

A people-state negotiation in a borderland

A case study of the Indonesia–Malaysia frontier in Sebatik Island

LINA PURYANTI AND SARKAWI B. HUSAIN

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show the dynamics of the Indonesian – Malaysian border area in Sebatik Island, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Take into account as a background is the territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia over the Ligitan and Sipadan Islands which were awarded to Malaysia by the decision of the ICJ (International Court of Justice) in 2002, which was followed by the dispute over the Ambalat sea block in 2005. Sebatik Island is geographically very strategic since it faces the disputed areas. Therefore the concerns of the Indonesian state with regard to the island pertain to issues of nation-state sovereignty and territorial security, which she tries to safeguard through intensive campaigns. Research conducted in Sebatik in 2009 showed how people willingly reinforced the state by incorporating its programs, despite their ambiguous position as people in a border area, which support they used subsequently in negotiating with the state for their own local purpose.

KEYWORDS

sebatik Island, borderland, negotiation, local people, state.

INTRODUCTION

“Our sovereignty over Ambalat is the bottom line”¹
(President Yudhoyono, *Kompas* 3 June 2009)

¹ “Daulat Ambalat Harga Mati”.

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“Actually if it is said that we are about to take up arms against Malaysia, I don’t know, that may be just politics, while we are here living in peace and keep good relations with the Malaysians for our life here depends on Malaysia. It remains for the Indonesian Government to decide how to offer facilities instead of creating barriers. The *ringgit* cannot simply be eliminated either, for it is basically just like in Jakarta where you can also pay with American dollars. The most important thing is the future of our fellow citizens who find themselves in the front line. For it is uncertain whether the *rupiah* can be brought back to life and the *ringgit* be made hated.”²

(Interview with Pak Zainuddin, the village head of Haji Kuning)

“Consolidate the Red and White Flag on the Border”³

(An inscription on a new border marker in the village of Haji Kuning)

How these three border narratives help us understand the process of negotiation between the state and the people in a context of the nation-state sovereignty?

The quoted narratives and the questions they arose came from a short preliminary research in Sebatik Island, a border area of Indonesia with Malaysia in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, during August 2009. The quotations are respectively (1) a statement from the President of the Republic of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, regarding the conflict with Malaysia on the Ambalat sea block in 2009, (2) part of an interview with the head of Haji Kuning Village, which illustrates the unique relation of the Indonesian Sebatiks vis-à-vis the neighbouring state of Malaysia in the contiguous border area, and (3) an inscription on a new border marker that was constructed and inaugurated on the celebration of the Indonesia’s 64th Independence Day on 17 August 2009 in Haji Kuning, a village on the border between both countries.

The narratives are from Sebatik in 2009 against the backdrop of heightened tensions between Indonesia and Malaysia because of their territorial disputes after the “loss” of the Ligitan and Sipadan Islands in 2002, that was followed by the Ambalat sea block dispute in 2005. The island itself is geographically very strategic, since the argument of the Indonesia government for keeping the sovereignty over the Ligitan and Sipadan Islands was based on the continuation of the line which divided Sebatik Island into a Malaysian and an Indonesian half. The position of Sebatik Island is also strategic since it is facing the disputed Ambalat sea block. Preceding the disputes the presence of the state in its borderland could hardly be noticed, but the issues caused Sebatik Island to enter a new phase of statehood by intensive exposure to the state’s symbols and narratives. The state that had been so long absent in the daily lives

² “Sebenarnya kalau ada berita yang katanya kita mau mengangkat senjata dengan Malaysia, saya tidak tahu itu mungkin politik, sedangkan kita di sini aman-aman saja, menjaga persahabatan, karena hidup kita di sini itu kan karena Malaysia. Tinggal pemerintah bagaimana memberi kemudahan, jangan malah disusahkan. Tidak boleh pula dihapuskan ringgit, karena kan sama saja sebenarnya dengan di Jakarta, di sana juga berlaku dollar amerika. Yang lebih penting bagaimana nasib saudara kita yang berada di ujung tombak. Karena belum tentu kita bisa menghidupkan rupiah dan membenci ringgit”.

