

**Refereed article**

## **At the Capitalist Frontier: Changing the Riverine Ethnic Identity in Central Kalimantan**

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### **Summary**

Ethnic identity has long been a contested issue in Kalimantan, the home island of the Dayak in Indonesia. This paper draws on fieldwork in a Dayak Murung village to trace the evolution of Dayak ethnic identity – understood as a process of transformation through encounter – in response to successive waves of territorialisation for the purposes of resource extraction, as occurring from the Dutch colonial period to the present day. I use the concept of ‘frontier assemblages’ to explore the process of transforming ‘wilderness’ to extractive landscapes and simplifying the meaning and value within the space. In the frontier landscape, encounters with the globalised commodity economy, state territorialisation, colonial and state-imposed changes to religious beliefs and practices, and changing riverine landscapes are all reconfiguring Dayak Murung identities and undermining their traditional cosmology. Political decentralisation – which had seemed to offer a way forwards for a broader-based ethnic political mobilisation around the key issue of access to resources – is used by the Dayak elite to consolidate their power. Using feminist Political Ecology, the paper uncovers the complex interplay of power relations between state actors, the extractive companies and local elites. Therewith it explores the intersectionality of Dayak Murung everyday resistance, especially how those concerned contest and subvert the dominant extractivist powers.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, frontier, extractivism, coal, resistance, feminist political ecology

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## Introduction

Ethnic identity has long been a contested issue in Kalimantan, the home island of the Dayak ethnic group in Indonesia. The province of Central Kalimantan was created in 1957, carved out of the existing province of South Kalimantan in order to give the Dayak in Kalimantan a home (Klinken 2006, 27). Similarly with Kaharingan as spirituality, the worldview of the Dayak – as embedded in their ethnicity and customs – is an arena of contestation in dealing with the oppression of the state regarding the local religion under authoritarian governments. It was strategically categorised by the Indonesian government as an offshoot of Hinduism, and as such is commonly referred to as ‘Hindu Kaharingan’ (Baier 2007, 173). However, the reconfiguration of ethnic identity is intertwined with political economy and landscape change over time.

Ethnicity assumed a more prominent role in national life and political discourse after the fall of Soeharto, and, specifically in 1999, involved the transfer of power to the provincial and district levels. In Central Kalimantan, Dayak elites demanded that the governor of the province should be a Dayak (Aspinall 2011, 298). This goal was achieved when Agustin Teras Narang, a Ngaju Dayak, was elected governor for the period 2005–2015. Also, in response to pressure from local Dayak elites, Murung Raya was created as a new ‘Dayak’ district, separate from North Barito District (of which it had been a part).

This paper explores evolving ethnic identity in Central Kalimantan in the context of changing economy and frontier landscapes, opening up areas of natural-resource exploitation for the global market. This has entailed an ongoing process of state territorialisation, whereby customary forest is classified as ‘state forest’. This provides an institutional framework for the state to grant permits for logging, mining and oil-palm plantations, under the guise of development projects. As of December 2018, there are 438 mining concessions in Central Kalimantan (ESDM Propinsi Kalteng 2019). In interview with JATAM, a national leading non-governmental organisation, it was mentioned that there are 215 coal-mining concessions covering a total of 1,517,603 hectares in Central Kalimantan.<sup>1</sup> These extractive concessions grant licence holders rights of control and access over *adat* (‘customary’) forest, in order to dig up sub-bituminous coal to supply global-market demand. Located in the remote upriver landscape and containing an abundance of natural resources, Murung Raya District has become a frontier of resource extraction (Geiger 2009, 33), as a mean of capitalist frontier-making (Tsing 2003, 5100). Since the 1970s, extractive projects promoted as development ones have brought physical infrastructure to the district, transformed the landscape, and accelerated far-reaching social change. Engulfed by the advancing capitalist

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1 Interview on 20 March 2020.

frontier, the lives and identity of the Dayak Murung are becoming ever more interconnected with and dependent on the extractive economy.

The process of decentralisation after 1999 was hoped to strengthen the political voice of Dayak, and was dominated by Dayak elites based in the provincial and district capitals. However, decentralisation also created a new terrain for indigenous people to negotiate and contest access to and control over resources (Henley and Davidson 2008, 833). In 2013, the Indigenous Peoples' Alliance of the Archipelago (Aliansi Masyarakat adat Nusantara, AMAN) won a case filed at the Constitutional Court in Jakarta to review chapters in the Forestry Act No 41/1999 (Rachman and Siscawati 2016, 238). By 'The Constitutional court decision Number 35/PUU-X/2012' (known as 'MK35'), *adat* forests were no longer included in the category of 'state forest'. This ruling recognises indigenous people (Masyarakat Hukum Adat) as rights-holders and indigenous territorial owners (Rachman 2014, 30). In Kalimantan, MK35 became a milestone in the revival of the *adat* organisations which upheld customary laws and strengthened the demand for recognition of *adat* laws and territories. The dominations of elites using ethnic politics made the challenge to *adat* forests' recognition more complex (Aspinal 2011, 291). Still, 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott 1986, 22) and 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 2000, 545) were part of these political struggles over access to resources.

This article draws on ethnographic field research over the period of six months in 2019–2020, when I lived with the Dayak Murung inhabitants of Sungai Murung<sup>2</sup> village in Murung Raya. I use a Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) lens which focusses on human and more-than-human relations alongside the concept of 'frontier assemblages' to explore resource extraction along the Lalang River and how this is shaped by, and contributes to, the reconfiguration of ethnic identity, and vice versa. I start by showing how, historically, frontier-making was driven by colonial expansion, state formation and expanding global demand for commodities. Then, I examine how the Dayak's ethnic identity is bound up with their relations with the river ecosystems, giving rise to what I term 'riverine ethnic identities'. I reflect on how frontier-making and resource extraction are undermining these relations, driving a wedge between humans and the more-than-human in the surrounding natural environment. I describe how the Dayak Murung are deploying their riverine ethnic identity as a 'tool' in the struggle to maintain access to customary forest resources through multidimensional forms of resistance. Thus, I argue, ethnicity is not an inert category but is undergoing a process of transformation through encounter within changing political economy and ecological relations. Ethnicity is one of the core dynamics and the most complex aspect of such frontier assemblages.

