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A PAST FOR THE FUTURE
Frontier heritage on the upper Mahakam (East Kalimantan, Indonesia)*

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ABSTRACT. This article reviews historical processes of frontier-making (and re-making) in a region of central Borneo that was and still is on the margins of state control. Contributing to discussions about the 'assemblage' character of frontiers as zones of the 'not yet', this case study demonstrates how complex and eclectic historical legacies have gone on to produce a palimpsest of experiences and public memories that are currently being reinscribed in the context of 'frontierisation in the second degree'. This 'afterlife' of the historical frontier zone is discussed in relation to its significance for competing visions of regional identity-building and claims of political suzerainty.

Introduction

Frontiers have 'lifecycles' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019:11) and, I suggest, an afterlife as well. By stressing the 'cyclical' and 'provisional' character of frontier territorialisation (Rasmussen and Lund 2018:390), recent scholarship has focused on the processual dynamics of 'making' and 'unmaking' frontiers,[1] with an emerging focus on the framework of contingent, heterochronic and intertwined 'frontier assemblages' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019). The temporal dimensions of such 'assemblages' have been described in terms of 'historically nonlinear leaps […] that pile together to create their own intensification and proliferation' (Tsing 2003:5101). This article reviews the dynamic 'assemblage' of historical frontierisation in the area of the upper Mahakam River by disentangling 'the layering and imbrication of agents, intentions, and unexpected consequences' that have emerged in this central Borneo 'zone of convergence' (Duara 2019:192, 189).

In my analysis, I adopt Anna Tsing's metaphor of the frontier as 'a zone of not yet: not yet mapped, not yet regulated'. In this framework, frontiers are 'projects in making geographical and temporal experiences' (2003:5100), contingent and contested zones of dynamic social change, rather than temporally or spatially delineated realms. Accordingly, I suggest that the notion of colonial 'frontiers of control' (Geiger 2009:150–151) would benefit from a more inclusive reading of the heterogeneous claims towards ter-

* Except for three earlier trips to the upper Mahakam area (in 2002, 2007 and 2016), my field research in the area was mainly conducted as part of a research project funded by Mahidol University International College (Seed Grant No. 5/2018 and MUSSIRB Certificate No. 2019/039.1308 for research ethics clearance). Between 2018 and 2019 the region was visited four times with a total duration of five months.

1 For a comprehensive overview, see the introduction to this collection.

ritorial suzerainty, put forward by pre-colonial local polities, by a range of different indigenous groups, or even by competing family fractions within a group. Furthermore, I propose that in some cases these historical frontiers of suzerainty are not 'closed up' at a particular moment in time, but rather undergo an imaginative transformation that grants them a complex 'afterlife'. My use of this term is inspired by Walter Benjamin, who explores the intricate fusion of continuity and change in the 'life' and 'afterlife' of literary texts and suggests that 'their translation marks their stage of continued life' (1968:71). In literary scholarship this idea has been further developed to include the palimpsest-like nature of 'literature in the second degree' (Genette 1997), works of art whose plot or structure is reimagined and reinscribed in new creations. I suggest that processes of recent 'refrontierisation' adhere to similar dynamics. These processes may include the sudden 'frontier reappearance' at times of 'border enthusiasm' (Jańczak 2013), whereby territorial boundaries are recreated by 'lending themselves the peculiar characteristics of the frontier' (Barua 2018:110). However, read as a central feature of the frontier's afterlife – 'which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living' (Benjamin 1968:73) – the process of 'refrontierisation' is not merely one of the resurgence of a condition that has previously disappeared, but rather an animate process in its own right, with specific historical nodes as points of reference. In order to indicate these dynamics, this article adapts Gérard Genette's (1997) concept to speak of a 'frontierisation in the second degree'.

This line of argument is presented here based on a case study of Mahakam Ulu ('the upper Mahakam River') in East Kalimantan (Fig. 1), an area which gained the legal status of a regency (*kabupaten* in Bahasa Indonesia) in 2013, building on local aspirations that date back to the initial phase of Indonesian decentralisation in the early 2000s. My analysis below demonstrates that initiatives for administrative proliferation on the upper Mahakam have strongly relied on local readings of the area's earlier processes of frontierisation, dynamics which are embedded in historical legacies and 'reassemble' (Middleton 2019:196) vestiges and residues of the historical frontier zone in local visions and imageries for a preferred future. The components of this heterochronic assemblage include elements of the precolonial frontierzone of suzerainty as much as those derived from the experience of quasi-autonomy in the 'loosely administered space' (Geiger 2009:10, 39) of the Anglo-Dutch colonial frontier, eventually producing a palimpsest of frontier heritage that is currently being rediscovered (and reinscribed) in the context of Indonesian decentralisation. In consequence, the old frontier has generated a new one as a 'metaphor for […] development in its material and ideological senses, as well as in terms of spatial […] delimitation' (Fold and Hirsch 2009:95). This article attends to the historical trajectories of frontierisation at the upper Mahakam River and demonstrates how the area is gradually evolving as a discursive frontier of cultural hegemony and lo-

cal governance, of public memory and identity politics[2] – a frontierisation in the second degree that extends beyond the mere 'reappearance' of a spatialised 'frontier of control'.

