



Navigating the Indonesian-Philippine Border: The Challenges of Life in the Borderzone

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ABSTRACT. The paper explores border issues on the Indonesian side of the Indonesian-Philippine border by surfacing the contestations between state and society over the maintenance of the border and the social construction of identities and space, in particular the maritime border that connects the two countries. This interplay between identity, borders, and statehood places into context the long history of “illegal” border crossing in the Sulawesi-Sulu Sea that continues to the present. The paper puts forward a critique of the security and cultural approaches on border issues for not being sufficiently attuned to realities on the ground and demonstrates that the needs of border populations are better served by a more inclusive and consultative approach to understanding the particularities of their situation.

KEYWORDS. border studies · maritime borders · governmentality · Sulawesi-Sulu sea

INTRODUCTION

The border area where the national territories of Indonesia and the Philippines blend into one another is a border that cannot be seen. Like any maritime border, it is a border continually washed away by unbound streams of water and shifting ocean floors. It is a border not realized by physical markers—not a fence or wall, nor a river or a mountain range—but by the acts of border agents who patrol the waters that connect, rather than transect, insular Southeast Asia and its people. Indeed, the exact border coordinates have not been officially defined nor bilaterally agreed upon. It is, in every sense of the word, a fluid border.

This fluidity is an inescapable reality that conditions social processes that come to the fore in borderzones: the social (re)construction of space and identities. Drawing on my field experiences on the Indonesian side of the Indonesian-Philippine border in North Sulawesi, this essay identifies and explores the creative tensions manifest in these social

processes. This is its first aim. A second aim is to capture some aspects of the specificity of sea borders *vis-à-vis* current theorizing on *borderlands*. A third aim is to show that an inclusive and consultative approach that centers on “real life” issues of people in the borderzone can address some of the inadequacies of the predominant frameworks in border studies.

My discussion flows in five parts. The first section reviews common perspectives on borders and picks up some theoretical threads to frame the discussion. The second section serves as a historical-geographical background to subsequent sections that focus on portentous social processes at the Indonesian-Philippine border. The third section explores the spatiality of sea borders, while the fourth section problematizes the social construction of identities. A concluding section takes a closer look at statehood in the borderzone and presents proposals towards a more inclusive and consultative approach in understanding and addressing border issues.

Fieldwork in North Sulawesi was carried out from October 2006 through June 2007. I established a home base in Manado, the coordinative center of the province. My secondary base was in the town of Tahuna on Sangihe island, the jump-off point for “mini-expeditions” to the outer islands. My methodology consisted of unstructured conversations with people who grew up, live and work in the borderzone—from fisherfolk, artisans, shipping crew members, traders, local government officials, bureaucrats, navy personnel, men and women, adults and children. I asked them to share their observations, opinions, experiences and stories with me, wherever we met, spontaneously or planned: in the marketplace, along the pier, aboard ferries, on the road, in offices, during social gathering and private invitations. From these narratives, I identified recurrent themes, which were subsequently grouped and categorized in order to formulate the questions and tentative answers that run through this piece.

PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES

Borders are a subject matter in a broad range of arenas. It is a topic that occupies politicians and bureaucrats, economists and entrepreneurs, scholars and activists, law enforcers and lawless elements alike. As divergent as these voices may be, a discernible pattern is that discussions on borders are invariably couched in terms of problems and possibilities.

To law enforcement agents, borders present headaches. Borders are a real test of states’ sovereignty—marketplace for contraband; escape

routes for criminals and rebels; passageways for illegal traffic of people, animals, and goods. Borders cut through neighboring jurisdictions, creating sliced spaces where the power of one state ends and the power of another begins. Who/what may be illegal on one side of the border finds a safe haven on the other side. Borders reveal the limits of a regime, but also protect it from undesirable outside forces. And for this reason, they are sites of inclusion and exclusion, of sanction and surveillance. It is this kind of thinking that underlies what is commonly known as the “security approach” to border issues, which essentially consists of zealously guarding a nation’s territorial integrity and economic resources.

By contrast, internationalists of various stripes approach borders from a different set of assumptions. To advocates of (inter)regional integration, borders are fast losing their significance. What is stressed is the imagery of the “global village” made possible through rapid advances in travel and communication technology, as well as the advancement of a globalizing information-based economy based on de-territorialized exchanges. Nations and regions are seen to be moving towards a “borderless world” of exciting new possibilities and creative solutions to transnational challenges.

From a more bottom-up orientation, yet another set of problems and possibilities arise. Here borders are problematic where they seek to encase human activity and aspirations. Rarely do we find states’ borders neatly hemmed. In most parts of the world, international borders are arbitrary, if not artificial partitions. They are vestiges of colonial domination and “old-style” geopolitics that divide people of common descent and homeland. In this sense, borders represent repressive control mechanisms of the center reigning in centrifugal movements at the margins.

The other side of the coin is that precisely because borders are arbitrary, they are far from sacrosanct. Thus, where there are borders, there is also resistance—whether violent or quiet, organized or nonsensational. Seen from this perspective, “borderzones serve as a kind of laboratory for creative forms of local agency” (Amster 2005, 23). People in borderzones are hailed as skillful manipulators of passports and other badges of identity. Such forms of subterfuge allow people to take advantage of their interstitial position—for instance, by acquiring unofficial dual citizenship or circumventing customs agents in their cross-border dealings. Borders here become a “malleable resource” (Amster 2005, 39) to people. Border crossing becomes empowering, as it allows people to sidestep officially sanctioned norms (see, for example, Kusakabe and Zin Mar Oo 2004, Horstman 2005

and Tsuneda 2006). Cross-border mobility often allows female border-crossers to step out of the repressive gender relations in their home village and acquire new social roles as traders and breadwinners.

