Border Studies beyond Indonesia: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini menyajikan sebuah perspektif bersifat komparatif mengenai kajian kawasan perbatasan di dunia, khususnya di Afrika dan Amerika bagian barat-laut. Dalam konteks, perbandingan yang lebih luas itulah, kajian tentang kawasan perbatasan di Kalimantan ini diulas. Tulisan ini mengetengahkan definisi mengenai perbatasan; fungsinya secara sosial, ekonomis, dan politik; serta dampaknya bagi masyarakat-masyarakat yang mengalami pemisahan oleh batas negara. Tulisan ini juga mengupas konieks pengkajian masalah perbatasan dan cara 'perbatasan' diklasifikasi dengan fokus pada aspek interaksi internasional, konflik, akomodasi, dan keterpisahan perbatasan dengan komuniti-komuniti penghuninya.

Defining borderlands

Borderlands have generally been defined in relation to boundaries separating nation-states. Boggs (1940:22) defines boundaries as lines of frontiers, where the boundary is a line and the frontier, a zone between states (see also Prescott 1978). Others view the borderland as occasionally being distinct from a frontier, an area physically separate from the core of a state (Martinez 1994:305), which implies that borderlands might sometimes encompass or be encompassed by state cores (cf. Stoddard 1991). Frontiers are also seen as zones between unsettled and settled areas; that is, areas settled by people from the state core or heartland (cf. Donnan and Wilson 1994:8). Boggs (1940:10–11) argues that boundaries function negatively, serving to restrict and inhibit rather than promote; for example, in the restriction and exclusion of laborers, illegal activities, and diseases; in the collection of taxes and duties, and in the prevention of smuggling so that foreign goods might not compete with domestic products. More recently, with the focus on the borderlands and borderlanders rather than on the states that draw the lines, Martinez (1994) argues that borderlands should be defined by the movement of people, goods, and ideas across a boundary and by the forces behind that movement (see also Heyman 1991).

The modern function of boundaries is the result of the historical rise of nationalism in Europe in the past several centuries (Boggs 1940:23–24; Baud and van Schendal 1997). This concept of the nation-state, Asiwaju (1983:2–3) notes, spread virtually worldwide through European colonialism. Under this notion, borders should be precisely defined, clearly demarcated, jealously guarded, and exclusive. This leads to a view that borders are lines sepa-
rating distinct social systems, and borderlands become marginal, deriving legitimacy only through the relationship and participation in the core social systems, rather than as unique social systems (Alvarez 1984; Martinez 1996).

Largely as a result of European colonialism, borders worldwide resemble one another as arbitrarily imposed lines of demarcation, often dividing similar areas and people, sometimes into mutually hostile states (Asiwaju 1983:9–10). Because of this and other factors, the unity of a people within a boundary zone is often greater than that of the borderlanders with the heartland (Boggs 1940:6). Asiwaju (1983:3) notes that the separating and excluding function of boundaries is counteracted by the existence of borderlands and their inhabitants who defy the border divisions. ‘[C]ross-border informal linkages…generally operate often to the embarrassment of all modern states everywhere in their inherent concern to keep their borders as clear and visible as possible’ (Asiwaju 1983:18).

In Africa, for example, European colonial powers shifted from their early influence on maintaining ‘free trade zones’ along coastal and riverine trade routes to an increasing control of territory and populations in the late 19th century (Hargreaves 1985). (This holds to a certain extent for insular Southeast Asia.) In order to aid this territorialism, the colonial offices surveyed land and drew up maps. In doing so, ‘…[t]he populations of the frontier areas [defined by the boundaries] were envisaged, if at all, only as dim and inarticulate presences in the background’ (Asiwaju 1985a:25). The seemingly arbitrary boundaries of the colonial possessions and today’s states are based on the diplomatic compromises of rival European powers (Asiwaju 1985a:25), on ‘a certain short-term rationality within the narrow horizons of the respective European negotiators’ (Asiwaju 1985a:19), but also on the interests of African leaders on whose cooperation the Europeans depended or whose interests coincided with the European power in question (Asiwaju 1985a:23). Barbour (1961:314) notes that the European map makers were ‘...not always able to take into account the convenience of local peoples.’ There is thus a notorious arbitrariness of border placement and a high degree of economic underdevelopment, largely because there are few cross-border urban areas as in Western Europe and North America; instead there are mid-sized towns and innumerable villages along the borderlands (Asiwaju 1983:15).

