns (Martínez, 1994: 8–9; Kearney, 2004: 132). Having experienced some degree of political tension in the past, the relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia has today become relatively stable, and the West Kalimantan-Sarawak borderland exists in mutual interdependence, allowing increased economic and social relations (Azazi, 2000; Fariastuti, 2002). However, a high degree of

economic disparity differentiates Indonesia and Malaysia. While post-independence Malaysia has experienced strong economic growth, Indonesia has fallen behind its neighbour and become a source of cheap labour and raw materials for the former. The per capita income for West Kalimantan residents in 1995 was only one-fifth of the Sarawak per capita income. This difference has increased even more since the economic crisis in 1997 (Fariastuti, 2000, 2002).

As a consequence of these disparities, coupled with the ethnic similarity with a large portion of the Sarawak population, the West Kalimantan Iban have long been culturally and economically oriented towards Sarawak. The search for well-paying jobs has led them across the border as wage labour or other lucrative cash-earning opportunities have generally not been available locally. But this does not tell the whole story, particularly in recent years. Although Indonesia as a whole was hard hit by the economic downturn after 1997, the depreciation of the Indonesian rupiah against the Malaysian ringgit did not have the same negative effects for Iban borderlanders as other Indonesians because of their engagement in cross-border labour migration and trade. Iban men working in Sarawak have had the advantage of bringing home their salaries in Malaysian currency, making up for price rises of basic goods in West Kalimantan (Wadley, 2002). In addition, compared to other Indonesian labour migrants to Malaysia (from other parts of the province or other regions in Indonesia such as Java and Flores (Hugo, 2000)), the Kalimantan Iban are able to blend easily with a majority of the Sarawak population (though they also complain about wages being depressed by other Indonesian labour migrants).<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, when prices for cash crops (mainly black pepper and rubber) have been high, West Kalimantan Iban have sold their produce in Sarawak markets. Prices for pepper were high during the early years of this decade, while rubber prices are currently at all-time highs, thus decreasing the pressure on households for labour migration. In addition, as a direct consequence of the political turmoil following the dictator Suharto's fall from power in 1998, an illegal logging boom along the West Kalimantan border during 2000–2005 created

some local employment (and brought Sarawak Iban across the border (Wadley and Eilenberg, 2005)).<sup>7</sup> For many though, the short-term character of the work meant that the cash earned was not enough to satisfy all household needs. So people continued taking up labour across the border but for shorter periods. The logging boom ended in early 2005 with a government crackdown (Wadley and Eilenberg, 2006). For some, cross-border labour migration has once again become a major income earner while others have shifted to rubber tapping.

This fluctuating reliance on labour migration spells out quite clearly that the borderlander strategy is conditioned by economic disparity: When cash-earning opportunities are close at hand, they forego labour migration, only taking it up when local opportunities dry up. Long-term data on cash crop prices and male absences at Sungai Sedik show a strong inverse relationship (Table 1): when prices for black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) rose in the 1980s and late 1990s, fewer men left home (see Wadley and Mertz, 2005). After pepper prices declined, some men left again while others stayed close to home because of jobs during the logging boom and a rise in rubber (*Hevea brasiliensis*) prices. Even after the logging boom ended in 2005, men report that they prefer staying at home, at least as long as rubber prices maintain their record levels (Castaño, 2007) though this trend is less clear than that with pepper prices.

## Fluid borders and boundaries

### *Transnational ethnic relations*

In terms of their ethnic identities, at least three main types of border populations can be identified: (i) those which share ethnic ties across the border, as well as with those residing at their own state's geographical core; (ii) those who are differentiated by cross-border ethnic bonds from other residents of their state; and (iii) those who are members of the national majority in their state and have no ethnic ties across the state's borders (Wilson and Donnan, 1998: 14).