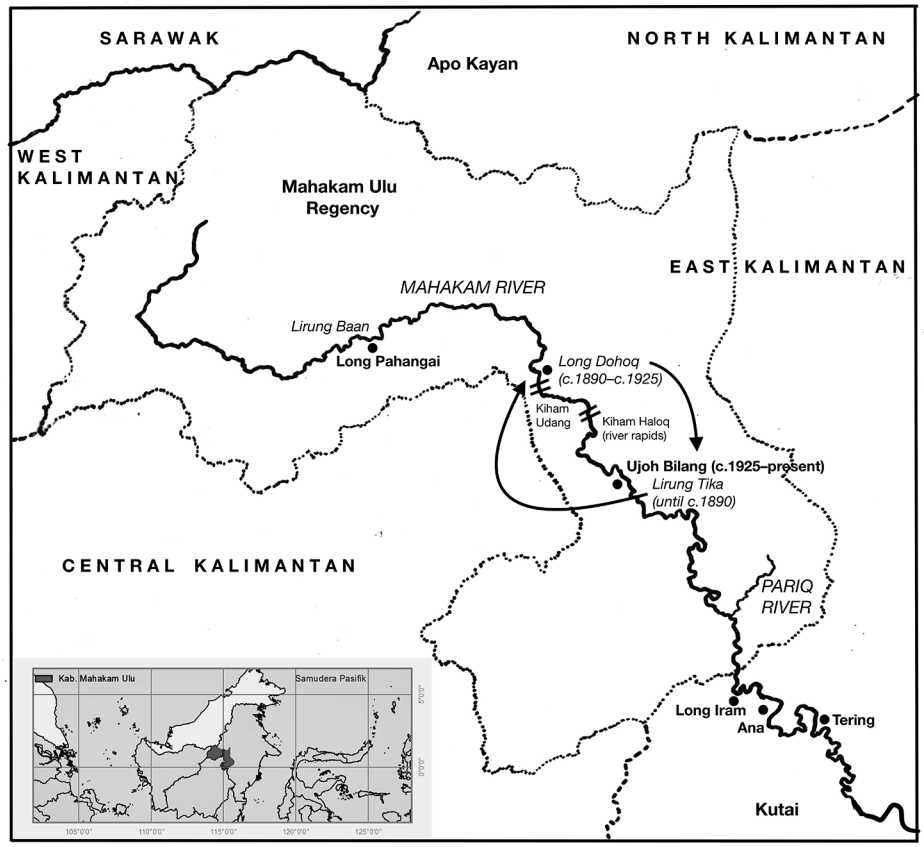

Figure 1: Map of the upper Mahakam region

Emerging frontiers of suzerainty

Between the 1890s and the 1920s, the region of the upper Mahakam River became a highly dynamic frontier zone, preceded by a much slower process of frontierisation that gradually gained pace throughout the nineteenth century. This comprised substantial demographic change and local struggles for political supremacy, initiated by the 'great Kayanic migration' (Okushima 2008:185) of the eighteenth century. To escape interethnic tensions and seek new arable land, Kayanic communities successively left the Apo

2 Cf. Chappell (1993) and Guha (2013).

Kayan plateau in various directions, some of them conquering the upper Mahakam area from its former Pin inhabitants, who were either subsumed by intermarriage or else driven downstream or into the hills of the Mahakam headwaters and its tributaries. There they would eventually merge with a number of hunter-gatherer communities to form the Aoheng, one of the few non-Kayanic indigenous communities in Mahakam Ulu (Sellato 2002:163–194). On the basis of their particular migration histories and struggles over regional hegemony,[3] new ethnic identities emerged among the Kayanic settlers too. The early indigenous frontierisation of the region produced in its wake most of the ethnonyms that are used among contemporary communities on the upper Mahakam, including the umbrella appellation 'Bahau' (originally the name of a river in the Apo Kayan region), which designates a wide range of upriver Busang-speaking communities, like the Uma Suling, Uma Tuan, or Uma Lakwe, to mention but a few, as well as the Bahau Saq or 'actual' Bahau, who are presently settled further downstream in the southern districts of the Mahakam Ulu Regency. Their language differs considerably from Busang, and they too are composed of numerous distinct communities, including the Hwang Sirau, Hwang Tering or the Hwang Daliq.