Against this background, it is possible to identify at least two broad streams in the cultural and sociological scholarship on borders.

One stream places emphasis on the *crossing* of borders, the activities and processes that take place in borderzones. In these cultural studies, border crossing becomes an occasion for performance. People who move around borderlands take on various roles reflecting their changing hybrid identities. They switch between languages, identity cards and social status in transversing political boundaries. Borders here become a metaphor for experimentation and exploration of difference, for transcending prescribed categories of belonging.

The other stream in the sociocultural scholarship on borders deals with the notions of territoriality and space. It examines the consequences—both stated and unintended—of living in a world divided by borders: the politics of drawing and securing borders or, as the case may be, the possibilities of (selective) opening of borders.

Here we see how borders are concrete manifestations of state power. National borders are more than just lines on a map or demarcations in the physical world; they are “political constructs, imagined projections of territorial power” (Baud and Van Schendel 1997, 211). Territoriality is “a ‘spatial strategy’ which uses territory and borders to control, classify and communicate—to express and implement relationships of power, whether benign or malign, peaceful or violent” (Anderson 2002, 27).

In today’s world, borders have become an accepted, taken-for-granted reality. We hardly question their existence. However, Anderson (2002, 27) asks us to take a step back and reflect on the flipside of territoriality: “While giving greater tangibility to power relationships, it de-personalises and reifies them, obscuring the sources and relations of power. It sharpens conflict and generates further conflict as its assertion encourages rival territorialities in a ‘space-filling process’.”

Seen in this light, border crossing is less an occasion for celebration than cause for concern. Harrowing refugee accounts from across the globe attest to this. Cunningham (2004, 345) thus reminds us “for much of the world’s mobile population, the experience of transnational interconnection entails rivers and oceans to be crossed (often in unsafe and overcrowded vessels), electrified fences guarded by border controls, stretches of isolated desert, or the interrogation cell in the basement of

a port of entry. As such, borders can be regarded as enactments of power on our globe, diagnostic of how the apparatus of rule unfolds in a global landscape.” The image of globalization as an unstoppable, free flowing phenomenon is thus difficult to sustain.

And so, even as nations are said to be moving closer together in this age of increasing global interconnections, borders are far from being anachronistic markers of possession. Borders remain highly functional barriers for keeping undesirable elements at bay.

I revisit the underlying assumptions of the security as well as cultural approaches toward the end of this essay. For now, I would simply like to flag the importance of understanding the *interplay* between borders, identities, and statehood. I begin by tracing the historical context of the Indonesian-Philippine border area, mindful of the possibilities of creative resistance, problems in policing partitions, and attendant issues of power. The next section delves into the history and present-day situation of *Nusa Utara*, the northern islands where the Indonesian sea shades off into Philippine waters.

NUSA UTARA: ISLANDS IN BETWEEN

The island regencies¹ of Sangihe and Talaud constitute the northernmost tip of the vast Indonesian archipelago. These territories are composed of about 132 islands, out of which only 39 are populated by a total population of less than 300,000 souls. Sangihe and Talaud encompass an area of about 47,320 square kilometers, 95 percent of which is sea. The hilly topography of the islands does not lend itself to large-scale cultivation. On the main islands, there are neither industries nor plantations, only smallholder cultivation of copra, root crops, vegetables, cloves, and other agricultural products. Fisheries are another important livelihood. A smaller percentage of the population makes a living from trading goods to fill the needs of the local people.

In the more populous Indonesian centers of Java and Sumatra, it would not be easy to find a person knowledgeable in the location of Sangihe and Talaud and their capitals, Tahuna and Melonguane, respectively. To the average Indonesian, the province of North Sulawesi is identified with its capital city Manado on the main island of Sulawesi. The northern islands or *Nusa Utara* are simply outside the radar screen of national concerns.

Indeed, the defining feature of Sangihe and Talaud is their location: isolated and left behind. This description, *terisolasi dan*

tertinggal in Indonesian, is a buzzword among both local public servants and the general public. This has not always been the case, however. The islands were once an important “relay ground” of world trade during the “Age of Commerce” (Hayase 2007, 81). Indeed, the history of Sangihe and Talaud in early modern times is intertwined with that of the sultanates of Ternate, Maguindanao, and Sulu as well as its connections with Chinese traders and European explorers, missionaries, and colonizers.

Local society was made up of scattered autonomous *kedatuan* (chiefdoms) and *kerajaan* (petty kingdoms) without any overarching power structure. Chinese traders first became active in the region in the fifteenth century. The first Europeans to reach the shores of Sangihe in 1521 were members of a Spanish expedition originally commanded by Ferdinand Magellan. Having lost their captain in the Battle of Mactan, the fleet set sail to the Spice Islands and made a pitstop at Sangihe. By 1526, the Portuguese got into the picture, developing a trade route from Ternate to Borneo via Sulu and the Sangihe islands. Due to its location, Sangihe gained in strategic importance being a “natural guidepost” (Ulaen 2003, 37) for seafarers engaged in the profitable spice trade.

Catholic missionary work in the area also commenced, as the Spanish established their base in Manila and built relations with a handful of Sangirese² *rajas*. The children of the royal family of Siau, for example, were eventually sent to Catholic schools in Manila. Local leaders adopted Christian names. On the other hand, a number of *rajas* chose to align themselves with Ternate. The kingdom of Kandahe on the main island of Sangihe, by contrast, was Islamized by Sulu and maintained close relations with the Buayan sultanate of Mindanao. The kingdom even established outposts on the islands of Balut and Sarangani (Hayase 2007, 87). However, coexistence among the various kingdoms of different creeds was far from peaceful, as alliances shifted and tensions often flared.