The West Kalimantan Iban are a good example of the second type of border population. The outlook of the Iban population in Kalimantan has been, in many ways, directed towards the much

**Table 1.** Men's absences and cash crop prices, Sungai Sedik (1979–2006)

Year	Percentage of men absent	Median pepper price <sup>a</sup>	Ave. rubber price <sup>b</sup>
1979	21	1951	ND
1980	39	1807	ND
1981	31	1510	ND
1982	47	1477	ND
1983	18	1488	ND
1984	29	2149	ND
1985	33	3946	ND
1986	18	4718	ND
1987	14	5015	ND
1988	18	4133	ND
1989	24	2954	ND
1990	16	2050	ND
1991	32	1488	ND
1992	60	1223	ND
1993	59	1256	ND
1994	44	1940	ND
1995	37	2568	ND
1996	53	2433	ND
1997	21	4666	ND
1998	18	5393	ND
1999	5	5531	ND
2000	5	5531	202.57
2001	32	2045	170.14
2002	10	2045	207.10
2003	9	1866	287.35
2004	19	1655	330.67
2005	9	1659	382.09
2006	–	3077	511.01

<sup>a</sup>US\$ per ton; source: Malaysian Pepper Board.

<sup>b</sup>Malaysian ringgit per kg bulk latex; source: Malaysian Rubber Board. NB Prices earlier than 2000 are not available.

Male absence v. pepper price: Kendall's test for independence ( $K = -125$ ,  $P = 0.004$ ).

Male absence v. rubber price: Kendall's test for independence ( $K = -2$ , n.s.).

ND, no data.

larger Iban population living in more prosperous Sarawak. Ethnic identity consequently comes to play a crucial role in everyday, cross-border interaction. According to Alvarez and Collier, 'ambiguities of identity in borderlands can also be strategically played upon to forge, reformulate and even mobilise ethnic identity to [an] advantage' (1994: 607). Being Iban is thus not only a marker of community belonging, but is also strategically used in social and economic negotiations along the border.

Iban identity in West Kalimantan consists of at least two parts – first, being ethnic Iban and culturally connected to the large Sarawak Iban

population; and second, being long-time residents of the border area, at the margins of the Indonesian state and the bounds of citizenship. These are two parts of multiple identities, appropriate to different times, places and circumstances. Identity is a critically important factor in local Iban perceptions and decisions (Wadley and Eilenberg, 2005), and ethnicity is the prime identity marker when people seek wage labour across the border and have to deal with ethnic kin and Malaysian government officials. But when facing local or provincial Indonesian government officials, they often downplay ethnic affiliation, rather emphasising their national identity as Indonesian citizens (see Lumenta, 2001, 2004; Pirus, 2002).

### *Cross-border labour migration*

As seen earlier, the frequency of cross-border labour activities varies over the long term, but this is also true for shorter periods, such as seasonally. Typically labour migration is adjusted to the farm cycle, with migration mostly being carried out in the weeding period (which occurs between planting in August–September and harvest in February–April and the following post-harvest rituals (*gawa*) in June–July). As weeding is considered ‘women’s work,’ most men see this time as a good opportunity to leave as their labour is not ‘needed’ at home. For example, at Rumah Manah from August 2002 to March 2003, out of the 19 adult males (15 or more years old), 13 left for about two or three months to work in Sarawak.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the 13 men working across the border, there were two men holding steady jobs elsewhere in the province (both having higher education in Pontianak), and three men who stayed at home during that period, tending their rice fields and pepper gardens. Out of the 10 families in Rumah Manah, nine of them had at least one man or women absent for a few months or more. Apart from the men, there were also two younger women in their twenties who worked on and off across the border (Eilenberg, 2005b, 2006a).<sup>9</sup>

In crossing the border for wage labour or to visit family and friends, the Kalimantan Iban are constantly confronted with the socio-economic differences between the two regions (though Sarawak Iban tend to envy their Indonesian cousins’ new-found political freedoms); such

disparities are especially apparent with regard to wages: In 2002–2003, working as unskilled labourers in Sarawak, people from Rumah Manah received an average monthly salary of about RM 700 (Malaysian ringgit). In contrast, a local primary school teacher in Batang Lupar Subdistrict earned an average of Rp. 600 000 (Indonesian rupiah) a month, which was equivalent to RM 260 (RM 1.00 = Rp. 2300) and typical for low-level civil servants. Considering such comparatively high wages for unskilled labour in Sarawak, it is easy to see why Iban men (and women), mostly with little education, leave home for months, even years, to work across the border.

### *The case of Ngelai and Jabak*

To illustrate these issues, we will describe the cross-border labour experiences of two young, unmarried men from Rumah Manah, Ngelai and Jabak, during a two-month period in 2002.