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2 The names of the village and the river have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.

## Understanding ethnic-identity configuration and frontier assemblages

Ethnicity in Kalimantan is not a given, nor is it a neutral category of difference. The social origin of the ‘Dayak’ dates from the end of the nineteenth century and is rooted in European colonialism. The colonial authorities coined the term ‘Dayak’ to distinguish non-Muslim people from the interior of Kalimantan from Muslim Malays living in lowland coastal areas (Cleary 1996, 19; Sillander and Alexander 2016, 97). At the beginning they named themselves after the rivers, for example Oloh Kahayan, Kapuas, Barito, Katingan and so on. ‘Oloh’ means ‘people’. ‘Oloh Kahayan’ means ‘people from the Kahayan River area’ (Mahin 2009, 119). In Murung Raya, this custom manifests in the naming of the ‘Murung Dayak’ – which means Dayaks who live in the Murung River watershed. ‘Dayak’ was thus a disparaging term, used by the colonial occupiers to describe people of the interior of Borneo with connotations of backwardness and primitiveness (Grossman et al. 2017, 14).

Three Dayak ethnic groups make up the majority of the population in Murung Raya district: the Murung, who are settled on the banks of rivers; the Siang, who live inland, away from the river (Harrington 2014, 42); and the Bakumpai, who originate from South Kalimantan. Thus, initially the identity of these ethnic groups is determined by their place of origin. The social relations among Dayaks are moulded by their relations to nature, meaning rivers and forests, through the co-configuration of local customs and belief practices, settlement patterns and livelihood strategies. In the contemporary world, Dayaks are encountering changes in political economy and landscape. This gives rise to a diversity which belies the simplistic labelling of all these different ethnic groups as ‘Dayak’. Thus, ‘ethnicity is a process of transformation through encounter’ (Sillander 2016, 113) which encompasses political, social, cultural and psychological dimensions (Brubaker 2002, 167). In this sense, ethnic identity in Kalimantan (as elsewhere) can only be understood to result from processes from ‘above’ and ‘below’. What happens at the micro level is as important for the configuration of ethnic identity as the broader political context (Brubaker 2002, 170; Sillander 2016, 113).

I use, as noted, the concept of frontier assemblages (Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 11) to understand events and processes which have shaped the reconfiguration of Dayak ethnicity since colonial times and continue to do so in contemporary Indonesia. I explore frontier-making across time and place as ‘a process of radically simplifying the meanings of a space to, primarily, the things valued within it. This simplification implies that the relationship between resources and spaces is anything but incidental’ (Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 12). I examine the materiality, actors, cultural logics, spatial dynamics, ecologies and political-economic processes finding themselves intertwined in the production of particular places – each with its own unique characteristics – on the resource frontier (Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 2). What Tsing (2003) calls the ‘capitalist frontier’ transforms

wilderness into a productive landscape, taking advantage of this ‘opening full of promise’ for states, extractive companies and interested actors. Under the capitalist frontier, landscape change is intertwined with the reconfiguration of ethnic identity.

Finally, in examining the power relations entangled and imposed in the process of frontier assemblages and the reconfiguration of ethnicity, I adopt the concerns of FPE to consider how the changes to the landscape and relations between humans and the more-than-human are also affecting gender relations, understood as intersecting with other aspects of social identity (Crenshaw 1991; Elmhirst 2015; Colfer et al. 2018). In focussing on the political significance of the mundane actions of people’s everyday lives (Jenkins 2017; Mollett 2017; Jonsson et al. 2021), FPE also directs attention to the ways in which indigenous people live around the forest and how they are resisting encroachment on their rights of access and control (Rachman and Siscawati 2016, 233). These multidimensional forms of everyday resistance (Scott 1986; Johanson and Vintangen 2014) include a form of the aforementioned quiet encroachment of the ordinary as a subaltern urban politic in a globalising world. Brought together, these conceptual frameworks provide the tools for understanding the complex interplay of power relations between actors and extractive companies, and enable exploration of how the Dayak Murung, in their intersectional relations, incorporate everyday resistance so as to contest and subvert the dominant powers of extractivism.

## From colonial to capitalist frontier

Remoteness is a key feature of frontier landscapes (Geiger 2009, 3), as is the case in Murung Raya – where the journey from the provincial capital Palangka Raya to the Lalang River can take more than 15 hours, and requires three different modes of transport. In frontier landscapes, geographical remoteness is combined with economic potential for human exploitation (Geiger 2009, 8; Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 12). Roads are signifiers of frontier-making, simultaneously reducing remoteness and making the landscape accessible for exploitation. In Murung Raya, an 80-kilometre-long road serves as a spectacular symbol of development and accumulation used for transporting logs and coal onwards, opening up marginal lands to various forms of extraction and control (Choi 2019, 147).

Frontier assemblages are dynamic. In Murung Raya, *adat* forests were first transformed into the family holding of rubber plantations, then to the logging concessions. The rivers were places of livelihood, but now equipped to serve their new function as a means of transporting logs. Today, only a few of these logging concessions remain in operation. In November 2020, I visited a family who are charged with maintaining an abandoned log pond and taking care of the old, decay-heavy, rusty logging machines. All the property is still owned by the logging company; it has now left the area, however, and moved to another district. Now this area is surrounded by mining concessions. I see these relics of bygone resource

extraction as markers of stop and expand, and evidence of the permanent reconfiguration of the frontier landscape (Geiger 2009; Rasmussen and Lund 2017, 13).

