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Contested meaning of the nation-state through historical border narratives

A case study of the Batang Kanyau Iban, West Kalimantan

IWAN MEULIA PIROUS

ABSTRACT

Nation as a cultural-psychological phenomenon is best understood in terms of how a sense of nationhood operates in order to construct social identities or a social imagination about the modern nation-state (Anderson 1983). The forging of nationalism as a national identity cannot be seen in isolation of the rise of modernization and industrialization (Gellner 1987). Although the nation appears to be a modern phenomenon, Smith (1991) stresses that every nation preserves its own past historical artefacts, narratives, and symbols for present-day needs. This model needs to be elaborated further as it is insufficient to understand how a sense of nationhood operates among borderlanders of a state. This paper relates the story of Kalimantan's Iban borderlanders who are officially registered as Indonesian subjects but live on the dividing line between two countries. This makes them appear to be ambiguous subjects who are torn between the two different historical timelines of British and Dutch colonial history (as well as postcolonial Malaysian-Indonesian history). They are marginalized in every aspect and are the forgotten subjects in the history of the broader picture of Indonesia's so-called nationalism project. The explanation is twofold. The first explains how identity is constructed as multi-layered historical narratives involving local and national cultures, and second, how transnational borderlanders give meaning to nation as narrative. The primary data for this article were collected in 2002 through a series of interviews in the village of Benua Sadap, an Iban settlement on the Batang Kanyau River, close to the West Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Sarawak (Malaysia) borderline.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism, Iban, borderzone.

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BOUNDED NATION BETWEEN MODERNIZATION AND THE “PERENNIAL” SCHOOL OF THOUGHT¹

Benedict Anderson (1983) defines a nation as group of people in which all members can recognize themselves as being part of a wider collective solidarity and of a history on a national scale. It is imagined as a sense of belonging to a nation shared by people who technically never meet. Nation is imagined and ties people because it is part of their territorial mind. In other words, the idea of a nation-state is imagined as being limited to its sovereignty. Unlike a monarchy where the height of power is concentrated at the centre of the realm (Anderson 1983: 38), power in a modern nation-state is distributed evenly over every square inch of its territory. That a nation is “imagined” does not mean that it is in any way false, unreal, or distinguishable from “real” (unimagined) communities. Rather, Anderson proposes that a nation is constructed through popular processes in which residents share a common nationality (Hubbard, Kitchin, and Valentine 2004: 17). Why is it imagined?

It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson 1991: 6).

Nationalism has a boundary and is limited. To have a nation requires the presence of another nation against which self-definition can be conceived through imagination.

The nation is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations (Anderson 1991: 7).

Nation is a novel thing. The underlying assumption of Anderson’s thesis is that nationalism is a relatively modern product. “Modern”, in this context, denotes not only time proximity, but also alludes to “Modernity” as the new cultural and historical experience Europe progressively went through since the early fifteenth century. In this period, all the ingredients of nationalism emerged as monarchies and churches lost their grip over power and were states became secularized. In this manner, a nation was a new way of conceptualizing state sovereignty and rule. This rule would be limited to a defined population and to the restricted territory over which the state, in the name of nationality, could exercise power.

It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm [...] nations dream of being free [...]. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state (Anderson 1991: 7).

The role of print capitalism acts as a vehicle for social progress. Technology

¹ Paper presented at the social-humanities seminar “Charting borders; Nation, narratives, and everyday lives”, a partnership collaboration of *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia*, a journal of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Indonesia, and the Academy Professorship Indonesia, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Depok, 26 November 2009.

plays as important role in opening up new horizons and in new ways of viewing the changing world through the expansion of printed and digital media that massively produces texts in vernacular languages as vehicles for communication. In contrast with oral traditions which affect limited groups of people, print capitalism is most relevant here as it contributes to spectacular effects on language and thought. Identical messages using identical linguistic systems can now be broadcasted to the entire middle class across the world. Without this impressive system of production and distribution, it is difficult to see how a person in Marseilles could even dream of having feelings of moral community commitment with a person in Lille. Seen as a technological device for the creation of a situation of abstract communities where there is solidarity and empathy between people who will never meet in flesh—print capitalism is the king (Eriksen 2007: 28). Reading the same newspaper and celebrating the same national festivals create a sense that the nation is imagined not as a hierarchical structure but as one in which men see each another as equal within the nation (Anderson 1983: 7).

The term “nationalism” acts as a cultural rather than as a political metaphor (next to “religion” and “kinship”) as it is more the outcome of destiny rather than choice. Therefore, the study of nation (or more precisely, nationality) should seek to understand how people interpret and take action with reference to their nationality. It is true that nation is the latest stage of state political organization. However, the history of every modern nation-state shows evidence of an accumulation of violence and killings as necessary lawful experiences in the creation of the sacred symbols of national identities (Reid 1985: 497). Anderson believes that nation’s historical narratives function as what he called “ghostly national imaginings”. In this sense, patriotism, wars, and bloodsheds appear as prime sources for the creation of a national epic which is widely popularized by printing capitalism cultures through novels, short stories, and all other possible popular media.²

Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately, it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much as to kill, as willing to die for such limited imaginings (Anderson 1991: 7).