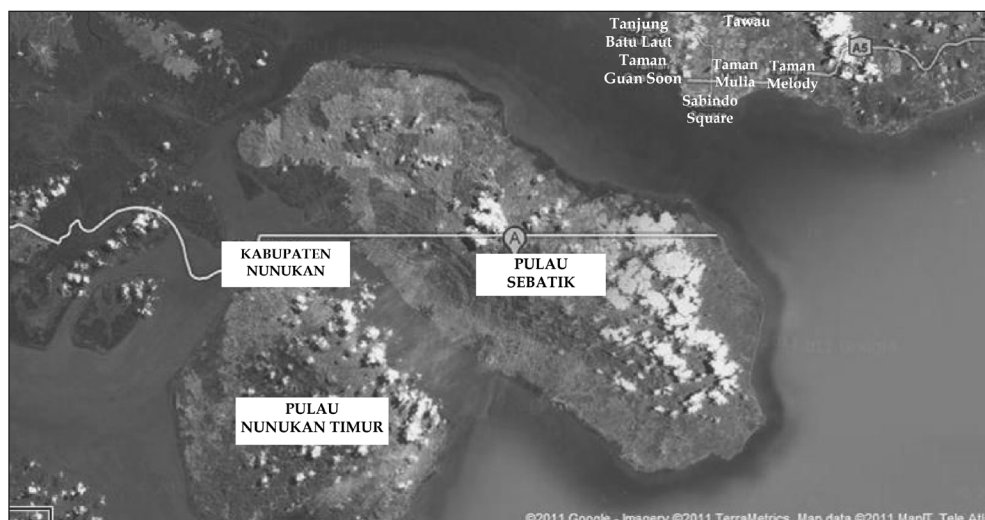
³ “Kokohkan Merah Putih di Tapal Batas”.

of the Sebatiks now became present among the people through slogans such as nation-state sovereignty, national pride, territoriality, etcetera. At the same time, the lives of the Sebatik people had always been connected to Malaysia, especially to Tawau (Sabah), through its economic relations and cultural ties (ethnic proximity). The new situation evoked various responses among the people, ranging from resistance to support for the state's campaigns.

To explore the issue, the present paper will present portrays of three border villages in Sebatik Island namely Liyang Bunyu, Sungai Pancang, and Haji Kuning. At the state level the focus of this paper will be the state's programs implemented on the island, especially those related to the issue of sovereignty, and the responses of the local people to these programs, as a form of negotiation.

SEBATIKS BORDER ECONOMY

Sebatik Island is an island situated off the eastern coast of Kalimantan, and located at latitude $4^{\circ} 10' 1''$ North and longitude $117^{\circ} 45' 0''$ East. It is bisected at roughly $4^{\circ} 10'$ North by the Indonesian-Malaysian border (Map 1). The island lies between Tawau Bay (Teluk Tawau) to the north, Sulawesi Straits to the east, and Sebuku Bay (Teluk Sebuku) to the south. To the west the island faces Nunukan Island (Nunukan subdistrict, East Kalimantan province, Indonesia). The Northern part of the island belongs to Sabah-Malaysia. The southern part to Indonesia.



Map 1. Sebatik Island (Google 2011).

Indonesian Sebatik is administratively divided into two subdistricts namely Kecamatan Sebatik Induk and Kecamatan Sebatik Barat. Kecamatan Sebatik Induk is located in the west (facing Nunukan), while Kecamatan Sebatik Barat is in the east (facing Tawau, Malaysia). The size of the combined subdistricts Sebatik Barat and Sebatik Induk is 24,371 ha. The centres of activity are the villages of Sungai Pancang in Sebatik Barat and Setabu in Sebatik Timur.

Economic activities are largely based on agriculture and forestry: padi (1.282 ha); plantation (cacao 9.262 ha, coconut 535 ha, coffee 204 ha, cloves 14,5 ha, pepper 12 ha); and palm oil.⁴ Besides there are about 1.800 people who are working as fishermen in Sebatik. Most of the trading activities with Malaysia take place through the ports in Sebatik, such as Haji Kuning in the village of that name, Lalosalo in Sungai Pancang, or Se Nyamuk in Senyamuk Village. Three villages in Sebatik Island have direct borders with Malaysia, namely Liyang Bunyu, Sungai Pancang, and Haji Kuning.

LIYANG BUNYU: "FRIENDLY" BORDER-CROSSINGS

The village of Liang Bunyu is special in that one of its neighbourhood associations (*Rukun Tetangga/RT*), Bambang, lies directly on the border with Malaysia. In this site, many villagers, beside those who are working as farmers, are working for palm oil plantations in Malaysia. Daily, the plantation workers move back and forth across the border without having any sense of crossing state borders or having to pass international immigration procedures like people have to do when they leave or enter modern states. What was understood as a borderline for the people, as it was shown by the villagers who accompanied us, was just a small river with some fallen bamboo trees as the (natural) border without any clear official signs. On the pathways to the plantation, the people have to pass an Indonesian army military post (*Pos Pam Perbatasan Indonesia - Malaysia Yorif 613/RJA*). However, the post is not influencing their daily border-crossing activities. The post (soldiers) never made that activity become complicated nor did they spread fear among the people.