One group of Kayanic migrants proved highly successful in the struggle for regional sovereignty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the Long Gelat, whose ethnonym derives from an earlier settlement between Apo Kayan and the Mahakam River. Their expansive war expeditions along the upper and middle Mahakam and into parts of central and west Borneo secured their position as the suzerains of the region. Long Gelat power was based on an intricate nexus of bellicose use of force and population capture, as well as on forging inter-ethnic marriage alliances and tolerating subsidiary rule and cultural autonomy. Some of the Busang communities were defeated in war and forced to join the augmenting Long Gelat settlements of Lirung Tika (in proximity to present-day Ujoh Bilang) and Lirung Baan (in the area of Long Pahangai). They were, however, allowed to build their own longhouses and retain their customs and language, tribal chiefs and internal social structures (Nieuwenhuis 1904:55, 274–275). Other communities that were able to withstand Long Gelat attacks, notably the Kayan Mekam, the Uma Suling and the Aoheng, were eventually integrated into this regional network through intermarriages between members of the local aristocracy (*hipui*).

The upper Mahakam area is geographically divided by a range of river rapids that form a natural boundary but do not necessarily delineate the emerging frontier of control. Dutch colonial officials and missionaries in south-eastern Borneo imagined the upper Mahakam ('Boven Mahakam' in Dutch sources) as comprising the 'highlands' to the north of the Sultanate of Kutai, upstream from the area of Sendawar, and inhabited by 'wild Dayak Pari' (Becker 1849:322), an exonym based on one of the Mahakam's tributaries, the Pariq River. The Long Gelat chief Lejiu Li engaged in devastating war

[3] For details, see Okushima (2008) and Rousseau (1990: 331–339), but also Nieuwenhuis (1904:273–291) and Vossen (1935).

raids on the fringes of Dutch control in southern and western Borneo, well documented in later hearsay accounts from these areas. In response Georg Müller, a major in the Dutch East Indies army, was sent to Kutai in 1825 and ventured upriver after signing a treaty between the colonial government and the Sultan. He was killed in the headwaters of the Mahakam, and the treaty became a 'dead letter' (Eisenberger 1936:20, 23). Dutch influence remained restricted to southern and western Borneo until 1844, when a new trade contract with Kutai was completed and Hermann von Dewall was placed as the main Dutch official in Samarinda to oversee Kutai and the east coast of Borneo. During a circular tour of the Kutai region he also visited the southern reaches of the upper Mahakam, where Uvat (the headman of the Hwang Ana) was acting as liaison to the Sultan of Kutai.[4] Court officials regarded Uvat as paramount chief of the Bahau and he was awared the noble title 'Kerta', but von Dewall suggests that his supremacy was limited to conveying the Sultan's messages to other tribal leaders further upstreams, where the Sultanate's claim to suzerain power was disputed and the Sultan was perceived as the local leader's 'brother' or 'son', 'depending on their respective age' (Weddik 1849:144). It seems that a closer connection between Kutai and the Long Gelat had existed earlier, when Lejiu Li's daughter Bulan was married to the former Sultan in the 1820s, but upon his death in 1845 Bulan had returned to the upper Mahakam, von Dewall noting that the Long Gelat and their Bahau allies were 'once again fully independent of Kutai' (Weddik 1849:149).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Kutai was able to extend its influence to the Bahau Saq area and renew alliances with some of the downriver Long Gelat factions. Lejiu Li's successor as Long Gelat suzerain below the rapids, Bang Lejiu, married one of Kerta's daughters, and by the 1870s one of their sons, Lejiu Bang, had become the new liaison to the Sultanate of Kutai, with the noble title of 'Raden Temenggung' (Fig. 2).[5] Like his maternal grandfather Kerta, he was the leader of the Hwang Ana and Hwang Daliq. The succession to Long Gelat rule, however, was claimed by Raden Temenggung's half-brother Juk Bang, who became the chief of Lirung Tika. The rivalry between the two factions indicates an ongoing tension between entering into an alliance with Kutai and the insistence on upriver independence that would become the basis for Dutch interference in this 'frontier penumbra of less governed or virtually autonomous peoples' (Scott 2009:4).