For centuries, many Sangirese lived on the south coast of Mindanao and the Davao Gulf region or shuttled between islands. There were no clear boundaries then between Sangihe and Mindanao (Ulaen 2003, 48; Hayase 2007, 93). However, as Maguindanao consolidated its power under the leadership of Sultan Kudarat in the first half of the seventeenth century, Sangirese were forced to subordinate themselves to his rule. With the decline of Maguindanao in the nineteenth century, Sulu gained political and economic preeminence, not just as

a trading post for forest and marine products for Chinese markets, but also as a center for slave trade. Pirates from Sulu regularly raided parts of Sangihe and Talaud to capture slaves³ (Ulaen 2003, 37; Hayase 2007, 93).

Meanwhile, with the ascendancy of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company [VOC]) in the region and subsequent withdrawal of the Spanish and Portuguese, Sangihe and Talaud were increasingly drawn into the Dutch ambit. By 1677, the *Noordereilanden* (northern islands) were included in the VOC map, as the Dutch entered into agreements with the *rajas* and *datus* of Sangihe. Catholicism was banned, and a number of faithful migrated to Manila (Hayase 2007, 89). By 1825, Sangihe and Talaud were placed under the provincial administration of Manado, rendering traditional leadership obsolete. The colonial period thus sealed the fate of Sangihe and Talaud, making it a unitary administrative entity at the fringes of the Dutch domain. This presented a significant break from its past, where the islands had represented a complex constellation of kingdoms with linkages across the busy traffic zone of the Sulawesi-Sulu Sea. This effectively transformed Sangihe and Talaud from a trade zone to a borderzone (Ulaen 2003, 49). Needless to say, local people were not consulted or made part of this process and only had a poor appreciation of these transformations.

It is therefore not surprising that the flow of people to and from Mindanao never ceased through the centuries, especially among those engaged in barter trade. With the changing direction of the winds, it is said that each monsoon season encouraged people to travel between islands to find new trading opportunities and meet future spouses. There are numerous legends and royal genealogies that attest to these exogamous practices (Hayase, Non and Ulaen 1999; Tiu 2005). It is due to this history of migration and intermarriage, trade links, and religious ties, that anthropologist and historian Alex Ulaen likens the islands of the Sulawesi-Sulu Sea to an entity such as the Mediterranean, a contiguous area of land and sea with common sociocultural traits.

Cullamar (1998, 19) interviewed Sangirese settlers on the Philippine islands of Balut and Sarangani who recall that those who arrived before 1935 thought the virgin islands were theirs by virtue of occupation. Indeed, there were no signs to warn them that they had entered in “foreign” territory, as immigration laws were only introduced when the Philippines and Indonesia became independent republics. Crossing

the border without proper papers only became a crime in the second half of the twentieth century.

As the Philippine frontier around General Santos City was opened, there was a great demand for labor in the agricultural and fisheries sectors. Migrant workers from Nusa Utara filled this need, fleeing the political and economic instability on the Indonesian side in the 1950s due to rebellions and unrest. While some settled in Mindanao permanently and raised their families there (Tiu, undated), others chose to commute back and forth.

Since neither the Indonesian nor Philippine government was able to regulate this “illegal” flow, the Border Crossing Agreement of 1956 was instituted in the context of repatriation and/or legalization of overstaying visitors. Successive guidelines, joint directives, agreements and amendments have since expanded and constricted opportunities for habitual border crossers through the years.⁴ These regulations allow residents of the Indonesian-Philippine border area, as defined, to obtain border-crossing cards (in lieu of passports) that allow them to travel to the other side of the border for up to 59 days for the purposes of family visits, religious worship, and pleasure. Fishing crew members are given 29 days. Individuals are allowed to bring with them USD250 worth of goods for cross-border trade, while families are granted USD1,000.

The reality, however, is that these amounts are often exceeded. In such cases, traders must negotiate over additional levies with border-crossing officers at designated border-crossing stations on both sides of the border. Most often, people prefer to ditch these stations altogether and pass through the border “illegally.” This not only makes their journeys more cost-efficient, but also shortens travel time, since the Indonesian border crossing stations on the islands of Marore, Miangas, and Tarakan are quite remote and inaccessible. Fishermen who “illegally” sell their catch across the border are referred to as “strikers.” Another problem is that the border trade is only allowed among residents of the officially defined immediate border area, consisting of the sparsely populated outer islands. Goods bound for markets on the main islands of Sangihe and Talaud are therefore brought in clandestinely.

People fondly recall the “golden era” of border trade from 1965-71, when the main islands of Sangihe and Talaud were part of the “trade belt” and the local government even profited from increased revenues. As a result, current regulations do not serve to improve the welfare of the general public, as the economic potential of cross-border

trade is not maximized. As Ferdinand Wenas of the local government office in Tahuna explains: “We must find win-win solutions based on good cooperation between both governments and the private sectors in the present context of globalized trade.”

By all indications, the Sangihe and Talaud island cluster is not a prosperous region. Poverty is exacerbated by the lack of adequate transportation and communication infrastructure and poor social services. Crops are prone to pests, while many coral reefs and mangrove forests are damaged. The area is also vulnerable to natural disasters. Any cross-border trade taking place—both legal and illegal—is not animated by profit, but survival. Whether traded “legally” or “illegally,” there is no difference between the assortment of goods. For the most part, goods brought in from the Philippines fill the everyday needs of people, such as rubber slippers, kitchen ware, and nylon sleeping mats, as well as alcoholic beverages and coca-cola.⁵ Fishing equipment and materials for the upkeep of outrigger motorboats (*bangka* in Filipino) are also almost exclusively sourced from the Philippines. Fish, copra and Indonesian laundry detergent are the top “export” products to the Philippine market.