On the day we visited the site, we met the soldiers and the commander, Letnan Tony, a young soldier of 24. He told us that the military duties of the post, among other things, were guarding the official border piles (whose positions were mostly far away in the hilly jungle and far from people's observation), preventing illegal logging⁵, and (probably) smuggling. These three duties actually are very crucial in a borderland like Sebatik. In 2009, for example, there was a case when the post caught subsidised Indonesian medicines which were smuggled to Malaysia. As regards the piles, the soldiers had to react on rumours that the people from the other side of the border had moved the piles in order to extend their land area, rumours that were quite strong in Sebatik. In their daily routine the soldiers were also involved with the

⁴ During our preliminary research, the people explained that palm oil plantation in Sebatik Malaysia had been managed in modern ways for many years and had given very good economic results for the country. Most of the Malaysian plantation workers are Indonesian, including Sebatiks. In Indonesian Sebatik on the other hand, palm oil trees are not well taken care of, or grow wild in the people's gardens or in the forest. In recent years, people become aware of the high economic benefits of palm oil and become more serious in cultivating the commodity.

⁵ The fact that in Sebatik Island the issue of illegal logging is also very critical can be seen from the government's designation of 400 ha of forest in Liyang Bunyu as a protected forest (*hutan lindung*).

villagers' activities like sports, religious observances, and festivals, or mingled with people in *warung kopi* (small food and coffee stalls). This involvement caused the soldiers to be quite close to and accepted by the local population.

The combination of fulfilling their military duties and seeking rapprochement with the villagers was not without ulterior motives. The existence of the military post in that borderline functioned as a symbol or empirical manifestation of state power and territoriality (Paasi 2010: 669). The approach of the military, for example, was meant to facilitate control of the population, whose loyalty was possibly ambiguous as a result of their intensive relations with the neighbouring state. The commander said that in their involvement with the people, they often referred to the importance of being loyal to the state and to keep up patriotic or nationalist values among them. As it seemed the army's approach to the people was successful. From the people's point of view the situation was not perceived as uncomfortable. In a conversation with some of the villagers at a *warung kopi* they said that they were not afraid or wanted to avoid the post; some of them even had made friends with the soldiers. We even got the impression that the interaction with the soldiers as a symbol of the government seemed to affirm one's status and position vis-à-vis the state (Amster 2005: 37). One of the villagers very proudly said that he often came to the post and chatted with the soldiers. On a "formal level", the villagers understood that the only problem with the soldiers was when they broke the state laws, for instance when they were involved in smuggling or illegal logging.⁶ This attitude was possibly caused by some "bad" experiences with Malaysia in recent years, which had influenced their perception toward the presence of the army.⁷ For the people, the military post as the state's guardian or the symbol of state sovereignty also functioned as guardian for the security of the villagers. In other words, in Liyang Bunyu, the presence of the military enabled "friendly" border-crossing for the local people.

THE VILLAGE OF SUNGAI PANCANG: FEARS OF MALAYSIAN INTRUSION, BUT ...

Sungai Pancang is also one of the villages located directly adjacent to Malaysia. In the village, some of the families in *Rukun Tetangga* (RT) 11 - Sungai Melayu - actually had been living in Malaysian Sebatik for almost thirty years, without even knowing that the place was not part of Indonesia. They became surprised when in 2009 the Malaysian Government issued a policy to develop the area by constructing a "for free" housing complex consisting of 300 houses for Malaysians. Mama Hamra, 54 years old, one of the settlers who was interviewed on 15 August 2009 said that in the beginning of the settlement

⁶ Smuggling as an offence to the state laws will be dealt with in the next section

⁷ Stories of bad or harsh treatments from Malaysian police towards the illegal workers in that site were very common in Sebatik. The people said that if there were enough jobs and good wages for them in Indonesia they wouldn't go to Malaysia for working. Some of them even decided not to continue working in Malaysia after those bad experiences.

about thirty years ago, the settlers did not realize that they were in another country. They resided on the land because their family in that village (who also did not really understand the borders of the land) told them that the area was free as it was just swamps and teeming with wild animals. Since then, the community had lived there for over thirty years as caretakers of salt fish ponds or as fishermen. Therefore, when the border issue became acute and Malaysia started its housing project in 2009, the families that did not have land in Indonesian Sebatik had problems to resettle.

Mama Hamra said that first (2009) the Malaysia government still let the families stay on the land. However, when we were on the site we found some boards attached to the new houses that stated: *Hanya untuk orang Melayu* (Only for the Malay), which was supported by the erection of the Malay flag on the site. In addition, the existence of a Malaysian Navy post at the coast on the edge of the area as a symbol of its being Malaysian territory contributed significantly to the aggravation of the atmosphere. Mama Hamra's modest house, surrounded as it was by the symbols of the foreign state, made her and other people who had the same problem feel threatened: they feared that at any moment they could be expelled from their homes and their land. The people of Sungai Pancang on the Indonesian side really sympathized with the fate of their folks who had lived on Malaysian soil for such a long time, even though they knew that Malaysia was in its right, as it was developing the project on its own soil. However, the location being adjacent to their village raised fears of Malaysian intrusion.