4 See his detailed travel diary in Weddik (1849:85–105, 123–160).
5 See Tromp (1889).

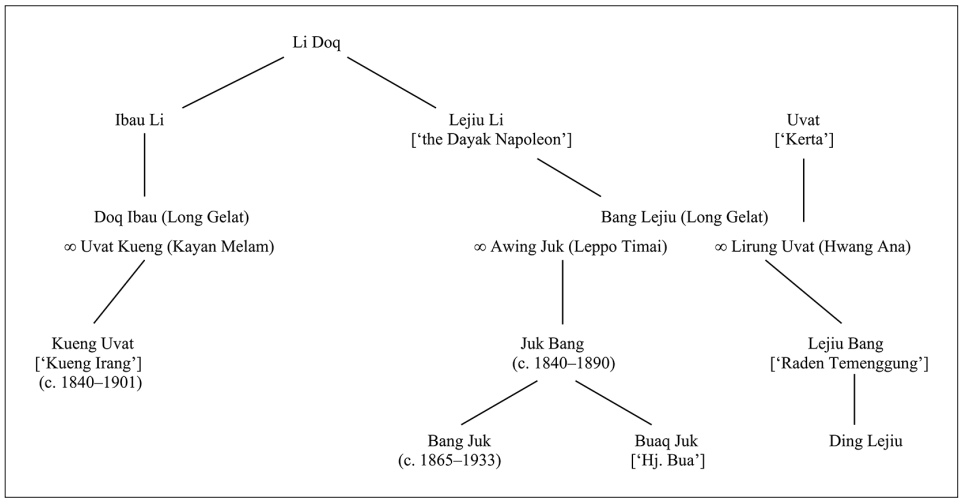

Figure 2: Kinship relations of paramount chiefs at the upper Mahakam

Colonial expansion and frontierisation

Dutch colonial interest in the frontier zone of the upper Mahakam intensified towards the end of nineteenth century. The area was suspected of being a safe haven for renegades from the Banjarese war of 1859–1863, which continued as an upland rebellion against Dutch authority into the early twentieth century. Control of the interior was also challenged from the north by the expanding influence of the Brooke 'white rajahs', who had established a private kingdom in Sarawak[6] that became a British protectorate in 1888 and hence part of the 'Anglo-Dutch frontier' (Tagliacozzo 2005). In 1885, a large-scale raid by Batang Lupar Ibans on the headwaters of the Mahakam devastated the area of the Aoheng and Kayan Mekam, 'possibly with the connivance of Charles Brooke' (Black 1985:287). Although the upper Mahakam area was considered to be part of the Sultanate of Kutai, and thus of the Dutch East Indies by 1844, it had become evident to colonial officials that the Sultan wielded no real power in the region. At the same time, attempts to make direct contact with the 'semi-subjected and fully independent' (Nieuwenhuis 1938:7) communities in the interior were hindered by Kutai officials to ensure the Sultanate could continue to profit from the trade in forest products, which was controlled by middlemen among the downriver communities.

The situation changed dramatically after a series of scientific expeditions approached the upper Mahakam from the western part of Borneo and surveyed the area

6 In 1842, the Sultan of Brunei ceded sovereignty over Sarawak to James Brooke (1803–1868). He was succeeded on the throne by his nephew Charles Brooke (1829–1917).

from north to south, instead of taking the route upriver from Kutai. A first expedition (1893–1894) was initiated by S.W. Tromp, since 1890 West Borneo's governor and previously the chief colonial officer for Kutai and the east coast. During his time in East Borneo, Tromp was the first to travel upriver as far as Lirung Tika, but his guard of Kutai Sultanate officials had discouraged him from venturing any further. His brief expedition (August to September 1885) was accompanied by 150 Bugis soldiers provided by the Sultan 'for his safety', but greatly obstructing direct contact with the wary autonomous chiefs (Nieuwenhuis 1938:7). Similar problems were encountered by the first scientific expedition that departed from Pontianak, the capital of Dutch West Borneo, towards the east in November 1893 and reached the watershed of the Mahakam and Kapuas rivers half a year later. After rumours spread that a hostile reception was to be expected on the upper Mahakam, the expedition was forced to return westwards.

Anton W. Nieuwenhuis, on the expedition as a medical doctor, later realised that the main problem once more was the expedition's guard of Malay soldiers. A couple of years later he organised a follow-up that relied fully on indigenous assistance. Nieuwenhuis' eventual arrival on the upper Mahakam was joined and heralded by members of the Kayan Mendalam of the upper Kapuas River, distant relatives of the Mahakam's Kayanic communities. During his earlier stays in their midst, Nieuwenhuis had acquired a degree of language competence in Busang, the upper Mahakam's lingua franca, and he was welcomed favourably in the autonomous frontier zone. In a situation where the 'independent upper Mahakam tribes were caught between the sultanate of Kutai and the Iban of Sarawak', as sketched above, 'local actors promptly realised how they could use him as a new political tool available to them' (Sellato 2002:23). During this second expedition, Nieuwenhuis engaged in ethnographic work and won local sympathies by routinely treating medical problems. He became particularly close to Kueng Irang, the aging leader of the Kayan Mekam who was held in high esteem by various ethnic communities above the rapids. This was partly due to his noble Long Gelat descent, which made him a second cousin of the chiefs below the rapids mentioned earlier, Lejiu Bang (or 'Raden Temenggung') and his half-brother Juk Bang, both of whom had been succeeded by their sons by the time Nieuwenhuis arrived. These were Ding Lejiu and Bang Juk, who were again competing for paramount power in the downriver area. Initially, it seems, Bang Juk was wary of the Dutch presence on the upper Mahakam and avoided direct contact, encouraged by the Sultan of Kutai, who sent a steamboat upriver to fetch him and granted him the title of 'Mas Kerta' in Kutai's capital, Tenggarong.