The storm of modern progress inevitably solidifies a nation. Massive state-supported industrialization acts as a primary prerequisite for nationalism to happen. It was the state who created the nation, not the other way around -

² Therefore, communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Javanese villagers have always known that they are connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were once imagined particularistically as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship. In this sense, the expanding network of print capitalism to remote areas significantly changes the way people imagine themselves as part of the nation.

and this is what Ernest Gellner said about the national culture of industrialism (Gellner 1987: 59). Modern man is not loyal to a monarch or a piece of land or a faith, regardless of what he may say, but to a culture. Thus, for Gellner, without the development stages like industrialization, prosperity, division of labour, and effective bureaucratic systems, the rise of nationalism as a national sentiment could not have become reality. Both Anderson and Gellner represent scholars who believe that nationalism and nations are the products of modernity. The elements of nationalism and nations are not only recent and novel, but could only emerge and had to emerge through a process of modernization.

THE ROLE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND PAST HERITAGE IN SHAPING NATIONALISM

The modern vision of nationalism is convincing and has met with modest acclaim from political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists. Anderson and Gellner share similar arguments that nationalism should be understood as a cultural phenomenon albeit they have little recognition of the importance of "proto-modern" cultural elements. According to Anthony Smith, the central question in our understanding of nationalism is the role of the past in the creation of the present. Archaeologically speaking, the historical past in terms of cultural and symbolical resources accumulate in every nation (Smith 1987, 2001, 2004). Smith's argument rests on the ethnic origins of modern nations by stressing the importance of cultural resources in the creation and sustainment of national identities in which myths and symbols of shared ethnicity play vital roles. Ethnic communities within present modern nation-states still preserve their cultural uniqueness as this symbolizes their communal identities that appear to be the historical continuation from past to present. This is somewhat different from Anderson's concept of imagined communities. He dismisses the pre-print capitalism history of nationalism as insignificant.

Some modern nations like most European nations may even use their historical past as primary sources to draw a compelling picture of an ancient world in which the elites of many societies actively cultivated an ethno-national consciousness as a vital source of cohesion and, in the cases of self-governing states, of political legitimacy. The historian Eric Hobsbawm argues that modern nations may even create newly invented vintages as their resources of cultural identity (using the example of the Scottish Highlander tradition of *kilts*). Symbols and imagery are not arbitrarily fabricated from scratch but from serious efforts of deliberate historical inventions. Grand-scale public traditions in many societies all over the world are not as ancient or immemorial as they are generally believed to be. They have recently been invented to provide national identity with a sense of timelessness. He called these "invented traditions" which include, invented, constructed and formally instituted "traditions" and those that emerged in a less easily traceable manner during a brief and dateable period (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 1):

[These] “invented traditions” are a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.

A nation is thus a political and cultural project, based on a sense of common heritage (Smith, Hobsbawm) and on an imagined community (Anderson). It involves social institutions in civil society (Gellner) and it may or may not include a polity of its own. Nations are much more often projects in process of becoming something more than what has actually been realized in stable political institutions, and command over territory (Walby 2003: 531).

NARRATIVE FROM THE BORDERLAND

The central assumption that undergirds perennialists and modernists is that a nation is established, governed, and constructed under a stable political and cultural hegemony. All of the theorists above attempt to establish a monologic discourse in relation to the concept of nation, national literature, and empire in order to understand how a nation actually operates. When state-centric history acts as the primary source for political legitimacy (stories of kings, leaders, heroes, gods, big temples, technological progress, and other powerful discourses), the idea of nation should be hegemonic or dominant as the State continually reproduces a powerful discourse in order to maintain the imagined community. However, how about other discourses that systemically have been marginalized because the State imposes a particular national identity? As present-day ethnic communities within modern nation-states, they continue to preserve their deeply rooted cultural identities. How can we understand interacting narratives and the dynamic or contestation between national and local narratives particularly those of people living in international border zones?

Studies of national identities and national cultures have mainly been carried out under the assumption that each national identity has a clearly conceptualized state border. From this point of view, a border zone is seen as a final frontier, a static space marked on the map which administratively and politically separates people. It appears that, on the contrary, a border is a dynamic space, where everything “begins its presencing”. Martin Heidegger’s attitude towards the ontology of space and boundary is relevant to the significance of border studies (Heiddeger 1998: 105):

A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds. That for which room is made is always granted and hence is joined, that is, gathered, by virtue of a location, that is, by such a thing as the bridge. Accordingly spaces receive their being from locations and not from “space”.

Of course, place and space are constituted by sedimented social structures and cultural practices. Sensing and moving are not pre-social; the lived body

is the result of habitual cultural and social processes. It is thus imperative that we “get back into place” (Casey 1993 in Escobar 2001) and reverse the long-standing disempowerment of place in both modern theory and social life. This means recognizing that “place, body, and environment integrate with each other; that places gather things, thoughts, and memories, in particular configurations; and that place, more an event than a thing, is characterized by openness rather than by a unitary self-identity” (Escobar 2001: 43). Space and cultural identity are intertwined and the “disruption” of the configuration of space will disturb the embedded configuration of existing cultural identity. Border zone studies emphasize “identity disturbances” as well as their construction. Border-crossing populations lie at the very edge of current transformations of concepts of sovereignty, national identity, and citizenship. While many studies seem to propagate this trend, only few are based on solid empirical fieldwork.³

Place, sovereignty, histories, and identities appear not exactly to fulfill the needs of national identity as elaborated by Anthony Smith and Benedict Anderson. Borderlands should be placed in their spatial and temporal contexts in order to study the relations between territory, identity, and sovereignty. Out of this emerges the concept of narrativity, the context which embeds identities in temporal and spatial relationships, or in other words, joining narrative to identity introduces time, space and analytic relationality. It is within these temporal and multi-layered narratives that identities are formed; hence narrative identity is processual and relational (Somers and Gibson 1994: 58-67). The borderlands and their interacting narratives provide the contexts in which borderland communities construct their social identities and systems of cultural significations within constant discourse differences. I quote Homi Bhabha to describe how the tension Janus faced is pictured (Bhabha 1990: 3).