However, the uncomfortable situation in RT Sungai Melayu was completely different from the one in Lalosalo (River Way), the traditional harbour of the village. This harbour was one of the gateways to Tawau. Every morning, through the harbour many machine boats, fully loaded with palm oil, cocoa, bananas and other cash crops took off from Sebatik. On their way back in the evening, the boats carried Malaysian commodities needed by Sebatiks like sugar, gas, rice, electronic devices, etcetera. The goods were gotten from Tawau at cheaper prices and in a shorter time than would have been needed to bring them from Nunukan or other parts of Indonesia. In general, it may be said that the activities in the harbour reflected the economy of the village which in its turn reflected the economic situation of the island.

Nonetheless, with these rapid trading connections between the people on Sebatik with their partners in neighbouring Malaysia, the issue of open smuggling was rampant in Sebatik. Subsidized commodities from each country, for example, were popular as contraband. It was common to find Malaysian subsidized goods traded in Indonesian Sebatik, while Indonesian subsidized commodities that were certainly restricted for being traded overseas were sent to Malaysia. It is not amazing therefore that Lalosalo harbour and other harbours in Sebatik have become gateways for smugglers. However, it is too easy to apply the common notion of smuggling in order to understand the situation in a borderland area such as Sebatik. The practice of border-crossing which is considered acceptable (licit) by the local population,

is, more often than not, declared illegal by the state. “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” (Eilenberg and Wadley 2009: 59). Transnational practices that are considered acceptable (licit) by participants are often illegal in the formal sense since it is very common and open, and not such a secretive activity (in Van Schendel and Abraham 2005: 36-68). For the people, having this relation was part of their daily life and not considered offensive to the state laws. How easily they passed the customs also showed how even for the state agents the criteria of legality or illegality were “flexible” in local practice.

THE VILLAGE OF HAJI KUNING: A FRONTIER VILLAGE



Picture 1. the Mappangara’s house (Photograph by the author, 2009).

In Haji Kuning, there was a house that was rather unique. It was built exactly on the international border between the two states; the family’s living room was located in Indonesia while the kitchen was on Malaysian soil (see Picture 1). Mappangara (44 years old), the owner of the house, said that when the house was built he knew that it was on the borderline, but since there were no formal prohibitions from the Indonesian and Malaysian governments or from the owner of the land in Tawau from whom he had rented it, he continued to live in his house until today. Apart from Mappangara’s house there were five other houses in a similar situation without there being any serious attention from the side of the government either. In other words, the two states did not make a problem of it. Actually, in a borderland situation in which the populations who are residing on each side of the border are ethnically the

same, what happened with Mappangara's house was not extraordinary. A good relationship between Mappangara and the owner of the land in Tawau was based on their common Buginese ethnic background. This appeared to be more important than the citizenship difference or the complicated formal procedure of concluding a transnational contract. Thus the partitioned peoples of these borderlands are continually involved in practices that transcended the territorial boundary of the state, keeping tight relations with people on the other side (Eilenberg and Wadley 2009: 58). However, at the state level, the policy of the two states of seemingly ignoring the case was in fact rather strange. Both Indonesia and Malaysia usually regard boundary issues between the two countries as quite serious. Despite their harmonious relationship as *bangsa serumpun* (people of the same race), the history of both states has been marked by "ups and downs" with regard to such issues. But in local practice, the states' representatives in the island may assume that the Mappangara's house won't be a serious problem, since the parties involved respect each other and do not present a threat for the security or sovereignty of either state. Cultural ties between Mappangara and the land owner and also among the state's agents from the two countries appear to be determining for this situation.

Like Lalosalo harbour, Haji Kuning is also a gateway for consumer goods from and to Sebatik. When we asked some people at the harbour whether they provided their trading goods with documents, they said "yes". But at the same time we got the information from other informants that they sometimes ignored the document procedures because of their "good relations" with the state agents (the customs officers on the Indonesian and Malaysian sides) and also with their partners in Tawau. Sometimes when they were in a hurry or just wanted to avoid the immigration procedures, they would leave the harbour much earlier in the morning before 7.00 o'clock A.M. when the customs office opened. Such practices were very common in Haji Kuning.