Being close friends and family, the two men decided to make a joint venture trip to Sarawak. Both already had several experiences with such labour trips and said that they always used their Sarawak relatives in some way to help find jobs. Jabak said that at the age of 16 he first went on a wage labour trip with his father. Together, they worked for six months as carpenters on a housing project in Sri Aman, Sarawak (which most Iban still refer to by its old name, Simanggang); Jabak’s grandfather, a Malaysian citizen who originally migrated from Rumah Manah to Sarawak in the 1970s, held the building contract for this project. During his four trips since then, kinship ties have played a major role in helping him to obtain suitable work and various permits. Not all the men from Rumah Manah are as lucky as Jabak with a well-to-do relative in Sarawak who can directly provide jobs, but most men make use of their kinship networks, usually by joining with Sarawak kin who themselves are taking up wage labour.

Ngelai and Jabak started off their journey by crossing the border illegally at the well-used Nanga Badau-Lubok Antu crossing. Having arrived in Lubok Antu, they took a local bus heading for Sri Aman, which was 50 kilometres away. Familiar with the trip and the wider area, they changed buses in Sri Aman and easily found their way to Jabak’s grandfather’s long-

house, just outside town. (Jabak also mentioned that, during previous cross-border trips, his grandfather picked him up in Lubok Antu to drive to Sri Aman. That way he avoided border control posts and being questioned by Sarawak police.) They spent a few days socialising before making job arrangements. Being well-connected, Jabak's grandfather (or, at other times, one of his older cousins or uncles) quickly found suitable jobs for them. Not having any projects of his own at the time, the grandfather called a local Chinese Malaysian entrepreneur. Chinese Malaysian businessmen have come to trust the work ethic and honesty of most Iban, and it did not take long for Jabak's grandfather to convince his associate to hire the two young men. A few days after arriving in Sarawak, the two men secured jobs as carpenters on a housing project, four hours away in the state capital, Kuching.

Usually when working closer to Sri Aman, Jabak stayed at his grandfather's place, but this time Jabak and Ngelai stayed at the house of a Sarawak cousin living in Kuching. They thus avoided the illegal squatter camps at the construction site, where most Kalimantan Iban labour migrants live when they work away from home. Jabak said that, when you stay in such camps, you always had to be alert as the Malaysian police regularly raided and searched the camps for illegal immigrants. Jabak had a Malaysian identity card, but Ngelai did not.

Through their advantage of being ethnic Iban, the two men were quite comfortable in Sarawak and faced few hassles. They blended easily with the local population; in many towns and cities, Iban culture is on display everywhere, from posters advertising Iban pop and traditional music to banners from the Malaysian Tourism Board promoting 'exotic' Iban culture as a major tourist attraction. Jabak emphasised that the Iban in Sarawak were respected, that life was easy and full of possibilities for them. In contrast, Kalimantan Iban were still poor people (*orang miskin*). In addition, when discussing the difference between Sarawak and Kalimantan, he often described the former as a place of 'order' where things functioned properly, thanks to a strong government, while the latter was a place of 'disorder' where nothing functioned, corruption was widespread and the government weak. Such idyllic images of Sarawak as the land of honey

(*negara madu*), both culturally and economically, were commonly expressed among the younger generation of Rumah Manah.<sup>10</sup>

### *Circumventing the border*

To engage in legal employment across the border, workers need official documents such as passports and work-permits, but few Iban bother to obtain these things. Instead, they use other ways of circumventing official rules and facilitating border crossings. In most Kalimantan Iban communities, only a few people possess Indonesian passports, but they still succeed in crossing the border and taking up work in Sarawak. To acquire a passport, one has to deal with a largely unfamiliar bureaucracy that is very time consuming and expensive. The nearest location to obtain a passport is the provincial capital, Pontianak, more than 700 km and several days of travel away from the borderland. It is rarely possible for most Iban to undertake such a venture. Pontianak is very much foreign territory to the majority of Iban as it is a place where there are few or no social or kinship contacts to rely on. Furthermore, apart from a small elite (many of whom have secondary houses in Pontianak), the Iban usually do not have the needed education to deal with the bureaucracy (Eilenberg, 2005a). Only a small percentage of most borderland inhabitants had ever been to Pontianak, or for that matter, had gone outside their own district, apart from Sarawak.