As the above example illustrates, frontier landscapes are spaces under ‘overlapping rule’ (Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 15), where multiple interests intervene and compete for control – a process which is steered by the intervention of the state. In 1967, at the start of the Soeharto regime, the Indonesian state passed a series of laws designed to centralise power and boost economic growth, including the Foreign Investment Act 1967, Forestry Act 1967 (later replaced by the Forestry Act 1999); Mining Act 1967 (replaced by the Mining and Coal Act 2009, and the Mining and Coal Act 2020) and National Investment Act 1968. These acts reclassified *adat* forests as state forest and gave the state the power to grant concessions for extraction of timber or coal from areas of customary forest. These concessions authorised private companies to exclude and displace indigenous peoples from these areas, through the process known in Indonesia as *negaraisasi* (‘state-isation’) (Rachman 2014, 29). *Adat* forests were transformed into what Vandergeest and Peluso call ‘political forests’ (1995, 2015), as part of efforts by the Indonesian state to promote the territorialisation of all forest lands.

Political forests and territorialisation are not new phenomena in Indonesia. In 1870, the colonial Dutch East Indies published the ‘Domain Verklaring’, which established the principle that all land in the colony without proven ownership rights belonged to the state (Henley and Davidson 2008; Hauser-Schäublin 2013; Van Vollenhoven 2013). The colonial government acknowledged the existence of *adat* forests and law (*adat rechtskringen*), but these were not considered to confer property rights and were subservient to the Western law enshrined in the Civil Code. Thus indigenous inhabitants had no legal defence when their land was taken from them to meet the global-market demand for spices and agricultural products towards the end of the nineteenth century (De Jong et al. 2017, 333). The village head of Sungai Murung village told a story from his grandfather about how rubber trees were introduced to the area by Dutch officials (March 2019). Around the turn of the century, these officials came to the village and ordered the community to cultivate rubber in the forest alongside the Lalang and Murung Rivers. Rubber as a socionatural commodity (Peluso 2012, 18) subsequently became established as a successful commercial crop in the area. It was widely planted after Indonesia’s independence in 1945, and continues to be cultivated by local farmers alongside fruit trees in forest gardens (i.e. mixed agroforestry plots) known as *kebun*, where a few more than 50-years-old rubber trees can also still be seen.

The introduction of rubber ushered in profound changes affecting the landscape, economy and lifestyles of local people. Previously the Murung had practised swidden agriculture on plots known as *ladang* and identified themselves as *peladang* (‘smallholders’). With the widespread establishment of family-holder rubber plantations (*kebun karet*), many Murung assumed a dual identity: as

*peladang* but now also as rubber tappers (*pemantat*). These family-holder rubber plantations also introduced land ownership and accumulation into the area, as well as new forms of work discipline, the division of labour and the cash economy, laying the basis for the formation of social classes (Dove 2011, 73–99). To accommodate the rubber plantations, the rotational cycle of the *ladang* was truncated from five-to-seven years to two-to-three, after which the land was given over to rubber cultivation. The subsistence economy based on the *ladang* enabled the rubber-based cash economy to flourish.

Thus rubber was the driver of colonial frontier-making, and the related market was at the core of the first frontier assemblage in Murung Raya, leading to the co-constitution of new ecologies, landscapes, economies and ways of life. However, the colonial frontier shaped the Murung's Dayak identity mainly because the introduction of rubber was accompanied by a forced change in the Murung's belief systems from Kaharingan to Christianity. Sang,<sup>3</sup> the head of the village consultative body (Badan Perwakilan Desa, BPD), recalled how the introduction of rubber came along with the obligation to follow this Western religion – initially as a means of consolidating Dutch rule and overcoming the resistance of Murung leaders. Thus while rubber was transforming the economy and the landscape, Christianity was changing the Murung's imaginary of the world and ushering in new ways through which people related to nature: namely, the earlier-mentioned riverine ethnic identity.

Often commodities have a restricted life cycle (Cons and Eilenberg 2019, 11), but rubber proved very durable and has continued to play an important role in the local economy even into the beginning of the present century. According to Mama Sri,<sup>4</sup> a rubber farmer, the price thereof peaked in 2010, about 65 years after the end of the colonial period. In the postcolonial era, with the logging-industry decline before coal mining's arrival, rubber has been an important source of income. A Murung woman told me of the unforgettable 'golden year' of 2010, when the price of gum rubber was 1.1 euros per kilogram, the best price ever. Everyone was looking for rubber to sell. Using the proceeds of her rubber sales, she was able to take her family on holiday to Jakarta and Central Java. However, the boom was over after only a few months and, since then, the price of rubber has fallen steadily – reaching 0.35 euros per kg in March 2020. The Murung abandoned their rubber trees and *kebun*. Coal mining arrived as the next global commodity to reconfigure the frontier landscape (Rasmussen and Lund 2017, 393).

Coal mining entered the Murung area in the year 2000, and has given impetus to the next round of capitalist frontier-making to serve the global hunger for fossil fuels – when, once again, consumers on the other side of the world remain ignorant of how the resources they consume are 'traumatically produced' (Tsing 2003, 5001). The colonial frontier did not disappear, but was merely integrated. The coal

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3 Interview on 24 November 2019.

4 Interview on 10 December 2019.

has provided materiality for the next wave of frontiers – both land and labour – and their integration into the global market; they are thus overlapping frontiers.