Whereas in Liyang Bunyu the practice of border-crossing with "no official document" was common, in Sungai Pancang and Haji Kuning border traffic was allowed to those who owned a special pass (*Pas Lintas Batas / PLB*), locally known as *surat merah* (red document) or *buku merah* (red booklet) because of its red coloured cover. The PLB is actually the result of the Basic Agreement of 1967 between Malaysia and Indonesia, a Memorandum of Understanding, valid for their border areas and intended for non-work-related or social visits. With such a pass, the Indonesian inhabitants of Sebatik are allowed to enter Tawau through the Tawau harbour and to stay there for four hours. Only the people in possession of a PLB take off from one of Sebatik's harbours while bearers of international passports have to depart from Nunukan. In practice, it is very hard to visit Tawau for only four hours since about two hours are needed for immigration processing in the harbour. Therefore the people have to conduct all business in Tawau in a rush. Sometimes a little money (*uang sogok*) for the officials in Tawau would help to let them stay longer than just four hours. Often the Tawau immigration officers seemed to deliberately tarry

serving the visitors. They had to wait long while the officers were chatting inside their office.

The border-crossing situation in these three villages shows how people in that open environment are constantly exposed to foreign values, ideas, customs, traditions, institutions, tastes, and behaviour (Martinez 1994: 10). In these villages as well as in the other Sebatik villages not directly bordering on Malaysia, the Malaysian *ringgit* next to the Indonesian *rupiah* is common currency in trading transactions. When trading in *rupiah*, for example, a seller would change the currency without taking care of actual exchange rates. The identity as border people is also strongly reflected in language use. In their daily life, for example, the people easily switch from their native language (Tidung, Bugis, Timor, and Buton)⁸ to Malay. However, proper Bahasa Indonesia is rarely used as their daily spoken language. Sebatik people commonly visit Tawau for a variety of reasons: visiting relatives (the people in Sebatik and Tawau are mostly Bugis, or have a Buginese background), shopping, working, and for medical examinations.

Sebatik is also an example of an economic symbiotic asymmetric interdependence border region, or to put it more simply an interdependent borderland (Martinez 1994: 8). The interdependence is asymmetric because Tawau is the only destination for trading Sebatik agriculture or agroforestry products and in many cases the Sebatiks (fishermen, farmers, and the local entrepreneurs) are also financed by Tawau's entrepreneurs. Moreover, the bargaining position of the Sebatiks is very weak since the prices of the commodities are completely controlled by the Tawau economic market. It is rather ironic because the life of Tawau in general dependent on supply from Sebatik. Conversely, for their daily needs that cannot be procured by the island itself the people of Indonesian Sebatik are almost completely dependent on the supply from Tawau, since there is no alternative choice. Trading with Tawau guarantees them more stable prices compared to what they would get by sending the commodities to Nunukan or Tarakan. Therefore, even though economically Tawau is more dominant and stronger than Sebatik, for most of the people in the island the economic relationship with neighbouring Malaysia is crucial.

AT THE STATE LEVEL

In discussing the government policies towards the border zones, Tirtosudarmo (2007: 3) explains how Indonesia's frontier areas generally were marginalized economically and never were considered zones worth taking serious care of, despite their strategic position vis-à-vis the neighbouring countries. The national media, for example, have 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 community

⁸ Besides Tidung and Bugis (the majority) ethnics, the island is also settled by Timor and Buton ethnics.