Because of these constraints, most Iban prefer crossing the border illegally. This seems to pose few obstacles as they have an intimate knowledge of the border area and can blend into the Sarawak Iban population almost seamlessly. The low-lying hills along the border are easily crossed and possess no physical barrier; besides the main avenues such as between Nanga Badau and Lubok Antu (which locals have used for centuries), there are many small back-roads into Sarawak or *jalan tikus* (mouse paths). In addition, local authorities have long ignored border crossing without official documents along these informal routes (Fariastuti, 2002; Tirtosudarmo, 2002; Edward, 2007).

Under the Basic Agreement of 1967 between Malaysia and Indonesia, border inhabitants on either side were to be allowed to cross the border for short non-work-related, social visits



(Agustiar, 2000; Bala, 2002; Fariastuti, 2002). But such border crossers need a pass (*pas lintas batas*), locally known as *surat merah* or *buku merah*. Applying for a pass can be time consuming and expensive. In reality, because government surveillance at the Nanga Badau border post is very lax, official resources are few and corruption is widespread, most Iban on labour journeys simply cross the border without passes (*Kompas*, 1999). The few who use the pass are mostly local non-Iban traders selling or shopping at the main bazaar in Lubok Antu, although some also obtain passes to enter Malaysia with the intention of later looking for work (see Hugo, 2003: 445). An Iban woman said that if she wanted to sell her farm produce or handicrafts<sup>11</sup> or shop at the Lubok Antu market, she just had to promise the Sarawak border officials to be back across the border the same day, although no one is likely to notice longer stays. Many Sarawak immigration officers stationed at border posts are ethnic Iban themselves and often turn a blind eye to Kalimantan Iban, to whom they are often related. Finding some kin connection or simply common ethnicity in border crossing negotiations can open up many doors.

For much of the past half-century, the only official border-crossing point (*PPLB – Pos Pemeriksaan Lintas Batas*), where non-border residents could pass and international trade was allowed, was at Entikong (West Kalimantan)-Tebedu (Sarawak), situated far away from the Iban borderland. The Nanga Badau crossing is not yet a designated PPLB although several attempts have been made to open it in the past decade (*Kompas*, 2002a; Sinar Harapan, 2003; *Pontianak Post*, 2004). More recently, however, national government has taken the initial steps to open it in the near future (*Equator Online*, 2006). Customs and immigration buildings have already been constructed. Malaysian authorities have been hesitant to develop a similar official border crossing point on their side because of the bad conditions on Indonesian roads (*Pontianak Post*, 2007).

Although the actual border crossing may pose few problems, undertaking wage labour in Sarawak can be an arduous affair without official documents. Many Iban men still work without documents, but many others try to obtain some kind of documentation through

unofficial channels as Malaysian authorities have become stricter in cracking down on illegal workers. In the past decade, Malaysia has initiated several programmes to deal with illegal immigrants from Indonesia, most recently in 2002 and again in 2004 and 2005. In August 2002, for example, several hundreds of thousands of undocumented Indonesian workers were expelled from Malaysia as a consequence of stricter immigration laws (*Kompas*, 2002b; Hugo, 2003; Ford, 2006). Although these laws have generally had dire consequences for the majority of the Indonesian workers in Malaysia, Kalimantan Iban workers in Sarawak remained largely unaffected. As a consequence of their ethnicity and reputation as hard workers, they have been generally more welcome in Sarawak than their fellow Indonesians.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, a number of young men from the area have experienced imprisonment after being caught by Sarawak police during their labour trips. These men mostly belong to the group of less fortunate Iban without dual identity cards and well-connected kin across the border. They said that they were in jail for three to four months, hit by rattan canes and only served two small meals a day. After serving the sentence, they were repatriated across the border – this time not at the Lubok Antu crossing, but at the official border crossing at Entikong. Being essentially abandoned at Entikong, far away from the Iban borderland and their social network, created hardship for those without money for food and transportation to return home. Most had to find work around Entikong for a few weeks in order to pay for a bus ticket home. But despite such uncomfortable experiences, most of these young men did not seem discouraged, but rather continued crossing the border in search of well-paid jobs. A few men have even been imprisoned more than once.