At the end of the second expedition, Nieuwenhuis returned to Batavia and conveyed Kueng Irang's request for Dutch protection 'on behalf of all Mahakam groups', initiating another follow-up from 1898 to 1900 which 'had mainly political aims' (Sellato 2002:24). During this time, Nieuwenhuis was joined by J.P.J. Barth, a colonial official with ethnographic interests who would become the first chief official of the new

Onderafdeeling Boven Mahakam, formally established in 1900.[7] The third expedition saw a consolidation of Dutch relations with Kueng Irang and the upriver communities and became the basis for friendly relations with Bang Juk, whose initial opposition to the Dutch was then blamed on interference by Kutai. Briefly before his death, in 1933, Bang Juk was knighted by the colonial administration with the second-highest grade of the Star for Loyalty and Merit (Anonymous 1933), and during the four decades of Dutch rule in the area from 1900 until the Japanese invasion during World War II, he gained prestige as its single most important chief. Contemporary sources often dubbed him 'the emperor of the Mahakam',[8] reminiscent of the colonial imagination of his great-grandfather Lejiu Li as a 'Dayak Napoleon' (Sellato 2002:147–148).

Remoteness and centrality of the frontier zone

Proceeding from the formal establishment of Boven Mahakam as an Onderafdeeling of Kutai, in 1908 the Dutch convinced the Sultan to relinquish all claims to the area and imposed direct administration (*rechtstreeks bestuur*). This was an oddity in the political framework of the Dutch East Indies, which outside Java mainly relied on a framework of indirect rule, and it formally recognised the region's de facto independence from the Sultanate of Kutai. Delineating the area's borders and establishing a bureaucratic administration, however, did not 'close' the frontier. On the contrary, Boven Mahakam remained an 'edge of space and time' (Tsing 2003:5100), an area where the 'transformation of marginal space into frontier zone' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019:5) had just begun. As a trope, 'Boven Mahakam' comprises both the geographical space and the particular timeframe of this transition. As such, it would later become part of the public memory of this region.

To reduce Kutai's influence, the Dutch established a new administrative centre, Long Iram, in the middle of the downriver Bahau Saq area, where some circumscribed alliances with the Sultanate had existed earlier. Long Iram became the economic hub of the region, with an influx of Bugis, Malay and Chinese settlers seeking trading opportunities in the frontier zone. The colonial administration regarded itself as a 'protector' of the indigenous communities, with the self-declared aim of controlling and limiting the 'obsessive banditry' (Jongejans 1922:144; all translations from the Dutch C.O.) of the 'Malays' (including Kutai people, but also Bakumpai gatherers of forest products from central Kalimantan). With the establishment of Dutch direct rule, these 'unwanted elements', who 'lived at the expense of the native population' were reined in and forced to

7 The Dutch term 'Onderafdeeling' designates an administrative unit below that of province ('afdeeling') and is comparable to the present-day Indonesian level of *kabupaten*.

8 See, for example, the terms 'Mahakam-keizer' in Vossen (1935:303), or 'har Kejseren' in Toussieng (1941:35).

settle in Long Iram,[9] from where the trade in forest products was officially administered and local chiefs eventually received tax revenues, after the government's taxes had been deducted.

At the same time, direct colonial interference with the internal affairs of the indigenous communities remained limited. A notable exception was the enforcement of 'law and order' under the *pax neerlandica*, resulting in the prohibition and prosecution of headhunting and human bondage (Sellato 2002:27). This had some impact on the ritual obligations and social stratification of upriver communities,[10] but the leadership of the local aristocracy was generally supported, and village chiefs retained their traditional political power. Based on the Dutch policy of legal pluralism, this extended to the local administration of justice in accordance with customary laws. To some extent, the traditional chiefs were even becoming more influential. As allies of Nieuwenhuis, they had helped facilitate and organise his expeditions in the late 1890s, including a trip to the Apo Kayan highlands, shortly after the upper Mahakam had been formally placed under Dutch rule. Appreciating the local guides' endurance and dexterity in traversing perilous river rapids and dense forests (Habbema 1910), the Dutch began to rely on them fully for further expeditions to Apo Kayan, as well as in exploring far-away Papua New Guinea. For two decades, the remote Boven Mahakam was becoming an unlikely central hub for the last phase of Dutch exploration in the East Indies, providing new economic opportunities for the local population, as well as a sense of prestige. Returning members of the expeditions were awarded medals (Anonymous 1910, 1914), and some of their stories live on in the collective memory of the region to this day.[11]