It is the project of nation and narration to explore the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation... in the process of the articulation of elements where meanings may be partial because they are in *medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of ‘composing’ its powerful image.

WHO ARE THE IBAN

“The Ibans are the world’s best jungle trackers I have come across. They served the country admirably and I have much respect for them” (Sir Gerald Templer) (Low 1968).

³ Many studies of ethnic minorities particularly in Southeast Asia do not take the border and its conceptual impact into full account. Similarly, most studies limit themselves to one country and largely ignore the practice of border-crossing and the transnationalisation of social space which involves two or more countries and may, through multiple networks and cultural contact over wide geographical distances, extend to pluri-local spaces, sometimes spanning continents (Horstmann 2002: 15).

The Iban or Sea Dayak are a riverine group of rice cultivators who inhabit the interior hill country of Sarawak (which became part of "Malaysian Borneo" in 1963) and part of Indonesian Kalimantan (the official Indonesian term for the Indonesian part of Borneo). The British mistakenly called them Sea Dayak when they came into contact with them in the 1840s, when many Iban were involved in coastal piracy with the Malays.⁴ Since they choose to settle along the banks of the main rivers and their tributaries which serve not only as their source for water, but also as a means of transportation, the label River Dayak would have been more appropriate. The name Iban originates from the Kayan (Land Dayak) language and means "strange roving" pointing at the Ibans who lived alongside the Rejang River (Sarawak, Malaysia). Haddon introduced the term into the literature in 1901 and it has remained the accepted term ever since (Freeman 1958: 50; Richards 1988: 111). The Ibans refer to themselves by the name of the longhouse village or river where they reside. The collective Iban community is one of 50 different tribes who reside in Borneo and outsiders commonly identify them as Dayak.

Presently the Iban occupy the "remote" jungle-covered ranges of the underdeveloped interior zone of Sarawak, and also various inaccessible headwaters of the great Kapuas River in what is now Kalimantan (Freeman 1958: 15). Except for Kapuas, they mainly occupy the Batang Ai, Batang Lupar, Saribas, Krian, and Rejang Rivers. Compared to other Dayak, Iban communities have the largest population with 600,000 members located in Sarawak and 15,000 on Indonesia's side. There are various other Dayak (Land Dayak) who reside in the north Borneo such as Bidayuh, Maloh, Kayan, Punan, Kenyah, Saben, Lun Dayeh, Tidung, and Murut, but the scope of my research is limited to the Kanyau Iban who reside in West Kalimantan, particularly those who live along the Batang Kanyau river and who are known as Kanyau Iban (Iban Batang Kanyau). They are part of a larger transnational Iban community who live on both sides of the Indonesian-Malaysian border.

The present-day⁵ Kanyau Iban consist of around 108 households, and mainly live in the villages of Sadap, Kelayam, and Kampung Madang on the upper Batang Kanyau. Iban histories can only be traced by comparing earlier

⁴ According to notes collected during his residence of about 30 months in Sarawak, Hugh Low in 1847 reported that the Sea Dayaks have a constant habit of sailing the ocean for the purposes of carrying off the heads of fishermen who inhabited the interior of the great rivers Sarebas and Sekarran (Sungai Saribas and Skrang) (Low 1968: 166). Most Dayak tribes at that time performed a seasonal ritual of headhunting for religious reasons, but only Iban constantly seek heads for individual motives to prove their masculinity and braveness.

⁵ In contrast with the affluence of studies available on the Sarawak Iban, many of which written in the nineteenth century during three generations of Brooke rule, little has been written about the Iban minorities on the Indonesian side of the border. Tracing histories thus heavily relies on oral histories rather than on the limited number of colonial sources or missionary reports. Although the Dutch colonial presence in this area extended officially from the 1850s to the early 1940s, they wrote very little about the native inhabitants along the British-Dutch border compared to the British administrative officers in Sarawak because of the absence of Dutch colonial officers at the frontier. The Dutch considered Java as the nucleus of their colony. This leaves researchers on the Indonesian side with only a handful of sources to start with.

studies of Iban migration with the remaining oral genealogical histories (*tusut*) which now almost no longer exist as older generations vanish, or because they are only remembered in fragments by the current generation of 40-60 year olds. According to their *tusut*, the Kapuas basin is the most important source of migrations for Indonesian and Sarawak Iban alike. The first wave of migration dates around 1800 from the Kapuas basin heading north to the Batang Ai River. From there, the migration continued to the Saribas, Undup and Skrang Rivers. The Undup and the Kumpang riverbanks were among the very first areas to be populated by Ibans who came from Kapuas probably because both rivers are easily accessible from the lower Kapuas (Ghuang 1999: 6).⁶ However, Kanyau Iban oral history relates that the first Kanyau settlers were led by Muban and Macan (circa 1810-1820), and that the river was named after a prominent leader of these early settlers who pioneered the opening of the area. Later migration to Batang Kanyau from Katibas River in Sarawak is recalled as having taken place around 1860. From this period onwards, migration to and from the Kapuas River was triggered by the occupation of the British Rajahs (the Brooke dynasty) who ruled Sarawak from 1839 to 1942. Conflict between the Brookes and the Ibans to the north of Kapuas (Ulu Ai) forced them to move back to the Kanyau area which at that time administratively belonged to the Dutch. In summary, the first migration started from the Kapuas River (Dutch West Borneo) into British Sarawak areas which continues to the present.