Iban borderlanders have long sidestepped Malaysian authorities by obtaining Malaysian identity cards (IC), and it is not unusual to meet Kalimantan Iban who hold two sets of citizenship documents (McKeown, 1984: 183–84; Wadley, 1997: 122–23; Lumenta, 2001; Pirus, 2002).<sup>13</sup> Having an IC makes it easier to find well-paid jobs and successfully slip away from unexpected searches by Malaysian police or immigration authorities. Furthermore, one's

time in Sarawak becomes more pleasant as labour migrants do not have to keep a low profile. (In Sarawak, as in other parts of Malaysia, official documents like birth certificates and national identity cards are a prerequisite for any dealing with the state or private sector, and travelling without one's identity card is inadvisable.) Such cards are normally for Malaysian citizens only, but were available to Kalimantan Iban in two ways. The most common strategy is to have a Sarawak relative claim parentage of a young man and register his birth with Sarawak authorities.

Only a few decades ago, many Sarawak Iban communities were, like their Kalimantan kin, situated in out-of-the-way places, far from the main urban centres and the watchful eyes of government authorities. It was thus very common for women to give birth at home without official recording. Unless these children attended school, many did not have birth certificates, and late birth registration was common (see Austin, 1977: 25), which was necessary to obtain ICs and passports. Kalimantan Iban have taken advantage of the fact that Sarawak authorities did not know the exact time and number of births in some remote communities. But now Malaysian authorities demand that women have regular prenatal check-ups at hospitals and if possible give birth at a hospital or clinic. Recently however, such endeavours have become increasingly difficult as the Malaysian government has implemented a new microchip-embedded national identity card popularly known as MyKad, which contains new security features and a wealth of personal information. The old identity card now must be replaced by the obligatory MyKad and the government had planned to issue 20 million MyKads by 2007 (*ZDNet Asia*, 2001; *The Star*, 2004).

The second (and still viable) strategy is to marry a Sarawak citizen and, after some time, receive official citizen papers. However, a minister in the Malaysian government expressed his concern with foreign workers in remote parts of Sarawak marrying local women to obtain citizenship. He warned that these marriages should be discouraged because helping foreigners obtain citizenship is unlawful (*The Strait Times*, 1999). As local authorities have become more entrenched in the remote rural areas and are

becoming aware of these loopholes, Kalimantan Iban must seek out new strategies, perhaps with women playing more prominent roles.

### *The case of Ladau and Kumang*

Residents of Rumah Manah, Ladau and her sister Kumang had Malaysian birth certificates and ICs from when they were children, made by the help of a Malaysian uncle in Sri Aman. Their cases provide contrasting accounts of how women go about providing their children with a cross-border advantage.

Like her sister, Kumang had crossed the border more times than she could remember. As a child, she followed her parents on extended visits at her uncle's where she got to know her many Sarawak cousins and was introduced to city life in Sri Aman. (As a young girl, Kumang actually stayed several years in Sarawak during which she attended Malaysian primary school. She only attended school for a few years in Kalimantan, and consequently, her knowledge of the Indonesian national language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, is very limited (Eilenberg, 2005a)). Later in life, when many of Kumang's age mates in Rumah Manah were married, she remained single and was not content with settling down and getting married right away. Like her male age mates, she wanted to earn a little extra money for herself and her family. For four years in a row, Kumang worked in a small supermarket in Sri Aman, usually for two to three months at a time. For a young, unmarried woman to engage in a labour trip is not uncommon in the study area, but as soon as she gets married and begins to have children, such trips usually stop because of her domestic work responsibilities. Labour trips by married women are dependent on the goodwill of their extended families and the ability of the women to confront conservative male values (Eilenberg, 2003).

One of the main reasons that Kumang was able to engage in labour trips was the large number of people in her natal family. She was periodically freed from farm work as others could work in her place; furthermore, the family was well off economically, as one of her brothers had a steady, well-paying job in the district. Although traditional gender values seem to be slowly changing, it is becoming more common

and accepted for young married women to cross the border and work as domestic help – cleaning ladies or cooks in Lubok Antu and elsewhere. Crossing the physical border thus also entails crossing social boundaries between the sexes.