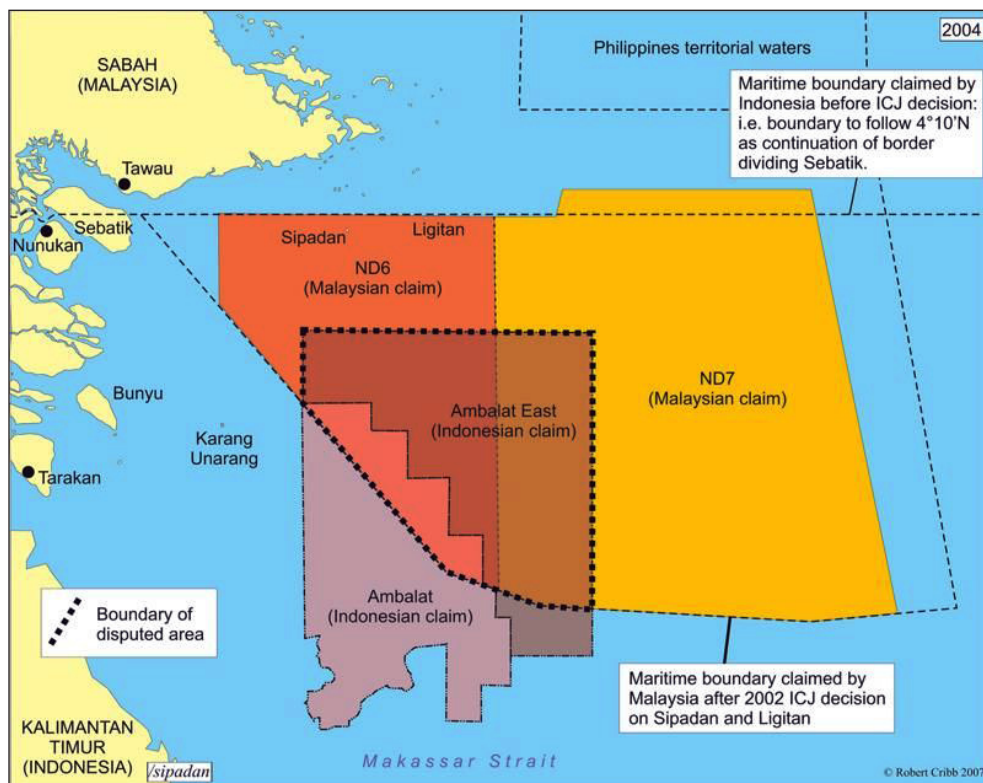
than to neighbouring Malaysia (*Kompas* 2001⁹ through Eilenberg and Wadley 2009: 61). A significant change in the government's policy vis-à-vis the border areas can be seen during the Megawati period. The Director General of Environmental Planning organized land use development in the border zone named KASABA (Kalimantan – Sarawak - Sabah). One of the aims of the President's decision regarding land use along the border (seventh draft, 16 October 2003, Article 2) was to turn the area from a peripheral backwater into the "front gallery" of the nation (Direktorat Jenderal Penataan Ruang 2003: 18). The border zone was identified as covering five districts in West Kalimantan and three in East Kalimantan. It was described as a backward, remote area, lacking in transportation facilities and access to information. A low population density, poor facilities for health and education, and high labour mobility were seen as characteristic, while the community's economy was described as "nomadic farming" (*ladang berpindah*). Six main problems were identified: economic disparity between Malaysia and Indonesia, illegal Indonesian labour flow, especially through Nunukan, destruction of Indonesia's protected forest, shifting of the border markers, weak customs facilities that encouraged smuggling, and weak infrastructure which kept border areas isolated (Direktorat Jenderal Penataan Ruang 2003: 12 through Potter 2009: 96).

The situation in Sebatik Island is not much different from the underdeveloped situation identified as problematic in other border areas of Indonesia. With the exception of Haji Kuning, Sungai Pancang, and Senyamuk that have direct access for transnational trading with Malaysia, the villages in Sebatik can indeed be considered "a backward, remote area, lacking in transportation and access to information". It is much easier for people in Sebatik to get their daily needs from Tawau instead of from Nunukan, both in terms of distance and price. It is easier for them to get complicated medical service that is not locally available by going to Tawau instead of to Nunukan. In a conversation with some Junior high school students in Sebatik, when the question was about their hopes for Sebatik in the future, their answers were the same: "We want Sebatik to become like Tawau". They did not mention Nunukan or Tarakan, or even Jakarta as the symbol of development. Their local orientation for a bright future was towards Tawau, because of its accessibility, whereas the modern cities in Indonesia are far away and beyond their imagination.

Up to the court cases with Malaysia resulting in the "loss" of Ligitan and Sipadan Islands in 2002 and the subsequent conflict on the Ambalat sea block in 2005, awareness of the Indonesian state was only mute. The state seemed to be absent in Sebatik as regards care for its people's well-being. In most of their activities the people were dependent on and in contact with their Malaysian neighbours, rather than with their fellow Indonesians. The succession of presidents over the years did not bring significant changes in people's lives. They only received some minor fringe benefits from the state's development projects.

⁹ "Jalan rusak, isolasi fisik makin parah" (Roads are ruined, physical isolation is getting ever worse, *Kompas* online, 8 June 2010).

THE INFLUENCE FOR SEBATIK OF THE LIGITAN AND SIPADAN ISLANDS LAWSUIT AND THE AMBALAT SEA BLOCK DISPUTE



Map 2. Sebatik, Ambalat, Ligitan, Sipadan (Robert Cribb 2010, *Digital atlas of Indonesian history*).

The border between Indonesia and Malaysia in Kalimantan (Borneo) is a legacy from the colonial period, being the outcome of the 1891 Convention between the Netherlands and Great Britain. According to this agreement the northern part of Borneo belonged to Great Britain and the southern part to the Netherlands. With independence, Malaysia became the successor of Great Britain and Indonesia of the Netherlands. As a consequence, in defining their border, especially the land border, both countries had to refer to the 1891 Convention. In that Convention it was agreed upon that the border line ended at the eastern edge of Sebatik Island, so that the sovereignty over the small islands and the area to the East of Sebatik remained unclear. After many years of conflict on the sovereignty over Ligitan and Sipadan, both islands were finally handed over to Malaysia by the decision of ICJ (International Court of Justice) on 17 December 2002. However, the territorial dispute between Indonesia and Malaysia did not completely stop after the Ligitan and Sipadan lawsuit. It was followed by a political escalation because of the Ambalat maritime dispute in 2005 (Arsana 2005; Patmasari et al. 2008). Ambalat is not an island but a marine area/block to the east of Borneo with the coordinates of

118°15'21" - 118°51'15" E and 2°34'7" - 3°47'50" N, also known as Block ND6 and ND7. If these coordinate are accurate, Ambalat covers a distance of 65 km from south to north and of 135 km from west to east. This also means that the block is situated below the border line crossing Sebatik Island (Arsana 2005).