Admittedly, there have been cases of Filipinos being caught for smuggling firearms and fake dollar bills and engaging in illegal mining across the border. The connivance of Indonesian law enforcement in smuggling activities remains much harder to prove. Nevertheless, accomplices in these crimes are outsiders, not people of the borderzone. This distinction is crucial. This is also true for suspected terrorist movements that originate from outside this particular zone. Nusa Utara is far from being a terrorist hotbed, as my informants from all walks of life emphasized.

In this regard, it is important to understand the relative location of Sangihe and Talaud within the Indonesian archipelago. These northern island regencies are the most peripheral within the province of North Sulawesi, not just in terms of distance, but also in terms of development and infrastructure. The people in the capital of Manado look down on the northern *orang pulau* (island people). Ironically, the Minahasans who dominate provincial politics themselves feel marginalized within their own country. Nusa Utara is therefore *twice* removed from the nerve center of the Indonesian nation. The situation is even worse for the remote northernmost islands in the immediate border area.⁶ A concrete manifestation of this marginalization is that the large fish processing plants (among these, subsidiaries of Philippine

companies) are located in North Sulawesi's premier port city of Bitung. The jobs and revenues created, therefore, do not benefit the people in the borderzone where the fish are caught.

This marginalization extends to government structures, processes, and mindsets as well. For example, to encourage economic development, the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN⁷ Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) was signed into existence in 1994 and is experiencing renewed enthusiasm after some growing pains. Informants from local government units in Sangihe, however, are not too impressed by this initiative, since they are not included in the structure that formulates BIMP-EAGA's programs and strategies. Their interests are supposed to be represented by provincial and national-level officials who sit in the meetings. The local government of Sangihe, therefore, prefers to forge local-to-local linkages with Philippine counterparts from Sarangani province and General Santos City.⁸ The local government and local branches of national agencies based in Tahuna also have substantive suggestions on amending legal frameworks for cross-border trade, yet there are no venues for them to be heard by decisionmakers in Jakarta.

In this section, we have seen how the present-day isolation of Sangihe and Talaud is a product of recent history and state policies. We have also seen that the traditional intercoastal movement of people has been carried over to present times. As legal scholar Immanuel Makahanap explained to me: "Laws cannot stop the natural flow of people who have developed bonds with other islands over hundreds of years." Indeed, what makes the study of the sea border connecting Indonesia and the Philippines so intriguing is not just its rich history but also its mutable nature. It is this specificity of sea borders (*vis-à-vis* land borders) that we turn to in the following section.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SPACE: SEA BORDERS

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the Indonesian-Philippine border is that it has not been officially defined. Bilateral agreements between the two countries merely identify islands on both sides of the border without providing exact border coordinates. To date, there have been no serious assertions on either side in this border dispute, which is, for all intents and purposes, inactive.

At the heart of the matter lies the island of Miangas, the northernmost island on the Indonesian side of borderzone. In 1902, then American governor of Mindanao, Leonard Wood, visited the

island after his intriguing discovery that it was included in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which ceded Spanish rights over the Philippines to the United States. At the same time, the Dutch also claimed the island. The case was settled in favor of the latter in the 1928 decision of the International Court in The Hague (Jessup 1928, Lam 1932). The Republic of Indonesia, as the successor state, thus automatically took over Miangas. However, when it comes to the waters surrounding Miangas, technical issues of delineating the sea border remain. If both countries were to draw their baselines in standard fashion, this would result in an overlap in territorial waters, as the closest distance between two states is less than 24 nautical miles.⁹

To gain a fuller appreciation of sea borders in this part of the world, however, we must go beyond technical matters. Indeed, there is much to be learned from anthropological studies of littoral societies and especially from the rich maritime history of Southeast Asia. This maritime history is a “borderless history” (Warren 1998, 16) as opposed to a history of bounded entities exemplified by nation-states. Reid (2000, 39) thus writes: “The exuberant diversity of Southeast Asian life was chopped up by European colonialism into a dozen colonial states with fixed borders Recent scholarship, however, has recovered the sea as a unifying principle in Southeast Asian history, and one which paid little heed to those boundaries which European colonial nationalism insisted on drawing on land.”

This maritime dimension has been highlighted by a number of scholars of the Sulawesi-Sulu Sea. Ulaen (2003) thus speaks of *kawasan laut* (sea areas), Lopian (cited in Ulaen 2003, 38) conceived of the *Sistem Laut Sulawesi* (Sulawesi Sea System), and Warren (1985, 1998) produced seminal research on the rise of the “Sulu Zone.” All these attest to the ethos of mobility, which is so characteristic of insular Southeast Asia.

The rule of traditional leaders was not territorial. Power rested on the followers they maintained, not the area under their control (Shiraishi and Ulaen 2004, 8; Scott 1998, 185). Sultans were often referred to as “Lords of the Sea” for being able to draw autonomous seafaring people such as the Bajau, Ilanun and Samal into their sphere of influence (Hayase 2007, 35).