### **Commodity extraction and capitalist frontier-making**

Increasing global demand for food and natural resources is a key driver of the configuration of the capitalist frontier (De Jong et al. 2017). Following independence, the new Indonesian state embraced the colonial territorialisation programme, both in spirit and practice (Peluso and Lund 2011, 673). The legal measures implemented to facilitate the granting of coal and mining concessions mentioned above were accompanied by an intensification of boundary-mapping and development projects (Rasmussen and Lund 2017, 393). Under Soeharto, most forested areas in Indonesia were registered as state forests under the control of the Forestry Ministry. The colonial government was gone, but the assemblage of the frontier under the New Order meant that it remained present in spirit – as a manifestation of the coloniality of power (Mignolo 2007, 156).

As explained above, frontier assemblages incorporate multiple dimensions of change, including political shifts, evolving patterns of resource extraction, infrastructure development, the reconfiguration of landscapes and economies, and the presence of new actors. Table 1 below is a schematic representation of how frontier assemblages along the Lalang River have overlapped and become intertwined over time. Rubber slowly gives way to logging and then coal; river transportation is augmented by road construction; and the landscape fragments into a complex overlapping mosaic of logging and mining concessions, *kebun*, *ladang* and the remnants of *adat* forests. The logging and mining companies are powerful new actors in the area, who transform the rivers into transport infrastructure and who are cooperating in the development of the growing road network which is spreading across the landscape. Since 2000 the old logging road, owned by the responsible company, has been widened to three times its original size to accommodate vehicles of the mining company transporting coal from source to stockpiles on the banks of the Barito River. The roads owned by logging and mining companies in the area between the Lalang and Barito Rivers now have a total length of around 270 kilometres.

**Table 1: The dynamics of frontier assemblages in different times and spaces in the Sungai Murung village and villages along the Lalang River**

	Colonial period (1800–1945)	Postcolonial period	
		Centralisation period (1967–1998)	Decentralisation period (1999 to present)
Commodities	Rattan, timber, amber and illipe nuts, and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs); rubber introduced from ca. 1900	Timber, rubber	Coal, timber, rubber
Infrastructure	The river	River, road, log pond, camps	Expanded road network, river, stockpiles, camps
Political structures	Dutch colonial government	Centralised Indonesian state government	Shift towards decentralisation
Family	Extended family ( <i>rumah betang</i> )	Extended family and nuclear family	Nuclear family
Religion	Kaharingan, Christianity introduced from ca. 1900	Christianity on the increase; introduction of Hindu Kaharingan	Christianity is the dominant religion
Economic structures	Subsistence economy based on collecting of NTFPs and on <i>ladang</i> . Introduction of rubber starts transition to a dual economy ( <i>ladang</i> and <i>pemantat</i> )	Expanding extractives economy (timber); in the communities: dual economy transitioning to wage-labour economy	Dominant extractives economy (coal and timber); in the communities: increasing consumerism and growing reliance on wage labour with dual economy persisting
Actors	Community, <i>adat</i> authorities, colonial government	Community, <i>adat</i> authorities, immigrants and settlers, Indonesian state government agencies, timber companies	Community, decentralised government agencies dominated by Dayak elite, immigrants and settlers, mining and timber companies, land brokers (controlled by Dayak elite)
Landscapes	<i>Adat</i> forest, <i>ladang</i> , riverine villages; <i>kebun</i> from ca. 1900	<i>Adat</i> forest, <i>ladang</i> , <i>kebun</i> , timber concessions	Timber and coal concessions with diminishing <i>adat</i> forest, <i>ladang</i> , and <i>kebun</i> ; roadside villages; increasing waste and water scarcity

These ‘private’ roads have a hybrid function, supporting capitalist frontier-making not only by transporting commodities for the corporations but also by connecting local people to markets and facilitating the adoption of a ‘modern’ lifestyle. For villagers, the road is a symbol of development and modernity, and many who used

to live on the river bank have moved to live closer to the road. The latter opens up multiple opportunities to the villagers: to connect with other villages; to trade on local markets; to access public facilities (such as schools, healthcare centres and government offices in villages and the district capital); to transport produce to and from the *ladang* and *kebun*; and to access areas of the forest where they can open up land for new *ladang* and *kebun*. In two of the villages, half of the community decided to uproot and move nearer to the road. This has changed profoundly how the Murung relate to the river. The main road has become the ‘front yard’, and the river is now the ‘backyard’. The road has also opened the door to an influx of consumer goods, as villagers embrace the consumptive lifestyle – purchasing trendy gadgets, electronic goods, sports motorcycles as well as processed food and drink. This new lifestyle creates inorganic waste which accumulates in the landscape and pollutes the river. Food packaging and disposable goods (including diapers) end up in the river, where they join the accumulating sediments and other waste products of logging and coal-mining operations.

After years of logging, forests in the area have been cut down and most of the related companies have moved away, leaving behind a forest in ruins – most of the big trees with bees’ nests are gone. In their place, coal-mining companies have moved in, driving a further reconfiguration of the frontier economy to avert collapse (Cons and Eilenberg 2019). Coal is extracted 24 hours a day from open pits close to the river, on abandoned logging concessions and in customary forests, *ladang* and *kebun* – including in mining-concession areas claimed as state forest.

However, recent political changes have been accompanied by shifting local attitudes towards logging and mining extraction (see Table 1 above). This is especially true since 2000, when decentralisation and the system of direct elections opened up opportunities for local actors to assume leadership positions in district and provincial governments. Many candidates standing for election focussed their campaigns on indigenous peoples’ rights, and especially rights of access to *adat* forests and to compensation from mining companies whose concessions encroach on the latter. Local people received compensation for the first time when the logging road was enlarged to enable transportation of coal and the mining company agreed to pay compensation for destruction of land and trees.