An example of this is the Yoruba of western Africa who were in the late 19th century arbitrarily divided by British and French colonies (respectively Nigeria and Dahomey [modern-day Benin]). In the case of Dahomey, the Yoruba were placed into the same administrative structure as former enemies (Asiwaju 1976:61–62). They first petitioned the French to change the boundary, and when that failed to work, resorted to physically relocating the boundary markers. This failed as well, leaving the Yoruba in Dahomey feeling resentful at their marginality in contrast to other groups on whom the French concentrated their efforts. This gave rise to a heightened sense of their Yoruba identity and irredentism. On the other side of the border in Nigeria, the western Yoruba fared better under the British gaining a sense of independence from control by traditional power centers (for Southeast Asia, see e.g. Wijeyewardene 1990; Yukio and Yang 2000).

Asiwaju (1985b:3) contends that the laying of state boundaries imposed different symbols of formal status upon the same ethnic groups, mainly in the form of citizenship (see Omoniyi 1997). Boundaries were drawn across well-established lines of communication including a sense of community based on common traditions, usually very strong kinship ties, shared socio-political institutions, shared re-

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sources, and sometimes common political control (Asiwaju 1985b:2). Colonization brought different education systems and different official languages that have often persisted after independence (Asiwaju 1985b:11). The Mandara of Nigeria and Cameroon are a case in point; their sultanate was divided by German (later French) and British colonial forces which imposed different administrations, monetary systems, economic values, education, and official languages. These have left their distinctive impressions on the Mandara of today (Barkindo 1985). In many cases, ethnic groups divided by borders were given different names on either side. Yet despite the imposed boundaries and accompanying divisions, partitioned peoples in many Third World situations largely ignore the border in their daily lives (Asiwaju 1985b:3; see also Southall 1985; Llambi 1989; cf. Drummond and Manson 1991). This is less so for borders like that separating Mexico and the U.S. (e.g. Urrea 1993).

Research on the border

Until recently, argues Asiwaju (1983:3), the focus of border studies has been on the economies of states, on the conflict and diplomacy between states divided by borders, with the boundary as the point of reference, rather than on the people who inhabit the borderlands (e.g. Boggs 1940; Prescott 1978; for recent examples see Bath 1988, Grundy-Warr 1994). Borderlands are generally neglected by state officials who regard such regions as fringe or marginal for economic development plans. Scholarly work has likewise been restricted by the existence of borders, either by the relative isolation of borderlands, the difficulty in obtaining government permission to conduct research there, the mistrust by borderlanders of outsiders asking a lot of questions, or by problems gaining access to relevant material across the border (see Donnan and Wilson 1994:6–7). Asiwaju (1985b:11) notes that just as roads and development projects decrease in importance and scale closer to the border, so too does scholarly research. He calls for the focus to shift from the nation-states to the borderlands (Asiwaju 1983:21), and Alvarez (1995) documents this shift within anthropology (see also Donnan and Wilson 1994).

Asiwaju (1983) contends that past studies of borderlands have been dominated by U.S.-Mexico border issues which have tended to treat that borderland as if it were unique, isolating it from comparison with other borderlands. Alvarez (1995:451) shows, however, that in many respects it is unique in that ‘...[n]o other border in the world exhibits the inequality of power, economics, and the human condition.’ Indeed, he says that scholarly attention to the U.S.-Mexico border created the study of borderlands generally, and research into other borders and borderlands has used the U.S.-Mexico experience as ‘icon and model’ for comparison (Alvarez 1995:449; e.g. Truett 1997; Vila 2000). Within this context, borderlands research has developed from a dialectic between the ‘literalists’ (who have given attention to the actual problems of the border including migration, policy, settlement, environment, identity, labor, and health [e.g. Dwyer 1994; Jones 1995]) and the ‘a-literalists’ who take a metaphorical approach, focusing on social boundaries, contradiction, conflict, and shifting identity within and beyond the context of geographical borders (Alvarez 1995:449–450). This latter approach was pioneered by Barth’s Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (1969) and is exemplified more recently in Tsing’s (1993) study of Meratus identity and marginality in South Kalimantan. Ethnographic work on international borderlands (i.e. those lying between sovereign states) has been sparse until recently (see e.g. Cole and Wolf 1974; Cohen 1972; also recently
Donnan and Wilson 1994).

Classifying borderlands

Focusing on borders between states and on the influence state activities have on life along borders, Martinez (1994) classifies borderlands into four historically related types. Each is defined in contrast to the others with no primacy of one type over the others. The first is the alienated borderland where cross-border interchange is non-existent because of warfare, political disputes, intense nationalism, ideological animosity, religious enmity, cultural dissimilarity, or ethnic rivalry. From the perspective of the state, international strife leads to militarization of the border including rigid controls on cross-border traffic. This makes it difficult for the borderlanders to lead stable lives (Martinez 1994:6; e.g. Lee 1980). The second type is the coexistent borderland where cross-border conflict is reduced to a ‘manageable level’ but where there still exist unresolved questions about the ownership of strategic resources in the borderland (Martinez 1994:6–8). The Israeli–Egyptian border, for example, has shifted from an alienated to a coexistent borderland, but it has imposed constraints upon traditional Bedouin grazing cycles that in the past used the borderland, resulting in desertification from overgrazing (Meir et al. 1994). The case of the Iban in western Borneo fits here as well at two different points in history. During the late 19th–early 20th centuries, Brooke (Sarawak)-Dutch rivalry and Iban headhunting kept the borderlands shifting between being alienated and coexistent (Wadley 2001), and during the 1960–70s under Indonesia-Malaysia Confrontation and the subsequent Communist insurgency.