Trocki’s (2000) study of precolonial Malay “states” is also instructive. According to him, these “states” existed as “collections of thinly-populated centers at river mouths, held together through trade, kinship; shared ceremonial and religious practices; various forms of clientship and dependency; violence and intimidation; and possibly,

language” (2000, 4). He continues (Trocki 2000, 6): “As maritime states, Malay *negeri* tended to be bound together by water rather than separated. Rivers and straits tended to be the core of states and were rarely the edges Within these far-flung centers, traders and raiders, both indigenous and foreign seemed to roam at will The idea of drawing lines around bits of territory, or dividing one ruler’s sphere from another by means of a line, to say nothing of drawing a line through the middle of the sea, seem to have been foreign concepts at the beginning of the nineteenth century in this part of the world.”

These sensibilities are still felt today. In the Indonesian national language, homeland is referred to as *tanah air*, literally “land water” in English. Then there is the Indonesian state doctrine of *Wawasan Nusantara*, the archipelagic outlook, codified in 1973. Rooted in the New Order’s exaltation of Indonesian unity, this doctrine asserts that the seas connecting Indonesian islands are part and parcel of the nation.¹⁰ In this regard it is also interesting to note that the conception of the “mid-ocean archipelagic state in international law is wholly Southeast Asian in origin” (Johnston 1998, 20) and is directly traced to the historical Philippine and Indonesian claims (Dubner 1976, 59-65).

The “classic characteristics of a littoral society—that is, a symbiosis between land and sea” (Pearson 2006, 354) are palpable in every story the people of Nusa Utara tell about their lives. On the outer islands, village chiefs are officially referred to as *kapitalaud* (sea captains).

When they speak about their travels to Mindanao or Maluku, it is as if these places are just “in the neighborhood” or “around the corner.” They genuinely enjoy the elements of sea travel and have a good laugh at city people who are afraid of big waves. The sea is an integral part of island life.

In discussing the porous Indonesian-Philippine maritime border, foregrounding its materiality becomes inevitable. As stated in the introduction, the fluidity of this sea border is—both in the literal and figurative sense—an inescapable reality. No matter how much effort is exerted in patrolling this border, the object of surveillance is constantly carried away with the waves of the ocean. This is further compounded by the difficulty of navigating these waters. The northeast wind makes sea travel from November to March a treacherous affair. This seasonal element makes this part of the sea so unpredictable—how is one to pin down water, a force of nature more powerful than humans? And how do we assert propriety over the sea, when the sea has been a common resource to coastal people since time immemorial?

In the next section we look at the formation of identities. As we shall see, the social constructions of identity may be similarly fluid—yet, at the same time, structured by the material conditions of the locale.

IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT

That identities are fluid constructs, contingent on the intersection of various variables is, of course, a truism—especially in borderzones, where lines of ethnicity and political loyalties are far from self-evident. Yet throughout this research, what struck me were not so much identities in themselves—the ways people feel, think and talk about themselves—but the specific contexts where given identities are generated, strengthened, and weakened. This is illustrated by the story of Miangas.

With a total population of 982 people, life on Miangas is simple. There are no telephones, no cellular sites, no television antennae, no stores nor eating establishments. Fishing and copra are the main sources of livelihood. From Miangas, Cape San Agustin in Davao Oriental can be reached in three hours by pumpboat. By contrast, it takes three days to reach the main island of Sulawesi aboard a passenger ferry that ploughs the route every fortnight. Most of the adults, frequent border crossers, speak Bisaya and/or Tagalog and tune into Philippine radio every day. Many are agricultural migrant workers in Southern Mindanao. Locals interchangeably refer to their home as *Isla de las Palmas*—its Spanish name dating back to colonial times. Like many other outer islands in the sprawling Indonesian archipelago, Miangas rarely makes waves. An unprecedented expression of dissent in May 2005, however, put Miangas on the map.

The trigger was the death of Miangas Village Secretary Jhonlyi Awala, who succumbed to injuries he received at the hands of the chief of police of Miangas. The latter reportedly lost his temper when he encountered the drunken Awala on a Monday afternoon and beat him. With no adequate medical treatment available on the island, Awala died in the arms of his relatives and neighbors the same night. Agitated villagers kept vigil all night outside the residence of the subdistrict head, threatening to set a fire if their calls for justice would not be heard. The next day, the Talaud regent arrived to prevent the situation from escalating. About two hundred people, dressed in black, mobilized to express their outrage at the senseless death and the acute neglect by the Indonesian state. They lowered the Indonesian flag at the Miangas pier and greeted the local government delegation by waving a Philippine flag.

In shock, Indonesian authorities wasted no time in wooing back the island population. Sacks of rice, assorted medicines, and sports equipment were doled out almost immediately. Two years after the incident, the once sleepy island is awash with government projects: the pier is upgraded, a warehouse constructed, and there is even talk of developing an air strip to bring Miangas closer to the world. Piped water supply was completed in early 2006 and the first street light put up at the end of the year. A residence for a village doctor has been built, although there is still no word when he/she will set up practice. A terminal building and marketplace add up to the picture—yet without the steady flow of people and goods, these remain unused (Velasco 2007). The central government may have instituted a full-fledged program to develop Indonesia's outer islands in recent years, but without adequate consultation with the local people, assistance does not always correspond to the needs on the ground.

Nonetheless, the Philippine flag has long been returned to its rightful place at the Philippine Border Crossing Station on the island and locals are proud to point out the progress when receiving newcomers. Mr. Yoppy Luppa, the harbor master of Miangas, explains that “the people of Miangas feel close to the Philippines. But we are also scared of the war in Mindanao. We do not want to go there.”