It has since become standard practice for companies to pay compensation when their operations encroach on individually owned land, or on customary forests and other communal land. Decentralisation opens up opportunities for the Murung to claim *adat* forests and force the company to pay for compensation, which further embeds Murung people in the monetary economy. Often, instead of ‘paying compensation’ the company use a practice known as ‘show compassion’ (*tali asih*), by giving ‘gifts’ of money or through the offering of a job with the mining company. Offering *tali asih* is a strategy to avoid the ownership claim of the *adat* forest; thus, the land is considered state forest. By accepting payment, the people are considered to have relinquished their ownership of the land. The massive



later to coal mining. The continuity of frontier assemblages is intertwined with social change on the individual and family scales, shaping Murung identities and relations to nature.

## **Riverine ethnic identities and ever-changing frontier assemblages**

Amidst the changing social, political and ecological dynamics of the frontier assemblage in Central Kalimantan described above, riverine ethnic identities have also undergone a transformation. The Murung's relationship to the river and the forest shapes the way they see the world and react to it. The river was their first encounter in the area, and since then their life rhythm has been shaped by the river ecosystem. The names of villages evoke the river, or refer to a nearby landmark or event. Sungai Murung village is one of the oldest in Laung Tuhup, a subdistrict of Murung Raya. The name of the villages are derived from Murung words, such as: the name of big rattan vines; the river and river tributary; or the name of the tree found growing near the river.

The order of establishing the villages followed the direction the river took heading downstream. The predecessors to today's inhabitants reached the area in a series of migrations across hills and along rivers sequentially, being people looking for a decent area for food cultivation and settlement where they would be safe from Dayak headhunters (Maunati 2004, 64). The river was the main source of clean water, while river fish together with game meat from the forest were the main source of protein. Today, the river water is no longer drinkable, and the Murung have to collect water from creeks – located far from the village – or buy it. Some of the Murung live in floating houses along the river, known as *lanting*. These *lanting* are most often simple structures, consisting of large tree trunks lashed together and with a small hut and pig cage on top. In the morning and the evening, most activities of the Murung – such as bathing, washing clothes and dishes, collecting clean water, mooring the boat and many others besides – take place on the *lanting*. The *lanting* may also be understood as a metaphor for Murung cosmology, as an imaginary bridge between the land and the river – symbolising the relationship between the Murung and the riverine ecosystem on which they depend. This, as noted, I call their riverine ethnic identity.

The forest is the abode of the Murung, in both life and death. They believe that the forest is home to the souls of the dead. It is also the source of livelihood which provides timber, game meat and NTFPs such as rattan, resin and many others. The forest frontier provides access to new areas of land for *ladang* and *kebun* (Fisher and Van der Muur 2020, 63). The villages are surrounded by the forest and, almost invariably, located on the banks of a river, which is (or was until recently) the villagers' 'front yard'. In the past, the Murung lived in longhouses or *rumah betang* which, as in most Dayak settlements, were constructed to lie parallel to the river (Maunati 2004, 178). Living in the longhouses was part and parcel of a way

of life based on commonality, co-operative exchange of labour and shared responsibility for taking care of children, parents and widows. The longhouse symbolised communal life and mutual support within the extended family. However, the last longhouse in Sungai Murung village was abandoned in 1999. This also symbolised the collapse of *rumah betang* as an institution. It marked a shift in which the nuclear family replaced the extended family as the principal social-production unit, a development which has had profound effects on the control, distribution and accumulation of land among community members, as well as giving rise to new areas of contestation over access thereto (Kumoro 2020, 15).

The Murung cosmology is poorly documented. However, there are some similarities to the religious system of the Dayak Siang and Dayak Ngaju. Most of the Siang people live inland, away from the Barito River. They believe that humans and nature were created by Mohotara-Lobata, the supreme deity who split in two: Mohotara rules the upper world while Lobata rules the underworld, ensuring the Earth remains in balance (Harrington 2014, 46). Ngaju people live in the estuary of the Barito River, the Kahayan River; Katingan and Kapuas believe that Ranying Hatalla Langit and Jata Balawang Bulau created humans and the universe, symbolised respectively as hornbill and dragon (Schärer 1963; Mahin 2009). While, as noted, the Murung call their super deity Mohotara-Lobata, it is also mentioned as being the unity of Ranying Hatalla Langit and Jata Belawang Bulau. In colonial times, the Murung were forced, as mentioned, to abandon Kaharingan beliefs and convert to Christianity, a process which accompanied the forced transition from a subsistence (rice-based) economy to a dual economy with the introduction of rubber. Christian doctrine contradicted the Murung belief system, and replaced the multidimensional Kaharingan cosmology with a simple vertical relationship between God 'above' and humans 'below' (Chua 2012, 516).

## **Image 2. A *lanting* on the Lalang River**

After Indonesian independence in 1945, belief in one God was declared to be one of the five pillars of the national ideology, Pancasila. Under the authoritarian government of Soeharto, having more than one God was thus considered an act of defiance against the state (Mahin 2005). In order to be considered equal and avoid state repression, Kaharingan religious and intellectual figures decided to affiliate with Hinduism, after having failed to obtain recognition as a ‘formal religion’ (Schiller 1997, 116; Mahin 2009, 167). This affiliation gave birth to a new religion recognised by the Indonesian state, known as Hindu Kaharingan (Baier 2007). As the official Indonesian version of Hinduism, Kaharingan moves to privilege monotheistic religions which require a singular God. In accordance with this requirement, the male Ranying Hatalla Langit was declared to be God (Mahin 2005, Baier 2007) Central Kalimantan now has the second-largest Hindu population in Indonesia.