Interdependent borderlands form the third type. This is where borderlands on either side of a boundary are symbiotically linked under relatively stable international relations. The people on either side, and the states, are involved in a mutually beneficial economy and on a more or less equal basis; such as where one has production facilities, the other cheap labor (Martinez 1994:8–9). Here significant gains from smuggling for one state might be felt as loses by the other (Collins 1985:212). One might regard the current Indonesia-Malaysia relations as having entered this phase. The fourth type is the integrated borderland where borderlands are economically merged, nationalism on both sides declines, and the states so linked are closely allied, such as the U.S.-Canada borderland (Martinez 1994:9).

Because all borderlanders share an often similar border experience—isolation, underdevelopment, and neglect by central powers—Martinez (1994:10) offers a general outline of the ‘borderlands milieu’ within the context of the different borderland types. This milieu is characterized by transnational interaction, international conflict and accommodation, ethnic conflict and accommodation, and separateness. The level of transnational interaction depends on the degree of border permeability, measured along a continuum between an interdependent, integrated, and relatively open border and an alienated or closed border. But border closure does not entirely eliminate cross-border trade, communication, and travel given that ethnic or cultural affinity on both sides enhances interaction (Martinez 1994:10) regardless of what state governments might do. An end to state conflict opens interaction and allows for a higher degree of interdependency, such as with the U.S. and Mexico.

Under international conflict and accommodation, boundaries are seen as inherently unstable, and borderlanders face unique challenges inherent in the existence of the boundary and its instability. Under conditions of conflict, borderlands may become battlefields,
where the border inhabitants are under threat of attack from foreigners or from their own people across the border, both of which borderland Iban have experienced. There might be disputes over the control and use of natural resources such as water, in which local feuding might mirror or even exacerbate state feuding. As long as the border remains unsettled, there is uncertainty in the lives of borderlanders (Martinez 1994:13–16), but even under situations of alienated borders, locals still seek to maintain important social and economic relations across the border. In a climate of accommodation where open conflict is reduced but control of borders by the state is maintained, borderlanders bear the brunt of restrictive policies designed to limit or tax the movement of goods or people, leading to smuggling and illegal migration. Borderlanders’ interests, social and economic, is thus often in conflict with state interests (Martinez 1994:15).

**Ethnic conflict and accommodation** generally follows from the contrast of an ethnically heterogenous borderland and a homogenous core or heartland, although in the case of Borneo (including both Indonesia and Malaysia) homogeneity of the core is derived more from a common religion (i.e. Islam) than ethnicity. Ethnic conflict arises from attempts by the state to assimilate groups in the frontier or borderland, especially where a group is closely linked culturally and ethnically to people across the border (Martinez 1994:16). Colonization by outsiders tends to harden group loyalties and reinforce identity; indeed, borderlanders develop legends and ballads about heroes—viewed as rebels and outlaws by the state—who oppose the newcomers or the intrusion of the state (Martinez 1994:17), such as in the *narco-corido* ballads of the U.S.-Mexican border (Paredes 1958). The border is often used as a place of asylum by people declared outlaws or rebels by the state (Asiwaju 1983:17) which then has the problem of identifying and capturing criminal offenders who flee to the border and are protected by their kin on the other side (Barkindo 1985). Under conditions of accommodation, people cooperate, trade, and intermarry whether between different ethnic groups on either side of the border or between pioneers and natives (see e.g. Clifton 1989; Brooks 2002).

A feeling of uniqueness by borderlanders comes from their *separateness* economically, culturally, and historically from the core. Borderlanders themselves are generally characterized by duality, by seemingly contradictory tendencies (Martinez 1994:305; Omoniyi 1997). They are pulled in (at least) two directions—linguistically, culturally, economically, and politically—giving rise to a lack of strong identity with the state. Borderlanders with the weakest loyalty to the state are often those with the strongest ties to people across the border (Martinez 1994:19). For example, the people living on the Swiss side of the Swiss-Italian border face an identity problem, feeling like double minorities: On the one hand, they owe political allegiance to the Swiss, yet on the other hand they are culturally and economically Italian. Their kin on the Italian side of the border do not have that problem (Leimgruber 1991). The fact of being astride an international boundary and having relations across the line also lays cross-border peoples open to suspicion by the states involved (Asiwaju 1985b:10). In contrast some borderlanders, especially those pioneers from core areas, exhibit extreme nationalism based in part on the dangers they might face or perceive along or across the border, or in reaction to people in the heartland doubting their loyalty.