A few years into Dutch control, Boven Mahakam also became the epicentre of the Catholic Church in East Borneo. Missionaries of the Capuchin order arrived in the village of Laham in 1907 and established a boys' school there in 1911, followed by a boarding school for girls in 1922 and additional educational facilities in the area above the rapids. Proselytisation was most prevalent among the schoolchildren, and as a gradual process that would only gain pace from the 1930s onwards, its impact on the social structure and traditional customs was benign. Localising Catholic theology within the frameworks of traditional religious beliefs and focusing on social work in the fields of education and healthcare, missionaries on the upper Mahakam anticipated strategies that would become official Church doctrine after the Second Vatican Council. Catholicism provided communities of the upper Mahakam with an opportunity to embrace an alternative modernity, instead of 'becoming Malay' (*masuk Melayu*) by conversion

9 Vorstman (1927:15, cf. 49–51). See also Jongejans (1922:120–121), or the accounts of Nieuwenhuis (1904:276) for the situation in the 1890s. In contrast to the Lindu area in Sulawesi (see Greg Acciaioli's contribution to this collection), the influence of settlers at the Mahakam Ulu frontier was consequently limited.

10 See Vorstman (1927:33–34), Jongejans (1922:108–114).

11 During field research, several of my informants in the region recounted stories their parents or grandparents had told them about experiences in 'the land of Papua' (*tanah Papua*).

to Islam. In this vein, it also aided the preservation of a distinct upriver identity during the period of Indonesian independence, when each citizen was forced to embrace a state-acknowledged world religion. At that time, Dutch priests were gradually replaced by seminarians from among the local population and from eastern Indonesia, but some adopted Indonesian citizenship and remained on the upper Mahakam. At a time when the region was finally incorporated into Kutai, their sheer presence kept the trope of Boven Mahakam alive.[12]

Reassembling Boven Mahakam

This review of (pre)colonial historical trajectories on the upper Mahakam frontier demonstrates that it is impossible to distinguish particular groups – settlers, the colonial state, missionaries – as agents of frontierisation by default.[13] Recurrent and competing claims to suzerainty, authority and prestige have gradually 'assembled' a frontier zone of the 'not yet' in which both political clout and regional identity have remained contested since Indonesia gained its independence from the Dutch. Initially, the Indonesian state succeeded where the Sultanate of Kutai had historically failed: the upper Mahakam region became part of the royal polity, which itself retained a special autonomous status within the Indonesian state. When the special area status of Kutai was revoked in 1959, the region became part of the Republic of Indonesia as a geographically very extensive regency, and the upper Mahakam lost its strong centrality. The area's remoteness saved it from becoming part of the downriver resource frontiers, which developed during the logging boom in the late 1960s and wrought environmental devastation in the lowlands of Borneo's interior, but for the same reason it was also largely excluded from basic infrastructural developments.

Hopes for change were raised when new decentralisation policies were implemented after General Suharto resigned as Indonesian president in 1998. A year later Kutai was divided into three, the upper Mahakam becoming part of the new interior regency of West Kutai (Kutai Barat), stretching from the districts of Bentian Besar and Bongan in the far south to the remote headwaters of the Mahakam. Initially there was something of a revitalised 'Dayak' spirit uniting the lowland Benuaq and Tunjung communities with the upriver Bahau, Long Gelat, Kayan and Aoheng, but political power in the new regency was concentrated downriver, and consequently development was more pronounced in the lowlands. Discontent with the socio-economic marginalisation of the upper Mahakam was growing, and some customary leaders (*tokoh adat*) and other public figures (*tokoh masyarakat*) from the upriver districts began to discuss the idea of

12 For a detailed account of the history and influence of the Catholic Church at the upper Mahakam, see Coomans (1980).

13 See also the contribution by Kaartinen in this collection.

re-establishing Boven Mahakam. In 2004, a community organisation under the name of the Upper Mahakam Society Concord (Kerukunan Masyarakat Wilayah Mahakam Ulu) was formally established to represent upriver interests and eventually fostered another administrative split. In Kutai Barat, parliamentary representatives from the upper Mahakam formed a subcommittee and commissioned a 'special team' to expedite administrative proliferation. As local initiators of the process recall,[14] the main goals were to tackle the precarious development status of the upriver districts, but they were also anchored in the region's cultural and historical distinction from the downriver lands of the Tunjung and Benuaq, which 'belonged' to Kutai, whereas the upper Mahakam did not. The trope of Boven Mahakam was revived, and early drafts for the new regency matched its territorial dimensions. However, to comply with the legal requirements for administrative expansion, popular support had to be garnered from each individual district (*kecamatan*). When West Kutai was created in 1999, the upper Mahakam area had been divided into seven *kecamatan*, only five of which proved to be in favour of the new regency, though this still satisfied the minimal legal requirements. The two downstream districts of Tering and Long Iram opted to remain in Kutai Barat, presumably due to their Muslim majority populations and the districts' relative proximity to West Kutai's centre at Sendawar. The predominantly Catholic village of Tering was one of a number that voiced support for inclusion in the new regency, but migration patterns and new settlements during the preceding decades had changed the demographic structure in the two downriver districts substantially.