In the case of Miangas, the remote location has bred pragmatists rather than rebels. Poverty and the lack of opportunities force them to be practical and resourceful. They are not interested to talk about whether they feel more “Indonesian” or “Filipino.” What matters more to them is that their grievances are being heard and taken seriously. In Miangas, as elsewhere in Nusa Utara, people prefer local identities to national ones, such as *orang Miangas*, *orang Talaud* or *orang Sangir*. They are just too far removed from the centers of the nation to participate meaningfully in provincial, let alone national life.

Similarly, being able to speak two to three languages, including Bisaya and/or Tagalog, is not a “big deal” to them, because it has always been that way in their seafaring-trading culture. Having relatives both in Davao and Bitung is normal on the island, where the intercoastal movement of people is a way of life. No one raises an eyebrow at “undocumented” Filipinos married to locals on the islands. It would certainly seem strange to them if an academic came to them to “celebrate” their “hybridity.”

The same is true for a thirty-something Adrian (not his real name) whom I befriended in Manado. Born to a Filipino father and a

Sangirese mother in Davao, he keeps his “mixed” identity a secret. Since his birth certificate states that he is “Filipino,” he has no Indonesian identity card nor a valid visa and passport. Yet he has lived, studied and worked “illegally” in Manado for more than twenty years and knows no other “home.” Ironically, Adrian is a card-bearing member of the nationalist Indonesian Democratic Party and has run for local office in the past. As a stateless nationalist, as it were, he defies many norms. Yet, the constant fear of being discovered is no joke at all. Adrian’s circumvention of Indonesian laws is not an act of mischief. For him, it is the only way he can continue the life he has built for himself in his motherland.

Knowing that its hold on the populace is more tenuous in the borderzone, the Indonesian state is not inactive in projecting its presence. I would like to propose two ways by which the borderzone is becoming “more Indonesian” through the years. One is what I call “state penetration,” the other is the rise of governmentality in the borderzone.

“State penetration” here refers to the concrete development of the border area, the increased density of government and military infrastructure as well as uniformed personnel. This also includes any structures built by the state, such as terminals, markers, and schools, which all bear the Indonesian flag. In places where people have traditionally relied on their own devices and local wisdom, all these serve as important reminders that the state, however far removed from the everyday life of people, “exists.”

Over time, the state is thereby able to establish its presence, augment its visibility, and become an increasingly important source of support and employment for local people. Many parents in the borderzone in fact encourage their children to enter civil service and become teachers, office workers, or police officers. “Even if the salary is small, at least it is a stable income. If you depend on fishing and trading like we do, you are never certain about how much you can earn at a given time,” they say.

Given the constraints of the job, these young civil servants are not as well traveled as their parents and do not have the same opportunities to visit the Philippines, learn a Filipino language, and establish business contacts and personal networks there. Teenagers I spoke to all dream of going to Manado or Jakarta, which they know from the film and music videos they watch, while their parents are more oriented towards the Philippines.

Such “state penetration” produces and strengthens a certain kind of governmentality in the borderzone. The concept of governmentality has its origins in the writings of Michel Foucault; it is the “government of men,” a “general technique of the exercise of power” by the government characterized by the diffusion of this power to “many different institutions and apparatuses,” a technique that is “the condition of [the] functioning and effectiveness” of “juridical and political structures” (Foucault 2003, 49). What is spoken of here is a mechanism of internal self-regulation that affirms “Indonesian” ways of thinking and doing—such as, for example, referring to Filipinos as “foreigners” on Indonesian shores.

Another prime example here is language. Until the 1960s, it was still common to use local languages in formal and social occasions (Ulaen 2003, 10). Nowadays, only a few members of the younger generation are still fluent in Sangirese or Talaud. The everyday language of Nusa Utara has become Manado-Malay, a variation of standard Indonesian—the latter being the language of the bureaucracy, public education and services.¹¹

Scott (1998, 1, 184-191) posits that mobile populations—sea nomads, hunters and gatherers, and the like—“have always been a thorn in the side of states.” Efforts to permanently settle these mobile people, or what he calls “sedentarization,” are a “perennial state project,” along with converting unruly nonstate spaces into neatly bound state spaces. To effectively govern and rule, it is in the state’s interests that its citizens have permanent addresses, speak the same national language, and consent to the same set of rules and norms.

Does the construction boom on Miangas serve the needs of the people or the state? Sometimes it is not that easy to tell.

CONCLUSION

In the main body of this essay, I portrayed the history and current challenges in the Indonesia-Philippine borderzone. At this point, I would like to show how an inclusive and consultative approach that allows local populations to articulate and voice their concerns can help in addressing these conditions. We have already seen, for example, that the people of Miangas, while appreciative of the government’s efforts, would prioritize the delivery of health services over the construction of transport terminals.

I much identify with Baud and van Schendel’s outlook (1997, 212): “We look at the struggles and adaptation that the imposition of

a border causes in the region bisected by it Traditionally, border studies have adopted a view from the center; we argue for a view from the periphery Rather than focusing on the rhetoric and intentions of central governments, we look at the social realities provoked by them.”

As seen above, my interaction with people in the borderzone has led me to question the centrality of identity and cultural flows in much of social sciences today. A major problem with the cultural approach to border issues is that it obfuscates the need to remedy conditions that place local populations at a disadvantage. Rather than hailing border-crossers as subversive, itinerant subjects, I have therefore sought to refocus attention on the structural conditions of poverty and marginality that necessitate the circumventing of official rules in the Indonesian-Philippine borderzone.