“BLURRY” SELF-IDENTIFICATION: A REBELLION BRITISH POSTCOLONIAL NARRATIVES

Many Kanyau Iban identify themselves as the offspring of heroic anti-Brooke ancestors who endlessly challenged Charles Brooke’s rule. In this regard, Brooke is portrayed as cruel (*jahat*), and they view the fact that Brooke himself relied on a large Iban force that he succeeded in turning “downriver Iban” (from Kapuas, Indonesian side) into “traitors” (*pengkhianat*). Today, many Ibans from Batang Kanyau remember the story of their great-great grandfather’s association in helping Rentap to start his war with the “Raja Beruk”. In their narrative, Batang Kanyau Ibans use the same name for the three generations of Brooke rulers: “Raja Beruk” (locally pronounced as *berook*) which means “Monkey King” to show how much they despised them. *Beruk* is also close to another local word *buruk* meaning “ugly”. There are three historical events, still often retold, in which the Brookes are portrayed as the antagonistic enemy:

⁶ Several *tusut* collected by Sandin (1994: 151,199) indicate that the earlier settlement of the Batang Kanyau area occurred during the first migration movements of Iban groups led by Naga and Sumping from the Ulu Ai. This migration probably took place in the early decades of the nineteenth century, from the Ulu Ai in Sarawak into the Katibas, which was undertaken through the Kanyau (see also Freeman 1970: 131-132). Sandin also pointed to the close kinship of the Kanyau Iban with the Emperan Iban around the lake areas near Lanjak. The Emperan themselves came from the Ulu Ai in Sarawak before the 1830s, and some even moved further to Ensulit Island in the Batang Kanyau River, where the notable Temenggong Koh (a prominent Iban leader) was born around 1870.

First, the War at Emperan (*Perang di Emperan*) which refers to Brooke's Kedang Expedition to the Emperan in 1868 when Saribas, Skrang, Banting, and Undup Ibans in British territory were used to retaliate against the Ulu Ai rebels (Wadley 2001). Many Kanyau Iban forefathers were accordingly involved in helping their Ulu Ai kin. Second, The War at Sadok Hill (*Perang di Bukit Sadok*) where informants tell about their great-great grandfather's involvement in helping Rentap attack "Raja Beruk". This narrative tells about the moment when Iban leader Rentap and Jubang (his follower) were defeated at Sadok hill with other Ibans who fought for Charles Brooke in 1861 (Sandin 1994: 308; Sutlive 1992: 29). The third event is the uprising of Balang and Unjop in the Katibas. Some informants claimed that their great-great grandfathers helped Unjop in fighting the "Raja" in revenge for "Raja Balang's" death in Sibul. It is interesting to note that Balang himself has been immortalized in several myths almost every Iban knows in the Batang Kanyau today. Contrary to the story of Balang's conspiracy to murder the Rejang Resident J.B. Cruickshank, which resulted in his death sentence in Sibul (Sandin 1994: 197-198), the three different narratives below show how Balang came to be reinvented in myths over time (note the use of the term Raja):

Version One (first informant in Sadap):

Raja Balang was killed by Raja Beruk (Brooke) because the latter lost to Balang in a showdown race to Singapore, which accordingly Balang undertook on a floating mat (*tikai terbai*), and Brooke on a steamship.

Version Two (second informant in Sadap):

Raja Balang was killed by Raja Beruk in Sibul because the latter envied Balang's abilities to fly faster on his mat (*tikai terbai*) than Raja Beruk's plane (*bilon*).

Version Three (third informant in Kelayam):

Raja Balang was killed by Raja Beruk because Balang tried to kill him. Raja Beruk was very scared of Balang's supernatural abilities, which included floating on the sea on a mat faster than the speed of a boat.

My question is why the Dutch are relatively absent in today's Iban narratives. It is as if they never had been a part of Netherlands Indies' territory. This is very much in contrast to the official version of Indonesian colonial history as taught in Indonesian schools, which is predominantly occupied by stories of intense contacts between native Indonesian heroes from many parts of the Indonesian archipelago who fought for 350 years against the Dutch. These stories clearly indicate that, apart from being closely rooted in, and being interconnected with Ulu Ai and Katibas Iban historical experiences in Sarawak, the reinvention of Balang's story appears to contest this reclaiming of history. It provides a text to celebrate their ancestor's superiority over a colonial power which was imagined as British, not Dutch. Noteworthy to

mention is that, unlike in Sarawak, in Indonesia, Iban language and history has never been taught at school. This local version of history provides an alternative narrative to the “irrelevant” formal version of history as taught in the Indonesian curriculum, which hardly ever exposes events outside the Javanese experience. As the previous colonizer, the Indonesian postcolonial government (since independence in 1945) copied the entire legacy of Dutch power and knowledge except the use of the language. The newly born Indonesian State in 1945 emerged confident with the idea of uniting and subjugating culturally diverse communities into one fixed, single national identities, relying on and reproducing the very same colonial ruling structures it had inherited. One may think that the Indonesian invention of a national language (Indonesian Malay or Bahasa Indonesia) had made a significant contribution to the hegemony of national integration; however, it does not mean that the hegemony of national narratives came to be fully extended to the state borders.

The most obvious difference between the Dutch and British ways of rule concerns the demographic situation. From early on, the first Brooke Rajah had to cope with a territory that was predominantly populated by Iban, which enabled his government to have first-hand contact with them.⁷ While famous for his ‘divide-and-rule’ style of governance in order to conquer various, also Iban, communities, he was also known for his respect for and concern with the preservation of Iban culture, a concern that was embedded in a number of policies implemented by successive Brooke rulers.⁸ He exercised a more ‘localized’ form of colonial rule, partly due to his cash-strapped administration, which prevented him from funding a large presence in remote areas (Wadley 2001: 638).