Map 2 clearly shows the strategic importance of Sebatik as it faces and is closest to the disputed Ambalat. As to the case of the "lost" islands, Indonesia argued that they were part of Indonesia since they were located south of the continuation of the border which divides Sebatik Island. Patmasari et al. (2008) therefore suggests that the Ligitan and Sipadan case shows the crucial position of Sebatik with the consequence that the Indonesian government should pay more serious attention to it.

PEOPLE - STATE NEGOTIATION

The "loss" of the Ligitan and Sipadan islands and the conflict over Ambalat opened a new phase in the relation between the state and the borderland(er)s. The government had become aware that issues like sovereignty, security, and pride to belong to a nation state, have their reflects in its borderlands such as Sebatik Island. The borderlanders are therefore expected to be the gatekeepers for their nation-state sovereignty.

In 2005 President Yudhoyono visited Sebatik Island. After him came other important government officials. In 2008 for example, the celebration of Indonesia's Independence Day in Sebatik was led for the first time by one of the government's ministers, the Minister for Youth and Sports (*Menteri Pemuda dan Olahraga*), Adhyaksa Dault. In 2009 when the conflict with Malaysia became more and more serious, culminating in some incidents when Malaysia's warships were regarded trespassing Indonesia's territory in Ambalat, President Yudhoyono stated "*Daulat Ambalat Harga Mati*" (Our sovereignty over Ambalat is the bottom line) (Kompas 3 June 2009). This statement had a large effect in Sebatik. Many people in Sebatik in interviews as well as in informal conversation repeated the statement again and again. Apparently their pride as Sebatik borderlanders close to Ambalat was very much triggered by the President's statement. Some youth organizations in Sebatik actively supported the state's programs. Some events that might be categorized as nationalist projects were arranged by the organizations or embraced as springing from their own initiative. Nationalist and patriotic slogans were spreading all over the Indonesian half of Sebatik Island

However, the euphoria over nationalist projects did not directly bring significant changes for the island. The people are still living under conditions of poor infrastructures, problems of poverty, and dependence on Malaysia for their living. On one occasion the people expressed their disappointment by saying, "Everyone has come to Sebatik except Satan and the angels!" meaning that all the official visits had not changed anything for the Sebatiks. More concrete critique was ventured by the village head of Haji Kuning, Pak Zainuddin (47 years old) (see Footnote 2). He said:

Actually if it is said that we are about to take up arms against Malaysia, ... that may be just politics, while we are here living in peace and keep good relations with them, for our life here depends on Malaysia. It remains for the Indonesian Government to decide how to offer facilities instead of creating barriers. The *ringgit* cannot simply be eliminated either, for it is basically just like in Jakarta where you can also pay with American dollars. The most important thing is the future of our fellow citizens who find themselves in the frontline. For it is uncertain whether the *rupiah* can be brought back to life and the *ringgit* be made hated [...].

In this way Pak Zainuddin described the real situation in Sebatik Island very accurately. The relationship with Malaysia, for example, cannot only be viewed in terms of “us” versus “them”, as is suggested when people talk about national identity. The most important point raised by the interview is how the central government may improve life at the border, since that is the real life people there lead. It would be illusive to measure their nationalism only from their using the *ringgit* in daily life. The way Pak Zainuddin mockingly compared the *ringgit* in Sebatik with the dollar in Jakarta while people never bother to question Jakarta’s nationalism, is indeed ironic. This is the situation that Donnan and Haller (2000: 8) described, when they argued that a focus on borders can show how citizens relate to their nation-state in which loyalties are competing and multiple identities are managed on a daily basis, especially when there are economic disparities between two neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia in their border areas. Transnational relations do not preclude nationalism or loyalty to one’s state. In another interview the interviewee firmly stated that the Sebatik borderlanders do not need special lessons (from the state) to teach them how to defend the land in case of open warfare between Indonesia and Malaysia triggered by the Ambalat territorial dispute: “We are born here, live here, and maybe we will die here. No need to teach us how to defend ourselves. It is our land. We know how to defend our rights and our pride”.