After a long administrative process on the regency, provincial and national levels, Mahakam Ulu (a direct translation of 'Boven Mahakam') was legally established in 2013. Because of the exclusion of Kecamatan Tering (the second centre of the Catholic mission, after Laham) and Long Iram (the capital of the colonial Onderafdeeling), the initial aim of re-establishing the colonial-era territory of Boven Mahakam has somewhat failed. At the same time, if Boven Mahakam is regarded as a trope of historical imagination that invokes the frontier zone at the temporal edge of transformation around 1900, its reassembly has been peculiarly realised: the new regency of Mahakam Ulu has established its capital in Ujoh Bilang, a village founded by Bang Juk in the early 1920s in the area of the old Long Gelat power centre of Lirung Tika. The downriver settlements of the Hwang Ana and Hwang Daliq, where Bang Juk's relatives had initiated alliances with the Sultanate of Kutai, are no longer part of the upper Mahakam. In this respect, the current borders of Mahakam Ulu have settled the nineteenth-century frontier of suzerainty, and the new regency has re-established the area's historical autonomy.

14 I have repeatedly conducted open-ended interviews with a diverse range of local politicians and customary leaders during my field research in the area.

Identity and frontier heritage

In recent years, the final closure of the territorial frontier has made way for a process of socio-cultural refrontierisation, with emerging discourses about development and governance, history and identity. This frontierisation in the second degree may be seen 'as eminently entangled: anchored in the imaginative, […] the known and the unknown' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019:12). Its basis is the renegotiation of public memory in relation to traces of upriver frontier heritage and legacies of early Kayanic migrations and inter-ethnic alliances, as much as early missionary history or the fluctuating socio-political relations during the colonial era. Many of the details are locally unknown, have fallen into oblivion or are concealed in Dutch archives and museums, inaccessible for people on the upper Mahakam, yet they filter through to the region's oral history and public memory. The past presents itself as a palimpsest, 'a membrane or roll cleansed of its manuscript by reiterated successions', where the original writing is 'expelled […] sufficiently to leave a field for the new manuscript, and yet not sufficiently to make the traces of the elder manuscript irrecoverable for us'.[15]

During my field research on the upper Mahakam, I frequently had the opportunity to take part in local discussions about the cultural identity of Mahakam Ulu, as well as associated visions of development and preferred futures. Plans have been devised to market the cultural distinctiveness of the region, in combination with its still pristine nature, for heritage tourism. Some village heads (*kepala desa*) want to establish local museums or rebuild traditional longhouses. Discussions abound with regard to the management of heritage sites, such as graveyards and old church buildings, but also about the significance of intangible cultural heritage, including the documentation of legends and local history, or even the revival of traditional 'noble attitudes' (*sifat hipui*) in public life. Requests for a greater role for customary law (*hukum adat*), long denied during Indonesian centralism, have resulted in some preliminary regional decrees and the compilation of a local legal codex, with distinct chapters for the diverse ethnic communities in the region (Dewan Adat Dayak Wilayah Mahakam Ulu 2019).

There is some common ground in public debates about Mahakam Ulu's future involving the expeditious development of infrastructure, as well as access to education, healthcare and new economic opportunities. There is also agreement about the significance of the region's distinct history and its cultural uniqueness. But it remains contested how this should be enshrined in a unified vision, a common symbol and 'motto' that attend to the heterogeneous traditions of this diversity of ethno-cultural communities. The trope of Boven Mahakam has served the struggle to (re)establish the territorial autonomy of the upper Mahakam region well, but it is now felt that a more endogenous metaphor should express the new regency's identity. Initially, its official motto was 'Mahakam Ulu Berbudaya', the last word literally meaning 'cultured' (not in

15 Thomas De Quincey: Suspiria de profundis (1845), cited in de Groote (2014:108–109)

the narrow sense of 'civilised', but rather as 'having a strong cultural basis'), its letters simultaneously forming an acronym meaning 'Bersih, Ramah, Beradat, Ulet, Damai, Aman Yang Asri' ('clean, hospitable, well-mannered, persevering and pleasantly peaceful'). The motto was incorporated into an emblem, dominated by a hornbill between the traditional sword (*mandau*) and a spear, its body resembling a war shield. Some regarded this as too generic, since the symbols and motto would be representative of the 'Dayak' in other parts of Borneo, too. Recently the emblem was changed to feature a traditional communal house below a *hudoq* mask, the *mandau* and spear being retained (Fig. 3). The new motto, 'Urip Kerimaan' ('pious life'), uses the Busang language instead of Bahasa Indonesia, and it has substantial religious connotations. The *hudoq* mask represents agricultural ceremonies that are common to many Kayanic communities, but they are not practised by all the ethnic groups on the upper Mahakam, and in December 2019 criticism of this exclusion abounded during discussions of the new logo. Ultimately, it seems that the assemblage of characteristics of the upper Mahakam frontier challenges any specific kind of cultural representation: people 'are living more and more in the midst of an enormous collage' (Geertz 2000:85), which renders the unification of symbolic representation impossible.