The amalgamation between the local institution of Iban leadership and the Brooke political system was cleverly designed to raise a high level of consensual acceptance among the Iban of Brooke’s hegemony. Locally, the Iban were well known as pirates and headhunters which caused Brooke to arrive at the conclusion that “nothing but hard knocks could convert them into ‘honest people’”. However, instead of treating them as “pagan enemies”, he exploited local rivalries to attract Iban allies. With their help he suppressed Iban groups who opposed him together with their Malay leaders (B.W. Andaya and L.Y. Andaya 2001: 129).⁹ In return, various local leadership attributes were invented using Malay terms (not British) which were presented to Iban

⁷ James Brooke came to power in 1841 when most Iban had already been occupying the Batang Lupar, Skrang, Saribas, and Lemanak Rivers. They had also settled on the Kenawit and neighbouring branches of the Rejang River and Lundup (Low 1968: 166).

⁸ His most important policy was the prohibition of intermarriages between Iban and other ethnic groups (Chinese and Malay) in his concern to preserve Iban culture from outside influence.

⁹ During one engagement a squadron including four British ships and 2,500 Iban recruits in 70 canoes killed around 800 “pirating” Ibans (B.W. Andaya and L.Y. Andaya 2001: 129). This historical episode was later remembered by elder Iban Kanyau as a “dirty trick” of the Rajah to weaken the Iban “brotherhood”. For the Iban, the scale of the event is probably as significant as the D-day for old generations of British and Americans today (personal communication with Dave Lumenta).

warriors as a reward for their services.¹⁰

Unlike the British, the Dutch government did not interfere much in local customs as they had limited interest in local cultures especially those within border regions which were imagined as empty space in no need of study. Since Brooke ruled Sarawak mainly for economic reasons, his primary target was successful tax collection and trading, rather than securing the border as part of British territory. Several expeditions to the Ulu Ai River (involving hundreds of Sarawak Iban) between 1870 and 1880 were conducted to pursue Iban who refused to pay tax. As many Iban ran to the south and crossed the border into Dutch territory (Emperan, via Batang Kanyau), the Dutch later considered this expedition a violation of their territory as the Iban were subjected to the Sarawak government. In response to Dutch accusations that Brooke did not respect the territorial border, he argued that the Europeans should not expect the Iban to consider border-crossing a serious problem or to violate Netherlands Indies territorial sovereignty since it was impossible to prevent them from living up to their obligations to support their cross-border kin (Wadley 2001: 633).

There are fundamental differences between Brooke – as an individual who had been given the right to govern the country by the local sultan – and the Dutch in view of the importance of the border. Brooke did not consider the Sarawak-Kalimantan border as political as the Dutch did, as he did not truly position himself as the representative of the British government. For the Dutch, his attitude towards the Iban and other tribes was basically motivated by a biased assumption of primitive savageness rather than by real frontier experience. Their close contact with the Iban was due to end the unrest caused by numerous raidings committed by Iban groups from the Ulu Ai and Emperan who had often helped rivaling Malay Sultanates in fighting each other in 1854 (Lumenta 2004: 5). Far from creating a highly consensual acceptance of the colonizer's policy to secure hegemony from below, the Dutch regarded the Iban as aliens who had to be carefully managed by allowing them limited authority. To carry out colonial policies, for each area the Dutch sought to appoint local leaders (*temenggung*) who had less authority compared to Brooke's officials of a similar rank. Hegemony as leadership cannot be solely political. It entails the building of a broader political alliance, the formation of new consent, and the expansion of a social support basis, which Brooke understood, but the Dutch did not.

IMAGINED COMMUNITY THROUGH VIOLENCE

The Batang Kanyau Iban meet every post-colonial category of "threat": they were the reverse of modernization, they were borderlanders, and they were vulnerable to stereotypes as non-patriotic and prone to communist

¹⁰ Iban warriors who fought alongside the Brooke government in war expeditions were awarded the Malay-borrowed title of *Penghulu* and given authority to supervise other Iban groups within larger territories beyond their longhouse communities, which had been formalized in 1883.

infiltration after 1963. The idea of Indonesia as a nation state was first imposed repressively by the military. Soekarno's "Konfrontasi" with the newly established Malaysian Federation in September 1963 had been the first direct contact with the Kanyau Iban. Knowing that the "Konfrontasi" would lead them into war with their Iban kin in Sarawak, most Kanyau Iban opted not to become involved in the so-called "conflict between Soekarno and Temenggung Jugah" (the Iban chief in Malaysia during the 1960s who was still perceived as their close kin). They also knew that many of their Katibas kin assisted British Gurkha troops who were based along the Song River in patrolling the Tekelan and Piang Rivers in the upper Kanyau as well as the fact that Kanyau Iban were forced to join Indonesian Army Forces (Angkatan Bersenjata Indonesia, ABRI) as scouts. President Soekarno's left-wing government supported the PARAKU (Pasukan Rakyat Kalimantan Utara - or the Northern Kalimantan People's Army, affiliated with the PGRS - Pasukan Gerilya Rakyat Sarawak/the Sarawak People's Guerrilla Forces, both part of a transnational Communist insurgency under the North Kalimantan Communist Party) during the "Konfrontasi" in 1963 to prevent Sabah and Sarawak from joining the perceived British-sponsored Malaysian Federation.¹¹ The "Konfrontasi" signalled the earliest state-sponsored campaign that emphasized the existence of a state border after Indonesia's independence on one hand, while, for the first time, the Iban community on both sides realized not only that they were "ideologically" divided, but also that these two countries did exist. Under Soeharto's right-wing command, communist troops were hunted down overnight all over the country and counter-insurgency attacks focused on PARAKU's last front line in the Upper Kanyau River continued from 1968 to 1972. This time is remembered as a period of confusion as numerous Ibans had to choose between being accused of being communist supporters or to join the Indonesian forces in the massacre of the communist. The border zone again became a hotspot. The new anti-communist government forced tens of thousands of ethnic Chinese who had lived in the interior of West Kalimantan for centuries to flee their homes and seek safety across the border in Malaysia. Ibans were recruited to attack these Chinese and Ibans who collaborated with "the communists" risked military reprisals.