Support for the interests of the state vs. resistance, or more exactly critique against the state, is not the only perspective to view the situation in Sebatik. The two different attitudes cannot be easily considered either as the one showing loyalty and the other disloyalty. They might be viewed as part of a negotiation process by the local people to attract more attention in dealing with the state. Das and Poole (2004: 7) said that borderlands are also locations where people can employ and play with the rhetoric of the state with the intention to fulfil their own local aims. A construction of a border marker in Haji Kuning that was inaugurated on the 64th celebration of Indonesia’s Independence Day may serve as an illustration.

Particularly noteworthy was that the plan to construct the new border marker only two meters away from the state’s original border marker and its inauguration ceremony did not come from the Government but from the borderlanders themselves, as various people there told us. A wide cross-section of the population attended the ceremony, in which the role of the state apparatus – in the form of locally stationed troops and formally appointed

leaders – was limited to that of supportive bystanders. They acted as the people's supportive agents in their determination to declare the applicability of Indonesia's sovereignty in the region. In this way, the ceremony was significant as a local-grounded bottom-up undertaking, rather than as a top-down process. Indeed, the ceremony was led and guarded by military officers so that it could have been considered a military affair. However, the ceremony was considered a civil one since the inscription on the monument was signed by a local civilian, namely Haji Herman, a successful Buginese entrepreneur and well-known informal leader in Sebatik, who also delivered the official speech.

The impression evoked by the event was that the existence of the border marker itself was part of the people's appropriation of the state's power for their own local purposes. The fact that the people have tight relations with Malaysia but at the same time cannot politically embrace Malaysian identity, makes them aware that Indonesia is the only country in which they are able to identify themselves as citizens. The possibility of daily transnational movement does not imply absolute freedom. The people cannot just move and "disappear" to the other side after having crossed the border. They have to submit to the strict control of the two states when it comes to permanent immigration, which is illegal. Discrimination experienced in trading with Malaysia, and for instance the fact that even after several years of residence in Malaysia without the authorities ever issuing a proper Identity Card were some of the bad experiences with Malaysian officials people talked about. As the reactions were comparable to those described by Sahlins in relation to the border between France and Spain in the Pyrenees: "states did not simply impose the boundary or the nation on local society," but it was rather the other way around, local society bringing "the nation into the village" (Sahlins 1989: 276). So, instead of resisting the state's policies whose aim it was to turn Sebatik Island into a "front gallery" for the state's sovereignty in the borderland and especially with regard to Ambalat, there was a localized process by which conceptualizations of and relationship to mechanisms of state control [we]re articulated, reaffirmed, resisted, and manipulated (Donnan and Wilson 2003: 9). The inscription on the border marker that stated "*Kokohkan Merah Putih di Tapal Batas*" (Consolidate the Red and White Flag on the Border) strongly conveyed how the Sebatiks agreed to use the vernacular of the state and transform what it meant for the state to correspond to their local objectives.

Another example of such use of the rhetorics of the state for their local political interests is the Sebatik proposal to the central government in Jakarta in 2010 for "territorial administrative reform" (*pemekaran wilayah*). In this proposal that the need for territorial reform of Sebatik Island is emphasized, with the argument that that would enable the population to become more active participants and guardians in case the conflict over Ambalat would change into open warfare. The Sebatik people are willing to be the gatekeepers for the state's sovereignty. However, although a year has passed now, they are still waiting for the central government's decision on Sebatik's administrative

status. A factor contributing to this delay is the government's decision to postpone evaluation of similar reforms in the whole of Indonesia. Yet the power of the state is still invoked by the local people in various ways. The question remains how long the Sebatiks (and other people in Indonesia's border areas) still have to wait for improvement of their living conditions.

CONCLUSION

The situation in the Sebatik Island borderland is characterized by the interdependent relation with Malaysia in terms of long-standing economic and cultural ties. The situation has changed a bit since the territorial disputes over Ligitan and Sipadan Islands and the Ambalat block. The Indonesian state became (more) present in the island with its discourse on sovereignty and security of the state's territory. However, the presence of the state hasn't effected in significant changes in the lives of the people. Therefore, in dealing with the situation the people of Sebatik Island showed various responses, ranging from support to critique. However, in the end the people chose to embrace the state's interests by appropriating its rhetoric and localizing them as a form of negotiation for improving their lives.

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Letnan Tony, 24 years, a commander of Pos Pam Perbatasan Indonesia - Malaysia (Yonif 613/RJA), 14 August 2009.

Interview with Mama Hamra, 54 years, Indonesian settler in Malaysia's Sungai Melayu, 15 August 2009.

Interview with Mappangara, 44 years, owner of the house in Haji Kuning, 14 August 2009.

Interview with Zainuddin, 47 years, the village head of Haji Kuning, 16 August 2009.

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