What the cultural approach lacks in problem orientation, the security approach more than makes up for this lack. This orientation trains its sight on identifying and sanctioning the wayward, those who violate the boundaries and sanctity of the nation-state. After all, “contraband and security, as it relates to border traffic generally, have become major issues now in Southeast Asia’s geopolitics” (Tagliacozzo 2001, 257). However, the security approach is also one-sided, in that it turns a blind eye to people’s traditional lifeworlds. The security framework simply leaves historical linkages and the fluid nature of the border unproblematized. Instead, the state’s security apparatus focuses on what I classify as “second order” problems in the borderzone: undocumented migration, illegal fishing, and smuggling. The shortcoming of this approach is that even though it may target “big fish” involved in transnational crime, oftentimes it victimizes the poor and marginalized who are unable to defend themselves. What is needed is a more inclusive and consultative approach that takes into account the practical implications of state policies. The call is not to simply tone down the security stance, but to take on the point of view of the local population and see how top-down structures and processes impact on individuals’ lives.

To illustrate, we must take a closer look at the profitable fishing operations orchestrated from General Santos and Sarangani in Mindanao, which employ fishermen of Sangirese origin or of mixed Sangirese-Philippine parentage who reside in Mindanao. These fishermen bring with them local knowledge of fishing grounds and are able to “blend in” once the fishing vessel transverses to the Indonesian side in

search of swarms of prized tuna and other fish. A common *modus operandi* is to have two captains and two flags (one Indonesian, one Filipino) which are conveniently interchanged depending on which side of the border they are on at a given time. This way, the operators are able to avoid getting caught for poaching in foreign waters and fishing without a permit. However, if their cover fails and a vessel is caught by Indonesian navy patrols, the crew is left to its own devices. Sometimes such cases are “settled” on the spot by paying bribes. Other times, the crew is apprehended and languishes in detention centers for many months before repatriation procedures are completed. Ship owners and operators often shrug off personal responsibility and have disinterested Indonesian agents represent them. Circumstances are aggravated when fishermen are unable to present proof of their identities and citizenship. The Philippine consulate in Manado is the only agency that helps these detainees.

It is difficult to forget the group of skinny, underweight boys, all minors, whom I met on the eve of their deportation in October 2006, after having braved months in the detention center in Manado. A few months later, the head of the center was transferred due to reported abuse during interrogation procedures. The story of a middle-aged woman I met on the boat on my way to Marore is equally distressing. Her husband, a petty trader (or “smuggler” as it were), forever vanished in the sea trying to avoid trouble in crossing the border.

I have thought long and hard about a question posed by one of my advisers in Manado, Rignolda Djamaluddin: “Are people tricking the state or is the state tricking the people?” The poignancy lies in the fact that transgressors in the borderzone at hand are not “big time” gangsters, just ordinary people following their traditional lifestyle of fishing and inter-island trade. They do not “trick” the state out of malice or for big profits. Some of us may secretly applaud the skillful mice in this cat-and-mouse game. But we should not forget that it is the cat that makes the rules of the game.

What we are up against here are the parameters of statehood and modernity. The modern nation-state is inextricably bound to its territory. The problem, according to Scott (1998,183-184), is that “modern states, to speak broadly, are ‘younger’ than the societies that they purport to administer. States therefore confront patterns of settlement, social relations, and production, not to mention a natural environment, that have evolved largely independent of state plans. The result is typically a diversity, complexity, and unrepeatability of social forms that are relatively opaque to the state, often purposely so.”

The state's perspective on border issues is therefore always delimiting, in that it is unable to account for the complex historical and social processes in the construction of the Indonesian-Philippine maritime border. This, in turn, creates a new set of concerns and puts into relief notions of "justice" in the borderzone. A critical limitation of the nation-state's border regime is that it establishes mutually exclusive categories: citizen/alien, legal/illegal, local/foreign.

The citizen/alien divide is problematic, because there are indeed individuals who, by virtue of their birth and blood, are both. Children of mixed parentage often choose one nationality over the other, as Indonesia only recently enacted a limited dual citizenship law. The situation becomes even more difficult for individuals who, for one reason or another, have no birth certificates to claim legitimate entitlements from the state. The simply fall through the cracks of the system.

By the same token, state-defined categories of what is legal/illegal (e.g., trading/smuggling) hardly capture the dynamism of the traffic zone at hand. Shiraishi and Ulaen (2004, 17) explain that "the Indonesian and Philippine states and their agents, as "players," inserting themselves into—and tap—the flow of goods and peoples for their own purposes in this zone . . . Basically, the state seeks to generate revenues for itself while penalizing (i.e. branding as "illegal") flows that it cannot directly appropriate. At the same time, border-crossers adapt to state presence by either complying with, or evading, the requirements set by the state. In both instances, they have recourse to middlemen and agents, negotiate under the table with border-traffic officials, or else slip through the border." What this implies is that the distinction between "legal" and "illegal" is much less salient than the distinction between "getting caught" and "getting away" with something.

We already encountered the local/foreign delineation above. The general norm is to conceive of foreign affairs as matters of national government. However, in the border area, what happens in a given locality is at once local and transnational. By the same token, actors are both local and supra-local. This creates a problematic asymmetry. Local government units and local residents are experts on real-life concerns in the borderzone, but lack the elbowroom for instituting meaningful change. By contrast, the central government in faraway Jakarta is supposed to represent the interests of the people in the borderzone, but is ill equipped to make decisions grounded in present-day realities.

Again, I turn to Scott (1998, 76-77) who problematizes this distance between the state and the people: “Officials of the modern state are, of necessity, at least one step—and often several steps—removed from the society they are charged with governing. They assess [the] life of their society by a series of typifications that are always some distance from the reality these abstractions are meant to capture . . . State simplifications such as maps, censuses, cadastral lists, and standard units of measurement represent techniques for grasping large and complex reality”

Here it must be stressed that borders in themselves are not “irrelevant” to people. For centuries, people in Sulawesi and Mindanao-Sulu have, in fact, taken advantage of differentials across localities in order to trade commodities, exchange marine technology, and enrich their lives. Problems arise when ordinary people eking out a living become victims of a border regime insensitive to their needs and intentions.