My aim is to reveal how the Iban experienced becoming Indonesian, which consequentially thrust me to unearth their traumatic past. I had two

¹¹ President Soekarno reckoned that the British position in Borneo would end very soon so that it was not worth challenging, but he believed that Indonesia should take over the rest of the island as soon as the British had left. If Malaysia was successfully united, his objectives would be permanently frustrated, and he added a new term to the jargon of politics by encouraging border raids and calling this a policy of confrontation (*Konfrontasi Ganjang Malaysia*). One may say that his policy revealed Soekarno's vision as an expansionist; however he had a strong point. The files of the Foreign Office reveal that Malaysia produces nearly 85 per cent of the world's natural rubber, over 45 per cent of the tin, 45 per cent of the copra, and 23 per cent of chromium ore. The immediate goal of the British was to protect their post-colonial interest in the vast amount of natural resources from the "unstable Soekarno" with his "Konfrontasi" (Pilger 2002: 30).

key informants: Linggong anak Sandom¹² and Ucing anak Lungan,¹³ who agreed to help me.¹⁴ The decision was made that we had to go cruising the river to hear the “story of the communists”. As Linggong told me the night before we left:

If I tell you here in this house, you will not believe my story and soon you will think that I just make things up. However, up there, the river, water, stones, and places will become the witnesses for each word that comes from my mouth. How can we possibly conceal the truth?

The upper Kanyau and its tributaries (Nanga Piang River) had not yet been cleared of wrecked guns and hand grenades. As our boat approached upriver, my informant kept holding his broken *Thomson* stengun, aiming and remembering. As he took a stable shooting position by supporting the weight of his rifle on his leg, his muscles relaxed, and the river gave him a chance to tell and recall the past in detail:

That evening I was hiding in the top of a tree, I aimed my gun at him [suspected PARAKU soldier] for a very long time, I was well trained by the Army to take a lethal shot but I couldn't pull the trigger although we were instructed to kill each communist we encountered. I decided not to fire since he looked very hungry and helpless. But I still captured him and later I learned that he is still alive today and lives in Sarawak.

We stopped at the riverbank where, according to him, there was a place where PARAKU had built their post facing the river to hide in and spot Indonesian troops coming their way. We cleared the bushes, creating a new track hoping to find the remains of the place. There was nothing left but bamboo trees and a small field that used to be planted with cassavas, which indicate that “they had been here before”. People had been staying there at least for months. As we waited for the rice to be cooked, Linggong continued his story of how he ambushed and killed a PARAKU soldier. This time he needed more than words and demonstrated how the Iban usually ambushed fleeing communist. How he had to vary his steps, the length and interval between rests and how sometimes he had to walk in quick bursts. The PARAKU had learned over the years to identify troops by their even and monotonous stride. They might think that something else was coming and so would not be easily alarmed, as he varied his steps as he walked. His ‘greenish’ tattoo with *ketam itit* ornaments

¹² The Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) recruited Linggong anak Sandom as a paratrooper in 1967. He was instructed to track down, hunt, and kill the communists at the upriver of Batang Kanyau River.

¹³ Ucing anak Lungan was one of the survivors when the Indonesian army bombed his longhouse at Kerangan Bunut because the area was marked as the last front of the fleeing communists as it was located near the Indonesian-Malaysian border.

¹⁴ As I recorded his stories, we spent a whole day cruising up the Batang Kanyau River where my two informants told and explained me their stories. Following Ricoeur, narrating and understanding stories is nothing but the continuation of yet untold stories. Narratives are both lived and told (Ricoeur 1991: 435). Narrative configurations mediate between the world of action and the world of the reader. It is a kind of collaboration between two people.

(river crab motive) on his back surely camouflaged him, as he moved unnoticeably among the trees and other vegetation. This demonstration took about 15 minutes before he resumed his story. He admitted that he preferred to behead rather than shoot his victim. For the Iban that is the noble way to kill or to be killed just like they went out for headhunting. He told me that before making a decision he usually first asked the victim more than twice *kau peraku kah?* (are you PARAKU?) – as if to reassure himself and to make a full sense of his action.

Ucing anak Lungan remembers how, when he was fourteen, the longhouse he lived in at Kerangan Bunut was bombed. The Kanyau Iban were confused at having to change sides again and were unable to distinguish communists from regular troops. Many of them continued to supply the PARAKU communists with rice and shelter, and therefore, anti-communist ABRI commanders began targeting the inhabitants of Kerangan Bunut. Anti-communist indoctrination sessions during exhausting longhouse meetings in Kerangan Bunut and Sadap started shortly afterwards.¹⁵ Ucing took a deep breath and kept quiet for some time, then he looked ahead to the river, and I could hear his voice trembling:

Back then we didn't know that those fleeing were the enemy. They asked us for food and worked in my father's rubber garden. Only after the army came did we find out that they were actually the enemy. The army bombed my longhouse at Kerangan Bunut. The chickens died, all the pigs died. Lots of Iban and other Dayak people were tortured by soldiers, but we couldn't blame anyone. The Iban people didn't know anything because we were stupid ... stupid! (and) the army wasn't wrong because in fact we had made friends with the enemy.