Within the Murung cosmology, the *ladang* has a special significance as the site of ‘human–spirit exchange’ (Dove 2011, 309). It is here that rituals are performed to honour the existence of plants and the more-than-human habitats. The cycle of swidden rotation, from forest clearance to harvesting, is accompanied by rituals to prevent disturbances, ensure good harvests and maintain the well-being of family members. The opening up of forest starts with the ceremony of ‘soul exchange’ (*sarodiri*), expressing the Murung’s reciprocal relationship with nature. In this ceremony, figurines of a human couple made of rice flour are placed in the area together with other offerings to persuade the forest-dwelling souls to leave and move on. The principle of reciprocity is central to Dayak cosmology, and ceremonies such as these serve to replenish the mutual well-being of humans and the more-than-human and ensure the sustainability of life over time (Schiller 1997, 38).

The reciprocal relationship with more-than-human is similarly expressed in the rituals which accompany the planting and growing of rice. Rice seed is considered to be a living entity which possesses a soul. At the moment when the seed is planted, the Murung believe it sets out on ‘a sailing journey on the river’. When the soul of the seed feels happy with the rituals it is able to complete the journey and return home to the *ladang* at harvest time with an abundant harvest. Rice rituals also symbolise the collaborative use of land and labour which is an essential part of the swidden system, ensuring an equitable distribution of wealth and a shared commitment to protecting the land (Kumoro 2020, 1).

Like ethnicity, Murung beliefs encounter social and political change. The Murung cosmology started to shift when the colonial encounter introduced a new religion to replace Kaharingan. Most in the Sungai Murung village are Christian. This transition weakened the attachment of the Murung to *adat*, since conformity to the new religion required them to simplify or even abandon some of their rituals – in particular funeral rites and birth rituals, through which *adat* traditions were manifested as maintaining the relationship between human and more-than-human.

In line with the change of belief, the introduction of rubber as a commodity is an important step in starting the Murung's integration with the global market and capitalist system. In the early 1970s, the arrival of logging companies in the area around the Lalang River initiated the process of integrating the Murung into the capitalist frontier. These companies provided a handful of jobs for the Murung and hundreds for other workers, whose arrival in the area stimulated the local economy – therewith exposing the Murung to new cultures, religions and lifestyles too.

In 2000, when the logging industry started to collapse, the mining companies moved in. Mining provides few employment opportunities for locals, since it requires specific skills and a certain level of education while mostly employing young, male graduates too. Opportunities for women are limited to a handful of jobs in administration, laundry work and catering. When there myself in March 2020, around 40 men from Sungai Murung village worked at the nearby mining site but only two women: one in the administrative division and the other in the canteen. Local people are employed in the mine by a subcontractor offering short-term contracts initially for a trial period of three months, which can then be extended to six months and up to no longer than two years. If the subcontractor's contract with the mining company ends, mass lay-offs follow; employment in the mines is, as such, always precarious (Watts 2018, 482).

On the capitalist frontier, logging and mining companies' operations have changed the gendered division and system of labour. The extractive economy is subsidised by *ladang* and *kebun*, as the dual economy of the Murung. The companies pay minimal compensation for occupying customary forest, *ladang* and *kebun* which belong to the Murung. They employ cheap labour which is sustained by the unpaid reproductive and domestic labour of Murung women (Bauhardt 2013, 364; Dunaway 2014, 7). Most of the mine workers from Sungai Murung village are educated young men whose families paid for their education from the proceeds of the dual economy. Men working in the mines have little time or energy for community activities and their absence has created a gap in the political life of the village. Many social and political positions formerly filled by men are now taken up by women, including the church committee and the BPD – both of which are dominated by women. It remains an open question to what extent increased formal representation in these official bodies has given women greater influence over decision-making processes in the village.

In summary, I have shown that under the capitalist frontier the area along the Lalang River is both an ecological and a social space as well as how both aspects change over time. Landscapes are co-constituted with the (re)configuration of riverine ethnic identity. Like landscapes, ethnicity is neither given nor static: '[It is] a dimension of social relationship' (Fenton 2011, 11) in which people affirm their positionality and distinguish themselves from others. It is also a process of transformation by encounter. The ever-changing frontier assemblages shape the reconfiguration of Murung ethnic identity, and vice versa (Sillander 2016, 113).

## Multidimensional resistance on the capitalist frontier

As a dimension of social relationships, ethnicity is not a fixed identity but rather responds to and is intertwined with political and ecological change. To fully understand the Murung's encounters with colonialism and capitalism, I examine the changing colonial and capitalist frontiers through a FPE lens. FPE is interested in politics not simply as affairs of the state; rather, it is concerned with understanding politics in a wider sense, therewith encompassing everyday forms of resistance in which gendered meanings are operationalised at multiple and interconnected sites of struggle over access to resources (Hart 1991, 95; Elmhiirst 2015). The Dayak Misik Movement is a medium for the Murung to contest the power relations of the provincial–national scale, meaning that the resistance arising is multidimensional in nature.

The change in the nature of Indonesian politics initiated following the resignation of Soeharto in 1999 – namely, decentralisation – provided an opportunity for local actors to contest the political and economic dominance of the state. Ethnic identity was mobilised as a powerful tool in related struggles over representation and access to resources (Aspinall 2011, 29), sometimes with violent consequences. This was the case in the ethnic conflict between Dayaks and Madurese which took place in West and Central Kalimantan around the turn of the century (Sillander and Alexander 2016, 97). However, ethnic fragmentation and predatory elites within ethnic political movements have enabled the central government to forge powerful compromises with ethnic leaders, thereby largely maintaining the status quo to date (Aspinall 2011, 291).