Rumley and Minghi (1991:5) argue that border areas are characterized by a high degree of *peripherality*, wherein often minority ethnic groups face disadvantage *vis-a-vis* the
elites who control the state. This disadvantage involves economic exploitation and a uneven distribution of wealth, great variation in political participation and power, and a distance from the core which perceives the borderland from a standpoint of strategic territorial advantage against potentially rival states. Borderlanders thus enjoy little political power, they are culturally and economically peripheral to state power and interests, and their incomes are lower, as is the state allocation of resources and services. This results in them being more culturally independent and conservative, and less willing to adopt the national culture (Rumley and Minghi 1991:6). It also fosters economic independence of border people from the center, leading in some cases to attempts at secession from the state (Martinez 1994:23–24). In other cases, cross-border migrations occur, spurred by the desire for sanctuary against taxes (Phiri 1985), to escape political and economic oppression (Asiwaju 1976) or to take advantage of economic opportunities, such as the illegal immigration into Nigeria after the oil boom of the 1960s (Asiwaju 1983:14).

Borders ‘invariably separate inequalities’ (Asiwaju 1983:19), and given this borderlanders have a casual and enterprising attitude given the need to be resourceful in exploiting changing border conditions (Martinez 1994:313). As mentioned above, borderlanders are often politically ambivalent (Asiwaju 1985b:12). They try to manipulate their national identities, with many people acquiring and claiming citizenship in different countries, and taking advantage of rights and privileges of citizenship but rarely exercising the corresponding duties, which take a back seat to personal interests (Martinez 1994:20). Borderlanders also develop interests that may come into conflict with the state or national interest, which breeds a high degree of alienation from the core. This alienation may manifest itself in borderlanders finding it acceptable to breech laws that they perceive as being at odds with cross-border interaction and thus their own interests, such as in smuggling (Martinez 1994:23).

According to Collins (1985), smuggling is an anti-state activity often fueled by cross-border ethnic ties, where the border (often unpatrolled, unpatrollable, and occasionally undemarcated in many Third World countries [Asiwaju 1985b:11–12]) is not a barrier to trade but rather a conduit of people and goods. For example, the border of Ivory Coast and Ghana which divides ethnic groups is regularly and illegally crossed, particularly from Ghana, the incentive being that coffee and cocoa prices are higher in Ivory Coast; border markets have also developed in Ghana selling cheap goods. These are visited by Ivory Coast traders who buy goods for sale on their own side (Stary 1994). Phiri (1985) shows that what states regard as smuggling is often everyday economic activity within a group of closely related people, either as families or as ethnic groups (see also Barkindo 1985; Asiwaju 1976:196–202). The existence of a border is thus blurred by the activity of cross-border people.

**Conclusion**

The study of borderlands around the world has expanded in recent decades, beginning with a flurry of scholarship on the US-Mexico border and its peoples and moving on to other regions such as Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia. In these studies, borderlands have been characterized as isolated, separate, and ambiguous regions where the inhabitants hold weak loyalty to the state and routinely engage in ‘independent’ economic activities such as smuggling. A dominant model until recently in border studies has been that of the ‘center and periphery’, in which relationships between the two is hierarchical, asymmetrical, and exploit-
ative. Borderlands are seen as unique forms of peripheries, as zones between often competing or unequal states. This ‘inter-national’ characteristic increases the peripherality and ambiguity of the borderland as inhabitants seek benefits from both sides of the border and as the states try to control their activities.

While this model outlines some important borderland features, it oversimplifies the complexities of the border experience and is being replaced by the now-ubiquitous concept of globalization. Globalization here is taken to mean the social-cultural, economic, political, and demographic processes occurring within and transcending nations; it represents an intensification of human relations around the world, linking and shaping events in widely separated localities (Kearney 1995; Giddens 1990; Appadurai 2001). Although globalization is a process that has been on-going for hundreds, if not thousands, of years (Cleveland 2000), modern communication systems allow information to be transmitted rapidly across national boundaries, creating the potential for economic power on a truly global scale. The globalization concept has an advantage in the border context as it is conceived as being a multi-centered and flexible phenomenon, with connectedness and transnationalism at its core—key features of borderlands. Social, economic, and political relations are thus not dichotomized as center-peripheries but are seen as complex, overlapping and regional, with borderlanders as active participants in global processes mediated through local and regional relations (Walker 1999). Indeed, one recent concern in anthropology has been the local responses and adjustments to global forces, and studies of borderlands have begun to incorporate these insights.

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