As we reached Kerangan Bunut, the site of the longhouse still stands empty and there were no traces but for a few broken plates and an old cluster of fruit trees shading the yard. When asked to describe how it feels to become Indonesian, Ucing could not give a direct answer. Instead, he pointed at his tattooed right chest where was written inerasably: *Indonesia meruah sayau*, which literally means "Indonesia (with) lots of love". However, it means something much deeper than that. Remarkably, his choice of the words *meruah* and *sayau* shows a deep compassion with Indonesia. I confess that his story gave new meaning to his "textual" tattoo as I later found it very irritating. It was written in "poetic" Iban language to show his innermost feeling, portraying his sense of membership of being Indonesian. As Anderson implies that the creation of a nation is mainly conceived in language, not in blood – something that individuals can acquire (Anderson 1991: 145), Ucing articulated his nationhood in his mother tongue rather than in Indonesian as the nation's language. If the language being uttered is crucial and acts a

¹⁵ New fresh anti-communist ABRI troops were stationed in early 1967 from the North Sumatra-based Bukit Barisan Military Command, better known by the Kanyau Iban as "Batalyon Infanteri 327" (Infantry Batalion 327). One of their orders was the dismantlement of the Kerangan Bunut longhouse, and the forced relocation of its inhabitants to present-day Madang village.

person's last territory to define and "defend" his/her identity when speaking, then, his tattoo narrates his Iban tongue's passive resistance against the invasion of the narrative of becoming Indonesian. When I asked him to explain his reasons of becoming Indonesian in some more detail and why Indonesia was so important, he said:

What makes me return to Kanyau is that I have land that belongs to me and my family. Although, I've travelled a lot to Sarawak and I have distant family there, I do not have land to grow there – therefore, I am nothing.¹⁶

Indonesia has become his destiny since he cannot separate himself from his land. This means the recognition that place, body, and environment are integrated; that places gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations; and that place, more an event than a thing, is characterized by openness rather than by a unitary self-identity.

INDONESIA AS IMAGINED OTHERS

Apart from tracking down communist guerrillas as far as the uppermost reaches of the Kanyau, many Indonesian troops began actively to promote their religion among the Iban. It was obligatory to choose a religion recognized by the State if they wanted to be treated as respectable, anti-communist, Indonesian citizens. These soldiers aggressively summoned the Iban to dispose of all beliefs perceived pagan (*kafir*), including all the adat *petaunan* (rituals related to the planting cycle). In addition, "Indonesians" in general view tattoos as pagan. In other words, Indonesian Muslims disapprove of Iban identity symbols. His following statement summarizes his knowledge of how "Indonesians" perceive Dayak:

We are perceived as savages, man-eaters, ant-eaters, pork-eaters, wearing tattoos ... and that is why they [referring to "Indon"] call us upriver people (*orang hulu*).¹⁷

The Iban had no choice but to obey the government in order to become "good Indonesian citizens". Converting to Catholicism became not only a means of keeping safe from the military but also of resolving the Iban's growing identity crisis as they were accused of "not having a religion" and of "being close to communist teachings". Indonesians had to be understood as new comrades against the communists – who, for the Iban for unclear reasons – were their inevitable enemy. Most of the Iban negotiated this by choosing Catholicism rather than Islam, since becoming Muslim would have uprooted their cultural

¹⁶ Each household in a Longhouse has its own land to grow paddy, vegetables, fruits, etc located alongside the river. The land is inherited from parents and is individual property. However, if for any reason the land is abandoned for more than 3 years, the ownership ends and according to their *adat* (customary law) others may legally claim it.

¹⁷ Upriver people (*Urang 'ulu*) is a stereotypical categorization Malay people use who see themselves as more modern and civilized since they reside downriver, or on coastal areas, the centre of Malay Islamic culture.

Dayak identity even more. In addition, their conversion provided them with a new identity to differentiate them even more from Islam-dominated Malay culture. My informant, Ucing anak Lungan, gave me the following reason why he chose to become a Catholic:

I could not choose to convert to Islam because I have Dayak flesh. We have been eating wild boar for ages. How could I possibly embrace that religion? We also traditionally drink rice-wine. Not to feel macho, but just to stimulate us to carry out heavy work, like clearing the land on the rice field ... I chose to become Catholic, that new style religion as ordered by the government, because it allows me to continue to eat pork.

Anderson (1983, 1991: 38) states that state power was at its most concentrated in the centre of the Kingdom (not the nation). This means that its power gradually diminishes the nearer we get to the periphery of Kingdom. Had Indonesia successfully appeared to be a modern imagined community, the power of the State would not have been less in its border areas. This is not what happened in the Iban case, as for them, the experience of being neglected and of being regarded peripheral subjects surely destabilizes their sense of Indonesian-ness. As the Indonesian State systematically place the Iban in the narrative of the "other", they reacted actively by placing the Indonesian narrative as one of the "other" too. By referring to their cultural identity as being part of a larger Iban transnational "imagined community", the Batang Kanyau Iban accordingly considered themselves to be at the centre of Iban identity in the sense of historical originality which is supported by their genealogical histories (*tusut*). Their former historical experience of being part of the Ulu Ai axis in Sarawak in the early of twentieth century, and the shared *tusut* of their past migrations are the two main sources of Iban core culture and its historical origin. Smith (1987, 1991) states that ethnic communities within present modern nation-states preserve their cultural and historical continuation in order to maintain their national identity. This is true for the Iban Kanyau but only relevant to their limited needs to develop a counter hegemony to counterbalance the narrative of the Indonesian State. In other words, they reconfigure their identity to provide more space for their "beingness" by first moving from their marginalized position to the centre of the narrative (Batang Kanyau as the centre), and second, by placing Indonesia in the position of the "other". As Ucing stated in response to the question of: Where do you originally come from:

... semua Iban Sarawak datai ari kitai ditu ...
 (... all the Sarawak Iban originated from us here ...)