In 2002, Kumang went on another labour trip, but this time she did not return alone. She brought home a young Malaysian Iban man whom she had been courting for some time. They had been introduced in Sri Aman by one of her cousins. As he came from a renowned longhouse and well-respected family in Lubok Antu and had a good job as an electrician, Kumang's parents were quickly convinced that the young man would be a good match for their daughter and an advantage for the family as a whole. It was agreed that the marriage was to take place a few months later at the groom's natal longhouse. Kumang and her newborn son now live permanently with her husband in Sarawak. The young couple decided to stay in Sarawak after they discovered Kumang was pregnant, given the practical and economic advantages to be had by staying in Malaysia. Kumang and her husband both had good jobs in Sarawak, and their child would become a Malaysian citizen.

Having experienced the many advantages of dual citizenship, Ladau decided to give her child the same opportunities. During her pregnancy, she crossed the border several times, visiting her uncle in Sri Aman; along with her aunt, she went to the hospital for prenatal check-ups. Three weeks before giving birth, Ladau stayed with her uncle. There were several reasons for this: First, during her check-ups, the midwife told her that there might be some complications and she was advised to have a caesarean section. Ladau said that she was better off having the operation at a Sarawak hospital because 'they have better doctors and equipment.' Second, by giving birth at a Malaysian hospital, she would have no problems getting a midwife's signature when she later needed to claim a Malaysian birth certificate for her child. So, although Ladau was born in Indonesia and had an Indonesian (Iban) husband, she had a complete set of Malaysian citizen papers for her child.

The relationship between the partitioned Iban, however, is not always as unproblematic as earlier described. Kin relations may also be

used for exploitative purposes. Sarawak Iban sometimes take advantage of their Kalimantan kin by demanding a fee for helping to obtain an IC and a job. Most often such exploitation takes place if the two parties are only distantly related. In an undertaking known as *ngampar*, Kalimantan Iban have obtained ICs by convincing unrelated Sarawak Iban to help them obtain a birth certificate in exchange for working on the sponsors' farms, often for as long as a year (Wadley, 1997: 123).<sup>14</sup> On the more sinister side, there are often-repeated stories of travellers in Sarawak being drugged by unrelated Iban and robbed of their wages.

Even with such examples of (relatively benign) exploitation, Kalimantan Iban are much better off than many other Indonesians. As a young man from Rumah Manah said, after his return from labour migration in Kuching, 'If it was not for me being Iban and the help of my kin (*kaban*), getting a well-paying job in Sarawak would be difficult and more of a hassle, especially as I would have to compete with the many thousands of (non-Iban) Indonesian workers in Sarawak.' Indeed, as mentioned earlier, over the last few decades, Sarawak (like the rest of Malaysia) has experienced a large influx of cheap labour from Indonesia (Agustiar, 2000: 236). These Indonesians do not have the advantages of being able to easily blend with the local population, nor are they equipped with the same social capital as the Kalimantan Iban. Their increased presence, however, has made wage labour migration more fraught for Kalimantan Iban. Despite the advantage of ethnicity and language, Kalimantan Iban without proper documentation have recently faced tough competition for low-skilled jobs, especially those sponsored by transnational labour syndicates (Hugo, 2003: 451).

Furthermore, recent Indonesian government plans for the entire Kalimantan border area are likely to change the nature of Iban cross-border practices. The government has stressed the importance of strengthening its presence and sovereignty along the border in order to regain control and prevent unauthorised border crossings. As noted by van Schendel and Abraham:

individuals and social groups that systematically contest and bypass state control do not

simply flout the letter of the law; with repeated transgressions over time, they bring into question the legitimacy of the state itself by questioning the state's ability to control its own territory (2005: 14).

Plans to develop the borderland include different kinds of labour-intensive industries (e.g., palm oil plantations; see Potter, this volume, on this development along the border) and the expansion of infrastructure, especially opening 2000 km of roads along the length of the Kalimantan border (Suara Karya, 2005; *Kompas*, 2005). Furthermore, the establishment of several permanent military control posts has been suggested to secure the border area and protect the country against external threats (e.g., illegal cross-border trade) (*Jakarta Post*, 2005). Two such control posts or camps have already been erected, one at the Badau border and one along the Leboyan River in the vicinity of Rumah Manah, each manned by one company of soldiers locally known as LIBAS (Tentara Lintas Batas). The first signs of confrontation between the Iban borderlanders and LIBAS are slowly emerging, usually triggered by LIBAS soldiers' interference in local cross-border activities. The Iban's long enjoyment of a fair amount of self-autonomy is coming into tension with the appearance of these 'outside' players holding state authority.