Perhaps the biggest trick the state is playing on the people is its attempt to project itself as an omnipotent, infallible entity—the irony of course being that the state’s sovereignty is compromised by its own state personnel, either through active connivance in or tolerance of “unlawful” practices. What people experience is not the rule of law, but the rule of inconsistency. This is also one reason people feel ambiguous about the “maintenance” of the border, which, to begin with, is an imposed reality on their lives and a barrier to their aspirations.

Taking the point of view of people living on the outer islands bordering on Philippine waters, we may ask ourselves: given that the Indonesian-Philippine border is not about to dissolve into thin air anytime soon, can borders actually become a resource for community development? How can the borderzone rise from its ascribed “backwater” status to become a venue for exchange and sharing?

There is no dearth of imagination on this subject. The people of North Sulawesi have many suggestions. I was often approached by parents who want to send their children to learn English in the Philippines or people inquiring about hospitals across the border. Another idea articulated is that of setting up information and training centers along the border for citizens of both countries, where people can receive social services and input on fishing and livelihood opportunities.

Unfortunately, there are not enough venues for citizens and officials in the borderzone to come together and discuss what a

revitalized border area might look like. The stage needs to be set not just for renegotiating urgent issues between the border population and state representatives, but also for a collective re-imagining of long-term solutions and cross-border cooperation. Such discussions would also require new thinking on the crafting of innovative instruments of border governance, such as updating the system of border-crossing cards and trading licenses.

What is therefore needed is not necessarily *more* central government intervention, but an *enabling* environment that empowers people—including public servants at the local level—to act on their own initiatives and seek opportunities across the Sulawesi-Sulu Sea without fear of sanction. ❀

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NOTES

1. *Kabupaten* (Indonesian regencies) are administrative-political units that constitute the nexus of the massive decentralization of the Indonesian state apparatus that began in 2001. Formerly joined, the Talaud island group was declared a separate *kabupaten* from Sangihe in 2002.
2. Although at times used interchangeably, I use “Sangihe” to refer to the main island and “Sangir/Sangirese” to refer to the people and society. The “Sangil” of Mindanao are descendants of Sangirese who migrated to Southern Philippines centuries ago and are now considered an ethnic minority group. According to government data in 1980, their population was estimated at 7,000 to 10,000 (Tiu 2005, 79).
3. The fear of pirate attacks has found expression in the names of some of the small islands in the immediate border area. Miangas means “exposed to piracy,” Tinakareng means “fenced off” (Aswatini et al. 1997, 9), and *Marore* means “tireless [resistance]” (Sri et al. 2003, 10).

4. The most important documents here are the Agreement on Border Trade of 1974, the Border Patrol Agreement of 1975, the Revised Agreement on Border Crossing of 1975 and subsequent implementing rules.
5. To the people of Sangihe, coca-cola from the Philippines tastes like “America” and “special,” while the locally brewed equivalent tastes “Indonesian” and “ordinary.” Religious kitsch from the Philippines (ostensibly made in China) is also popular. Examples include three-dimensional images of Jesus Christ, glittery renditions of the Last Supper and flashing, multi-color Christmas lights.
6. A few figures can help illustrate this. Tahuna, the capital of Sangihe is just 115 miles away from the southern coast of the Philippines, while Manado is 145 miles away. Marore, the northernmost island in the Sangihe cluster, is just 40 miles away from Mindanao, while Manado lies 274 miles south. Another 1,363 miles separate Manado from Jakarta. A flight from Manado to Davao just takes an hour, while a direct flight from Manado to Jakarta takes three times longer, transversing one Indonesian timezone.
7. Association of Southeast Asian Nations.
8. There were several exchanges of local government officials from both sides of the border from 2001 to 2006, resulting in memorandums of agreements to cooperate in several fields: trade and commerce, fisheries and marine resources, transportation, as well as education and socio-cultural activities.
9. Both countries are signatories to the 1982 United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), according to which territorial waters within 12 nautical miles are under the full sovereignty of a coastal state. The contiguous zone extends 24 nautical miles, which allows for the enforcement of national laws regarding smuggling and illegal migration. The Exclusive Economic Zones guarantee the right of a given state to exploit resources up to 200 nautical miles from the baseline. Traditional fishing rights are a caveat, as the UNCLOS recognizes these rights even across national boundaries as long as there is agreement between those two (or more) neighboring states, as in the Indonesian-Philippine case. My thanks to Mr. I Made Andi Arsana of the Department of Geodesy and Geomatic Engineering at the Gadjah Mada University for generously sharing his expertise on these matters with me.
10. In this context, Djalal (1996, 69-70) quotes Maj. Gen. Ali Moertopo, considered by many as one of the architects of the New Order: “The Indonesian nation as a nation whose existence has grown within the environment of *Nusantara*, in an environment of land and water, has the awareness that its waters are part of its life, livelihood and nourishment. As such, through *Wawasan Nusantara*, we consciously realize that the seas are the integrating element of the Indonesian archipelago. The islands which number in the thousands are in fact connected into one, connected by the waters of *Nusantara*. We can say that the seas constitute the ‘strategic linkage’ in the life of the Indonesian nation.”
11. In his famous work on nations as “imagined communities,” Anderson (2003) eloquently describes the role of public education and language in the process of Indonesian identity formation

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