In 2013, not long after the Constitutional Court decision (MK35) recognised the rights of indigenous people over customary forests, the Dayak Adat Council of Central Kalimantan set up the Farmers Group Coordination Forum, popularly known as Dayak Misik ('Dayak Wake Up') (Grossman 2019). Dayak Misik was based in Palangkaraya, capital of Central Kalimantan, and led by its founder Siun Jarias, who was the regional secretary under Governor Narang. Dayak Misik opposed the acquisition of *adat* lands by large development projects – meaning not only logging and mining ones but also state-led transmigration projects. At the same time, they called for the central government to grant 5 ha of land to each Dayak family and allocate 10 ha of land in each village to the village forest. To press for these demands to be met, local Dayak Misik organisations were established – including in Murung Raya district, where communities saw affiliation to the Dayak Misik scheme as a promising strategy to advance their struggle for the recognition of their rights of control and access over *adat* forest (Grossman 2019, 11). This was the case in Sungai Murung, where villagers were trying to protest and prevent one of the largest Indonesian coal companies from mining in an area which they claimed as customary forest.

Dayak Misik deploys a dual strategy by acting as a branch of the provincial government while at the same time building up a grassroots movement at the

district level, including in Murung Raya. At the provincial level, in 2008 the government adopted a regulation authorising *adat* leaders to issue 'land ownership letters' (SKTAs) as a means of certifying ownership of customary forest which bypassed the cumbersome and expensive official land-registration process (Setiawan 2017, 77). At the same time, Dayak Misik publicised the benefits of SKTAs in order to recruit new members at the grassroots level, including in Sungai Murung and other villagers along the Lalang River.

Initially, Dayak Misik seemed to offer a way forwards for the ethnic political movement through broad-based electoral mobilisation around the key issue of access to resources (Hart 1991, 95). However, the organisation was too reliant on the support of Dayak elites and top-down decision-making; grassroots mobilisation, meanwhile, was primarily used as a means to consolidate power at the provincial level – to gain 'the political power and resources' (Aspinall 2011, 290). The top-down organisational structure was reproduced at the district and village levels. In the villages along the Lalang River, local Dayak Misik organisations were led by elites, such as the *adat* leader (Damang), the head of the village and members of the BPD. Although Dayak Misik had around 1,200 individual and family members in six villages in the area, the top-down approach made local organisation dependent on the central leadership; this was its undoing. When Jarias failed in his bid to replace Narang as provincial governor and was unable to elicit the support of the new governor, Dayak Misik lost political ground.

However, in everyday life the Murung are facing the power of corporations and local elites over access to and control of resources. The arena for everyday forms of resistance is sustained along the 80-km-long haulage road. The latter is a contested space, over which the state, extractive companies, local people and even animals assert competing claims. Local people make frequent use of the road, sometimes accompanied by their pets or livestock, thereby encroaching on the companies' use of it to deliver logs and coal to the global market. For these companies, the road plays a vital role similar to the veins of the human body. Just as when blood stops flowing metabolism ceases and a person is likely to die, when coal and logs no longer move along the road the companies' most vital functions shut down, since they can no longer deliver goods to the market. In the hugely unequal struggle between them and local people, the road is a weak spot in the company body which the Murung have learned to exploit. The road is where most everyday resistance in all its multidimensionality takes place.

This is illustrated in the following examples, with descriptions taken from my field notes. The following story dates from March 2008, and tells how Tami, a Murung woman, set up a roadblock on the coal haulage road to demand customary compensation (*jipen*) after her dog was run over and killed by a coal truck: Tami, a 43-year-old Murung woman, is standing in the middle of the haulage road, waving her hands and getting the coal trucks to stop. She is wearing the *ladang* 'uniform': T-shirt, long-sleeved jacket and trousers, with a hat on her head and a machete

hanging from her waist. Her dog was accidentally hit by a coal truck. The company promised to pay her compensation, but since then nothing has happened. Tami decided to set up a roadblock on the haulage road. Her action has stopped the trucks (owned by one of the mining company in the area) going to and from the mine. After an hour, there is a long queue of trucks unable to get past. Two hours later, a company representative comes and agrees to pay the compensation.

The second story is about group protests by company employees over transportation issues and better working conditions in 2011: Pundit is 50 years old and Seki is 35 years old, both are male. They are neighbours, and both have experience of working for the mining company. They recount how they participated in several roadblock protests. According to Pundit, villagers are now able to use company infrastructure and facilities such as the road, and the students can catch the bus to go to school because of the protests and roadblocks set up by villagers. Seki, meanwhile, took part in a strike to demand the improvement of transportation facilities for workers and students from the villages along the Lalang River.

The third story was told to me in December 2019, when I visited Ranga<sup>5</sup> in her *kebun* next to the coal haulage road: Ranga, a 47-year-old woman, is in her forest garden, which is about 2.5 km from her village. She is showing me her *kebun*, which she visits once every two days to collect fruit and vegetables to sell. The garden also provides her with staple food, fodder for livestock, medicinal plants, firewood and many other useful products. She shows me the sawang trees along the border of the garden. She explains the sawang are the marker of *adat* land, and no one is allowed to occupy it without her consent. The land is a legacy from her parents, but until 2017 her family were not able to take care of the garden. Now a coal company is interested in acquiring her land, in order to widen the haulage road. The Dayak land broker and her brother, who is the leader in her village, made plans to sell the land to the company on the sly. To prevent this from happening, her family decided to grow food in the *kebun* by cultivating vegetables, corn and cassava, stocking it with pigs and chicken, and occupying it for as long as possible.

The three stories depict events which form part of a multilayered interplay of power relations changing across space and over time. In their daily lives, the Murung navigate a multidimensional web hereof during encounters with the state (from the national to local level), the logging and mining companies, the Dayak elites and with community leaders – all of which are shaped by the intersectional relations community members of kinship, religion, class, gender and age (Crenshaw 1991, Colfer et al. 2018). A focus on gender and intersectionality helps us to understand the complex interactions between multiple actors across different contexts which give rise to, and reconfigure, power structures in the capitalist frontier landscape of the Lalang River. The Murung are caught up in multiple

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5 Names changed for anonymity.

relations of power, domination and submission (Bayat 2000, 534; Johansson and Vingthagen 2014, 423). In response, it is difficult for people to engage in life-long collective action (Scott 1986, 14). However, the kinds of sporadic everyday resistance described above can not only a form of exercising power and be effective in resisting oppression, but may also be creative and transformative (Ortner 1995, 191).