However, what they refer to as the *all Iban* centre is ambivalent as it moves back and forth between two extremes: Sarawak and the Batang Kanyau River. By taking their essentialized past as their point of reference, the Iban indicate their identity construction in relation to their authentic origin they see as "fixed". Following the lens of Smith's perennialism, national forms are prone

to change and nations may dissolve, but a nation's identity is unchanging. Yet the nation is not part of a natural order, so one can choose one's nation, and later generations can build something new departing from their ancient ethnic foundations. The task of nationalism is to rediscover and appropriate a submerged past, the more the better to build on it (Smith 1987, 1991). For the Iban, the future is open to new possibilities. It is clear that they do not see their marginality – in relation to “Indonesian-ness” – as an absolute hegemonic reference and react passively towards the imposition of the nation-state and the border. The imposition of the narrative of Indonesian-ness has not been entirely successful in changing the Iban's perception of Indonesia's diverse ethnic composition in order to become “compatible” with Indonesia's main narrative of “ethnic diversity”. One day when I passed the village primary school in Sadap, I happened to hear what the teacher said in front of the class:

Children, Indonesians consist of many ethnic groups. They are Iban, Maloh, Malay, and Chinese.

Hearing this, any Indonesian living at the “centre of knowledge and power” would find this very peculiar as in any school in Java they would have been taught that the Javanese, the Sundanese, and the Batak are statistically dominant. Noteworthy to say, according to the main narrative of Indonesian-ness, the Chinese were not included into Indonesia's main narrative of ethnic composition until quite recently because they were accused of having been “involved” in the communist movement (1965). That the Iban position themselves on the first rank of the “Indonesian” ethnic listing indicates how the border zone has become a social arena where Indonesian-ness has been translated and contextualized locally to fit in their “Iban reality or common-sense”. In short, everything has to be “Ibanized”¹⁸ in order to make sense. By omitting Indonesian-ness from their narrative, the most logical reason for present day Kanyau Iban to construct their emerging identity is through a process of shifting their point of reference from “Batang Kanyau Iban” to “Sarawak Iban”. This process is related to their traditions of cross-border *bejalai*¹⁹ (long journeys) to Sarawak, *pantang* (tattooing) which functions as rites of passage and physical markers of life events, and *gawai* – the most important festival which unite Indonesians and Sarawak Ibans into one “Iban community” that shares the same fate, expectations, and future.

¹⁸ One clear evening, I ask a small boy about the names of the stars above. He pointed to Venus which was the brightest and said: “*itu bintang kitai iban!*” meaning: “that is our Iban star!”. On one occasion one elder Iban told me about the origin of men. He said that the first man and woman were Adam and Wawa, and that they were Iban.

¹⁹ *Bejalai* is very important for a successful Iban man, if not for society, in order to gain social prestige and affluence before returning to his longhouse after 4 to 15 years. In the past, an Iban man demonstrated his worth by returning home with status symbols like huge earthenware jugs that could be used as trade goods or as part of the bride price. At present, a *bejalai* is successful when a man is able to bring back a chainsaw or a motorboat engine, both useful items in today's Iban world where people no longer barter but fish the rivers or fell timber in the forests for cash. These temporary migrations now involve crossing national boundaries.

Apart from its economic importance, they chose Sarawak as their destination because in their social imagery, they see the centre of Iban not in terms of historical origin, but as a place where they can feel free to travel and where their Iban culture is well accepted. By shifting their imagination to Sarawak realities, the Kanyau Iban have more space to narrate their Iban identity. Most Kanyau Iban are well aware that in Sarawak, Iban have more space and more freedom of cultural and political expression.²⁰ Sarawak, then, takes the position of “the center” as it accommodates an alternative “hegemonical leadership” the Iban communities in both countries need.

To sum up, the Iban have always actively constructed their identity with such fluidity that it can alternate from the center of the narrative of the Sarawak Iban on the one hand, or remain unarticulated at the fringe of the narrative of the Indonesian State on the other. Ambivalent as it is in nature, it moves back and forth from center to periphery. As identity acts as the Self’s last territorial bastion, it always seeks ways to articulate itself and can therefore never be eliminated. Identity is constructed as multi-layered historical narratives involving local and national cultures. The national model Anderson offers is insufficient to understand the dynamic processes of national identity constructing for Iban borderlanders because the way Iban borderlanders imagine themselves as part of the Indonesian nation does not clearly follow the principle of limited but elastic allegiance to two sovereignties. Although Indonesian Ibans imagine themselves as part of Sarawak’s future, the stretchable nets of kinship, and their glorious past are recognized cultural sources and historical magnets for both Indonesian and Malaysian Ibans.

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²⁰ It is important to mention that in Sarawak, Christian Iban and Chinese can occupy important government positions, including that of Chief Minister as Tun Jugah once was. The proud stories of Iban being able to hold significant political posts despite their Christian belief also sheds light on how important religious identities have been in helping to construct Indonesia as ‘the other’ and Sarawak as ‘the center’ from the Iban perspective.

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