



Undoing ‘marginality’: The islands of the Mahakam Delta, East Kalimantan (Indonesia)



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Abstract The islands in the delta of the Mahakam River in East Kalimantan have for a very long time been of little interest to anybody. It was a hostile environment for human settlement, exploitable resources were limited and nobody could think of options for alternative forms of land use. The area was classified as ‘marginal or empty land’.

Things started to change dramatically in the 1990’s when the development of shrimp ponds became an attractive option. Land covered with forests of *nipa* palms and mangrove trees could be converted into highly profitable shrimp ponds. The demand for shrimps was booming and the delta was a kind of new frontier without any government control. Buginese fishermen and investors started to convert the landscape into extensive shrimp ponds. The financial crisis in Southeast Asia at the end of the 1990’s made the export of shrimps in dollars from Indonesia even more profitable because of the enormous inflation of the country’s currency. Over the years new settlements were constructed and informal forms of land rights were established. The spirit of ‘regional autonomy’ after the fall of President Suharto in 1998 contributed to this development.

The discovery in the delta of new fields full of oil and natural gas brought new and powerful actors into the area. As a result of competing claims over land and resources, the formerly ‘marginal and empty lands’ became highly contested. At present the provincial government is trying to take control over the delta islands but the gap between formal and informal forms of management is not easy to overcome.

The article is based on recent field research in the area as part of the East Kalimantan Project within the framework of research collaboration between Indonesia and the Netherlands.

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Introduction

In November 2010, just before the start of an international conference about the Mahakam River and watershed the

provincial government of East Kalimantan published a press release stating that it had for a long time not given sufficient attention to the islands of the Mahakam Delta. Though it was still officially classified as state forest land, the heavy resource conflicts between local and external fishermen, between shrimp pond owners and an oil company and numerous other stakeholders required serious attention. In addition

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it was also recognized that a 'new reality' had been created in the area beyond just being 'state forest land'. Numerous migrants had settled in the area, opening the mangrove and nipa forests in order to establish shrimp ponds and 'Jakarta' had issued a mining concession to a French company. Local level bureaucrats had made use of the wave decentralization after the fall of President Suharto in May 1998 to issue a variety of documents stating ownership of the land and local recourses irrespective of the lack of agreement from higher level officials, let alone from the central government. Many of them were not even aware of the events happening in the area. The effects of years of neglect of administrative attention came out in the open as a result of numerous conflicts some of which were taken to court. But a large international and interdisciplinary research project certainly played a crucial role in raising awareness about this resource frontier. It was time for change according to high provincial officials. In the course of the following year the governor of the province installed a special body to manage the Mahakam Delta and launched his 'Save the Mahakam Delta' programme. Total E&P Indonesia, the mining company operating in the area was quick to announce its contribution as part of its Corporate Social Responsibility.

What exactly had happened in the Mahakam Delta that provoked this reaction? Why had a neglected area of swampy islands at the mouth of a river, creating a hostile environment for human settlement, been turned into a highly contested area?

In this paper we will discuss the changing perspectives on the islands in the Mahakam Delta, and how their status as marginal islands as the edge of Indonesia's social and economic life has changed into an area with serious resource conflicts.¹

Land classification: delta islands as 'sleeping land'

Indonesia is a large island state in Southeast Asia comprising more than 17,000 islands. All types of islands are to be found in the archipelago which could be differentiated on the basis of size, geology, flora and fauna, and island cultures. Within the enormous body of biological and socio-cultural knowledge on the country's islands relatively little attention is paid to delta islands. Most of the islands in the country are formed by processes of volcanic activity or geological movements of plates and shields. Others are formed by elevated coral reefs. In fact not many rivers in Indonesia actually have extended delta's with the exception of some large rivers on the south coast of Papua, the east coast of Sumatra, and some rivers on Kalimantan, as the Indonesian part of Borneo is generally called. In the case of delta's there is usually a gradual transition from lowland and peat swamp forests towards these delta islands which are formed as a result of deposits of mud taken by the flow of the river from upstream areas and the tidal movements. The

¹ The paper is based on our involvement in the East Kalimantan Programme, a large research cooperation between the Royal Academy of Sciences in the Netherlands (KNAW) The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), and the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), 2006–2012. The EKP programme involved numerous research institutions from both countries. Gerard Persoon was one of supervisors while this programme, while Rikardo Simarmata was a PhD student who successfully defended his PhD dissertation in December 2012.

islands are usually overgrown by mangroves and nipa palms, and they have a typical kind of flora and fauna. The islands grow towards the sea while the channels or rivers in between them may vary greatly in depth as a result of the hydraulic dynamics between the discharge of the river and the tidal movement (MacKinnon, 1996; Tomascik, 1997). Because of the fact that there are very low and that they regularly overflow the islands are usually sparsely populated. In spite of their ecological dynamics they are usually referred to as 'empty land' or *lahan tidur*, 'sleeping land'.

In land use classification systems there is usually a category referring to areas which are apparently of little use. Their names are indicative for their limited value in terms of prevailing perceptions of land use. These lands are referred to by terms as 'marginal', 'empty', 'underutilized', or 'unproductive'. In some cases countries have developed specific terms to indicate these types of land. In the Philippines an often used term is 'idle' as in the case of 'idle grasslands'. Indonesia has both used the term 'empty' land, *lahan kosong* as well as 'sleeping' land, *lahan tidur*.² These terms refer to a dominant perception of seeing productive, cultivated land as the 'real' destination of land. So a wilderness area was considered as land 'waiting' to be cultivated. Many types of lands are classified as marginal lands. These include swamps, mangrove forests, degraded grasslands, or areas with extended dry periods and without any opportunities to exploit its resources. Delta islands in Indonesia were usually also classified as being marginal until relatively recent.

There are various reasons why land may be considered as marginal. It may refer to particular bio-physical characteristics, including low soil fertility, poor drainage, soil salinity or soil shallowness. It may however also refer to completely different characteristics. Land may be marginal because of its geographical location at great distances of markets or centres of economic and agricultural activities. In some cases low historical population density or restrictive tenure arrangements may be the reason why the land was never converted into productive land uses (Wiegeman et al., 2008; Snelder, 2012).

Undoing marginality

For a variety of reasons this marginality can be undone. Interest in new land for cultivation of crops is at present a major cause of conversion of marginal lands into other land use types. This is caused by the high demand for food crops, grazing lands for cattle as well as for the production of biofuel crops, such as oil palms, and jatropha. This demand is a driving force in converting marginal lands of various types into productive lands.

New infrastructure (roads, railways, hydropower dams, harbour facilities) can lead to the integration of isolated areas into mainstream socio-economic activities because of increased accessibility. The same holds for new technology as a result of which new frontiers of resources extraction can be created such as in the case of new mining techniques. Often political decisions redefine the marginal status of certain areas. In some cases border lands, which were for a long time at the edge of

² In the Netherlands a specific term was used to indicated uncultivated land, it was referred to as *onland*, or 'unland', meaning 'not really land' because it was not cultivated.

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