In the experiences of Tami, Pundit, Seki and Ranga, there is no dichotomy between real resistance and incidental activities (Scott 1986, 24). Tami's protest appears incidental but it sets a precedent which has a transformative effect by obliging the companies who operate along the Lalang River to respect local *adat* law on *jipen*. From now on, every single vehicle which hits pets or livestock will be expected to pay this compensation.

Tami uses her body as a roadblock which is able to temporarily stem the flow of 'the veins of the corporation' and forces it to offer *jipen* for the death of her dog. This brings a new dimension to ongoing everyday resistance where, from a FPE perspective, the female body becomes the arena of resistance (Johansson and Vinthagen 2014, 425). By contrast, the everyday resistance of Ranga takes the form of a quiet, feigned ignorance – apart from when, in conversations with her neighbours, she launches into slanderous, mocking attacks on her brother, who, as noted, is also one of the village leaders. By reclaiming *kebun* bordering the haulage road, she is combining formal and incidental resistance against the power of the coal-mining company, its land-broker agents and her brother.

The struggle of Pundit, Seki and the mining workers is a 'negotiation' over expanding their living space, gaining access to the road and vehicles belonging to the company, and thereby ultimately over improving their mobility. This is distinct from the struggle for survival through acts of everyday resistance. Bayat (2000) draws attention – via his aforementioned notion of the quiet encroachment of the ordinary – to similar acts of resistance by the urban poor in Third World cities who, in seeking to expand their living space, challenge established notions of urban order, where modern cities are governed by urban elites. Indeed, the inhabitants of the remote rural communities situated along the Lalang River have acquired some notion of (previously unheard-of) urbanity through their exposure to cultural diversity and 'modernity' since the logging and mining companies entered the area.

Similar to the urban poor, the Murung practice 'street politics' because they have learned that the street is the best – and possibly the only – place to contest the encroachment on 'their space' by the authorities and extractive companies. The haulage road becomes the arena for the performance of individual or group protest, where those involved complain about water pollution and the failure to pay compensation, demand jobs, seek improved working conditions, advocate for the implementation of corporate social responsibility programmes and chase access to clean water. The haulage road is also the setting for small daily acts of defiance which are unorganised and, unlike in the examples given above, performed without

any coherent ideological intent behind them, as explained by Bayat (2000, 546). Such acts include collecting gravel from the road for building work at home, chatting on the phone by the side of the road via use of the companies' telecommunications tower, hitching free rides in company vehicles, setting up a small store at the side of the road and ignoring attempts by the authorities to control these activities. The more-than-human also lay claim to the contested space of the haulage road, such as the dogs, pigs and chickens belonging to the village members who live along the side of it.

On the provincial–national scale, the Murung are involved with Dayak Misik as a political movement. To respond to the Constitutional Court's recognition of indigenous people as rights-holders and territorial owners, Dayak Misik reclaims their customary forests. On a more local scale, forms of everyday resistance are sustained by various methods including using their bodies. The company road being an arena of contestation and the quiet encroachment of the ordinary both demonstrate the multidimensionality of Murung resistance, who trouble the capitalist frontier with their acts.

## Conclusion

Overlapping frontier-making has transformed the landscape along the Lalang River, as native forest and swidden agriculture were replaced by family-holder rubber plantations and then the extractivist economy: first logging then open-cast sub-bituminous coal mining. Through Feminist Political Ecology perspective, I have argued extractivist activities are subsidised by the dual economy of the Murung (swidden and family-holder rubber plantation). This provides low-cost access to land formerly occupied by *ladang* and *kebun*, and cheap labour, as made possible by discounting the contribution of women's reproductive roles in the household and in the community.

In the processes of 'frontier assemblages', the Dayak Murung encounter the global-market economy demand, colonial and state territorialisation, different kinds of extractivist projects, new religions, large infrastructure-building and changing riverine landscapes – all of which reconfigure Dayak Murung identities. Landscape changes to service evolving global demands, together with state-imposed alterations to Kaharingan, have undermined the traditional cosmology of the Murung and affected their relations with the more-than-human. This occurs as the community becomes more integrated with the extractive economy.

Bringing together frontier assemblages, the reconfiguration of ethnicity, and FPE perspectives has allowed me to elucidate how the Dayak Murung are caught up in a complex interplay of power relations between state actors, extractive companies and Dayak elites. In response, they have formed a connection with the Dayak Misik political movement for the recognition of customary forests at the provincial–national scale, sustaining therein forms of everyday resistance multidimensional in nature.

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## Acknowledgements

This research received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 764908. It was presented as a research proposal at the DGA Conference in Würzburg in April 2019. I would like to thank the Dayak Murung people in Sungai Murung village who allowed me to stay with them as I learned during my fieldwork. I especially would like to thank Luthfi Bachtiar, my research assistant, and Semiarto Aji Purwanto (University of Indonesia) for the research cooperation. I am grateful to those who provided me with constructive feedback and assisted my research, including the Research-Lab Team and Ph.D. Writing Club at the University of Passau, Marco Mahin, Iliana Monterroso and Tracy Glynn as well as the anonymous reviewers. I thank Andrew Halliday for language-editing and his suggestions for improving Table 1. Finally, I would like to express my special thanks to Martina Padmanabhan (University of Passau), Rebecca Elmhirst (University of Brighton) and Noer Fauzi Rachman (Padjajaran University) for their advice and insightful comments during my research and writing process.