Borderland underdevelopment and its poor infrastructure, together with a sharp rise in cross-border illegal logging, timber smuggling and labour migration has come to be seen as a national security problem, and once again the borderland is seeing militarisation. From the perspective of national and provincial governments, development and national security are tightly connected: Currently per capita income in West Kalimantan is approximately US\$400 a year, while in Sarawak the yearly income reaches US\$4000 (*Media Indonesia*, 2005). By equalising disparate economic relations between people living on each side of the border, the government expects borderland inhabitants to become more nationalistic and reduce cross-border migration. By further developing the infrastructure, the international border will be strengthened against illicit practices such as cross-border logging and labour migration (*Pemerintah Kalimantan Barat*, 2005, 2006).

## Conclusion

Within political-economic studies of international borders and borderlands, there has been a long tendency to take a top-down approach, focusing solely on how the state inflicts control and exerts power over the lives of people in the borderland, while local agency and the practice of borderland populations in shaping their borderland environment has been largely ignored and neglected. Following more recent research trajectories, here we have attempted to turn the argument around and promote an understanding of borderland processes from the outlook of the local agents living there. By approaching international borders and borderlands from below – as structures of opportunity – we have shown that borderlands are ambiguous places where people and ideas meet, new things come into being and complex socio-cultural exchange occurs, despite the rigid control and rules of the state. We have argued that, in order to understand contemporary socio-economic processes taking place in the Iban borderland, we need to look at the overall borderland experience and take into account dynamic historic processes and long-term ethnic links. A meticulous investigation into different borderland practices as experienced by the inhabitants themselves is therefore decisive in understanding the borderland milieu. By studying borders, borderlands and borderlanders we can challenge some taken-for-granted notions about the idea of the state as the all-encompassing, bounded and sovereign entity surrounded by exclusive boundaries and impenetrable borders. This study shows that people living in the borderland are continually involved in practices that transcend the territorial line of the state, questioning its regulations by constructing tight socio-economic relations with people on the other side of that line. The study of everyday life of borderlanders might redefine some of our cherished assumptions within social sciences about the nature of the relationship between people, place and identity, particularly 'methodological territorialism' that understands social life as being played in bounded geographical (and social) fields (van Schendel, 2005: 39). Borders and borderlands are thus particularly helpful in generating insight into how people who are apparently living within

bounded social fields at the same time are trans-local in their actions.

We have argued that ethnic relations are a crucial component in cross-border labour migration among Iban borderlanders in West Kalimantan and have illustrated how borderlanders are continually involved in practices that transcend the territorial line of the state, questioning its regulations through their maintenance of tight socio-economic relations with people on the other side of that line. As the different cases presented indicate, transnational ethnic relations directly influence local Iban decision-making, with the use of ethnicity as a conscious strategy. Indeed, Kalimantan Iban strategically use the social capital of transnational ethnic relations to obtain citizenship documents and jobs in Sarawak, which later may be converted into economic and symbolic capital at home. Furthermore, labour migration and the importance of cross-border ethnic affiliation are not new phenomena in this particular borderland but have a long-standing history although the very meanings have changed over time. Today increasing competition from labour migrants from other parts of Indonesia over jobs in Sarawak has made playing the ethnic card even more significant. By embracing the opportunities of sharing language, culture and history with the much larger Iban population in Sarawak, the Kalimantan Iban seem to uphold an advantage that makes their labour experiences less troublesome than other groups of Indonesia labour migrants.

Cross-border labour migration among many Iban is a foremost and necessary economic survival strategy. In many cases, they do not have any other choice of generating cash income, as the Indonesian state has not yet succeeded in integrating the borderland into the larger national economy and thereby creating local job opportunities. The West Kalimantan – Sarawak border is thus more than a strict physical line separating two countries; it is also a social and economic boundary shaping the lives of the two historically separated Iban groups in different ways. Unequal economic relations between the two countries is definitely a decisive factor in contemporary Kalimantan Iban orientation across the border, and such unequal relations have furthermore created social boundaries between the two Iban groups

that are maintained and accentuated by their different circumstances of life.