Figure 3: Competing emblems of the Mahakam Ulu Regency

Public memory and local historiography face similar challenges. As I have demonstrated above, people on the upper Mahakam have adopted the trope of Boven Mahakam as a common narrative to help facilitate regional autonomy. At the same time, reconstructions of more localised village histories, including territorial claims and early interethnic relations, continue to be strongly disputed. Being aware that I had assembled a wide range of documents from Dutch archives and the holdings of the Samarinda

Archdiocese, village heads from different communities have often contacted me in order to verify local claims based on early Dutch maps and other 'historical facts'. Clearly there is some potential for future social conflict in this regard, and it has proved difficult to convince people to adopt a more relational and processual approach to the region's history – a vision of the past that is able to endure the contrasting (and often contradictory) character of both the varied versions of linearised oral history and the momentary snippets of existing documentary evidence.

As is the case with the region's motto and emblem, a historical symbol – an event or a personality – is currently sought that could be identified as a collective representation of the region's distinctive history. Many of my informants have suggested the 'emperor' of the upper Mahakam, Bang Juk, mentioned earlier, as the most promising option. This might indeed be a feasible choice for fashioning a unified and yet composite identity. Although each village has its own historical heroes, Bang Juk is often regarded as *primus inter pares*. He also has the potential to serve as a magnifier for the intrinsically relational identity of the upper Mahakam frontier zone. His lifetime (c.1865–1933) coincided with the peak of early frontierisation, while his astute manoeuvring during the establishment of Dutch rule made him neither a vassal of the Kutai Sultan, nor a willing tool of the colonial government.

Based on the marriage politics of his great-grandfather Lejiu Li and his brother Ibau, Bang Juk's network of affinal relations straddles the aristocracy of a wide range of indigenous communities on the upper Mahakam. Through his paternal grandmother he is also related to the Kenyah Leppo Timai, who started to settle on the upper Mahakam in the 1920s and were later followed by the Leppo Tau and Leppo Tukung. Bang Juk's wife has a central Kalimantan background, adding communities to his affinal network that came to the area as gatherers of forest products during the late nineteenth century and settled in the frontier zone during the colonial era. Bang Juk on the one hand represents the pre-Christian traditions of the upper Mahakam, while also providing a bridge to the legacy of Catholicism by his support for the missionary development of educational infrastructure, and for a few hours he even became a proselyte, being baptised at the day of his death *in periculo mortis*. Bang Juk's sister 'Hj. Buaq',[16] on the other hand, connects the family to Islam through her earlier conversion and pilgrimage to Mecca, consequently building bridges to the Muslim minority of the upper Mahakam. Bang Juk's two sons died at a young age, and the resulting lack of direct descendants enhances his suitability as a plausible and generally acceptable node for the region's historical legacy: at present, no single person could claim to represent Bang Juk's rightful succession, but all communities are able to reforge more or less distinctive direct relationships with this legendary 'emperor'. As an embedded historical personality, Bang Juk represents a relational 'collage' that is indicative of the historically assembled and still persistent frontier zone of the upper Mahakam.

16 The title 'Hj.' (short for 'Hajah') is given to female Muslim pilgrims after their return from Mecca.

Conclusion

The upper Mahakam has been an area of perpetual frontierisation, a process that began with the exodus of Kayanic communities from the Apo Kayan plateau and picked up speed during the struggles for suzerainty in the region. Different local actors, as well as the British and Dutch colonial regimes, converged at this frontier zone, resulting in the creation of Boven Mahakam as an unlikely border of interior autonomy, betwixt and between the 'self-governed' coastal polities of the Dutch East Indies and the Brookes' private kingdom to the north. As a trope, Boven Mahakam was rediscovered and revitalised when a political opportunity presented itself during Indonesia's era of decentralisation, and the perpetual frontier of suzerainty now seems to have been closed. At the same time, a process of frontierisation in the second degree is emerging in relation to the renegotiation of a historico-cultural identity and corresponding visions for the regency's future. 'Frontier[s] might be resurrected in new forms that build on the ruins of others' (Cons and Eilenberg 2019:28) – a rather pessimistic suggestion that implies that frontier heritage is no more than just some sort of 'rubble' (cf. Gordillo 2014). By attending to the 'palimpsestous' (de Groote 2014) nature of recent refrontierisation on the upper Mahakam, I offer an alternative reading of the frontier's afterlife. In this vein, public debates about cultural identity and local history continue to reinscribe the memory palimpsests of the region's frontier heritage, a highly dynamic process that has only just begun. In many respects, Mahakam Ulu remains a 'zone of the not yet' (Tsing 2003:5100).

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