The Iban borderland is rapidly changing from a long-isolated and marginal outpost to a possible centre of official cross-border commerce between Indonesia and Malaysia. These circumstances might rearrange the orientation and loyalty among local Iban communities, but perhaps without them losing or giving up the dual advantages of borderland life. The borderland milieu is changing, and so will the livelihood strategies of the Iban borderlanders. But despite current government initiatives to incorporate borderlanders into the national economy, and increasingly tightened Malaysian immigration laws, the Iban will probably continue their orientation across the border economically, socially and culturally. A headline of the main provincial newspaper read 'Border citizens still rely on Malaysia' (*Warga perbatasan masih harapkan Malaysia*) (*Pontianak Post*, 2005), and more often than not, the Iban population in particular is presented as a vivid case of this borderland dilemma – isolation, underdevelopment, national security threat and partitioned ethnicity as main reasons for cross-border solidarity and subsequent lack of national consciousness with fears of local Iban separatism.

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## Notes

- 1 For reviews of border studies, see Alvarez (1995); Wilson and Donnan (1998); and Donnan (2001).
- 2 Categorising a large group of people under one label can be problematic, and it is not our intention to treat 'Iban' as a natural category but rather to show how ethnicity is strategically played upon. Furthermore, the term is the prime ethnic category with which the Iban in the study area themselves identify, especially when they deal with the ethnic Iban across the border in Sarawak. On the constructedness of the Iban ethnic category in Kalimantan, see Wadley (2000a); King (2001).
- 3 Holding two sets of citizen documents (i.e., identity cards and passports) are officially considered highly illegal in both Indonesia and Malaysia. In 2006 the Indonesian government passed a new 'Citizenship Law' mainly directed towards easing the naturalisation process of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese. The status of Indonesian migrant workers abroad remains unclear (Sidel, 2007).
- 4 Rumah Manah is a pseudonym to preserve the anonymity of its residents, while Sungai Sedik is not (in consultation with its residents). Other place names are accurately reported, though the names of all individuals mentioned have been changed.
- 5 The authors have conducted long-term research in the West Kalimantan borderland through serial visits to the area between 1990 and 2007 (see Acknowledgements).
- 6 The use of ethnicity and language as a cross-border strategy in transnational labour migration is widely used among other partitioned borderland populations on Borneo; for example, the ethnically related Lun Berian (Kalimantan) and Kelabit (Sarawak) living in the central Borneo highlands (Bala, 2001; Ardhana *et al.*, 2004; Amster, 2005).
- 7 Malaysian logging entrepreneurs who were among the main players in the timber business in the borderland at the time brought along a small number of Sarawak Iban who worked as lorry drivers and mechanics, all of whom returned across the border after the logging boom was ended in 2005.
- 8 During this time, no one took up wage labour in Brunei, a country which had been a popular destination in past decades because its high salaries. Men said that it was too much of a hassle to obtain a job in Brunei these days, as the authorities were very strict towards labour migrants, especially if they were in the country illegally.
- 9 These statistics are typical for most Iban borderland communities. At Sungai Sedik, into the 1990s, 87% of all jobs held were across the border in Sarawak and Brunei (Wadley, 1997: 120; 2000b: 134). Since 2000, however, most men at Sungai Sedik have tended to stay at home (as previously mentioned).
- 10 Although the living standards of Sarawak Iban have generally been better than that of their Kalimantan relatives, Sarawak Iban, like other indigenous and non-Muslim groups there, have enjoyed less of Malaysia's rapid economic development than the dominant Malay and Chinese populations (King and Jawan, 1996).
- 11 A few times a year, women from borderland communities cross into Sarawak to sell their traditionally woven cloths, which are highly sought after because of their high quality and affordable price (*Equator Online*, 2005).
- 12 It is estimated that more than two million Indonesian migrants are working illegally, a majority of whom labour in Malaysia (Sidel, 2007: 19).
- 13 This strategy is not uncommon among border people in Southeast Asia. For example, along the border between peninsular Malaysia and Thailand, Malaysian citizens from the Muslim Thai-speaking minority register their children in both countries; there as well, kin relations play a crucial role (Horstmann, 2002b: 2–3).
- 14 The practice of inventing kinship relations is also a well-known strategy among Thai (Muslim) labour migrants obtaining ICs along the Malaysian-Thailand border (Horstmann, 2002b: 16).

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