



UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES



KONE FOUNDATION

## *Program and Abstracts*

# **Value frontiers across locations and landscapes: Anthropological perspectives**

Friday 8th of September 2023

9:00 – 17:10 EEST/UTC +3

University of Helsinki main building (Fabianinkatu 33, room F3005) and online

**Final Conference for the research project [New regimes of commodification and state formation on the resource frontier of Southeast Asia, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki](#).  
Funded by Kone Foundation.**

The final conference will address questions and concerns about the expanding and accelerating revaluation and transformation of socio-natural landscapes and their interconnections across Southeast Asia and Oceania. It aims to discuss the frontierization of local landscapes in terms of multi-scalar politics of commodification and its implications and variegated expressions across locations. We approach the question of the 'frontierization' of landscapes through methodological and analytical frameworks that reflect the valuations of environment and social action, state and corporate formation and effects, the interplay of states and corporations, and human-environment relations in altered environments. Along the lines of our project findings, presenters suggest that the frontier and the process of frontierization illustrates the tensions over who has power, control and access to decide on the configurations and qualities of sociomaterial relations and how they are valued across locations, space and time.

Keynote speakers:

- Anna Tsing, University of California, Santa Cruz (**online presentation**)
- Sophie Chao, University of Sydney (**online presentation**)
- Ward Berenschot, University of Amsterdam (**online presentation**)

**Speakers:** Liana Chua, Hannah Fair, Michaela Haug, Isabell Herrmans, Timo Kaartinen, , Anu Lounela, Viola Schreer, Pujo Semedi, Kenneth Sillander, Tuomas Tammisto, and Heikki Wilenius

**Project members and conference organizers:**

Anu Lounela (PI)  
Tuomas Tammisto  
Heikki Wilenius

**Seminar coordinator:**

Eemi Nordström

[eemi.nordstrom@helsinki.fi](mailto:eemi.nordstrom@helsinki.fi)**PROGRAM**

9:00

Opening words: Anu Lounela

9:05 – 11:15

**Panel 1: Landscapes, land use and social relations in transition****Keynote:** Possession/dispossession: How frontiers become property*Anna Tsing* (45min + 10 min Q & A)**Speakers** (45 min + 30 min discussion):

- Michaela Haug: Oil palm expansion, dispossession and the struggle for a self-determined life in East Kalimantan, Indonesia
- Pujo Semedi: Developmental refusal and farmers' vulnerabilities in Central Kalimantan peatlands
- Anu Lounela: Frontierization of wetlands in Central Kalimantan: dispossession and commodification
- *Moderator: Heikki Wilenius*

11:15 – 12:15

Lunch

12:20 – 14:30

**Panel 2: Mapping and revaluating environmental relations****Keynote:** Mapping value: Cartographic conundrums on the West Papuan plantation frontier*Sophie Chao* (45 min + 10 min Q & A)**Speakers** (45 min + 30 min discussion):

- Liana Chua: What does care take? Saving and sequestering in orangutan conservation
- Hannah Fair & Viola Schreer: Pongo oeconomicus? (De)commodification across the global nexus of orangutan conservation
- Isabell Herrmans & Kenneth Sillander: Frontier Life: The frontier dynamic as a source of Dayak counterculture
- *Moderator: Tuomas Tammisto*

14:30 – 14:45

Coffee break

14:45 – 16:55

### **Panel 3: Land rights and frontier politics**

**Keynote:** Frontier Politics and Rightlessness: Palm oil companies and land dispossession in Indonesia

*Ward Berenschot* (45 min + 10 min Q & A)

**Speakers** (45 min + 30 min discussion):

- Timo Kaartinen: Evolving images of smallholding in West Kalimantan
- Heikki Wilenius: Frontier counterpoints: Media imaginaries of landscape transformation in Central Kalimantan
- Tuomas Tammisto: Occupying land, closing the frontier: The temporalities of frontier dynamics in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea
- *Moderator: Anu Lounela*

16:55 – 17:05

Discussant: Sarah Green

17:05 – 17:10

Closing words: Tuomas Tammisto & Heikki Wilenius



## ABSTRACTS

In order of appearance

### **Panel 1: Landscapes, land use and social relations in transition**

#### KEYNOTE

#### **Possession/dispossession: how frontiers become property**

*Anna Tsing*

University of California Santa Cruz

There are places and times where property, as known by states and corporations, is not yet secure. How is property made in such scenes? This talk explores how the remaking of landscape—and particularly the eradication of swamps—can dispossess Indigenous residents while making property for settlers. My research concerns the frontier city of Sorong in Indonesian Papua. At the heart of settler occupation is the imposition of concrete infrastructure to “develop” what has been a swamp. Concrete is the swamp’s nemesis, and its inverse. The swamp is open and dynamic; concrete blocks and encloses. Its making requires materials the mining of which smashes up the land. My talk, based on recent and continuing fieldwork in Sorong, explores how concrete injures watersheds, and, in the resulting mess, makes property. The talk offers a view of Anthropocene destruction from the weeds, that is, close to the ground.

#### SPEAKERS

#### **Oil palm expansion, dispossession and the struggle for a self-determined life in East Kalimantan, Indonesia**

Michaela Haug

University of Freiburg

The hinterland of East Kalimantan, Indonesia, has repeatedly become the subject of processes of frontierization, defrontierization and refrontierization as a result of resource extraction, national interests and nature conservation. With the rapid advance of oil palm expansion, a renewed process of frontierization has begun in East Kalimantan since the mid-1990s, which for many local Dayak communities has been accompanied by dispossession, conflicts over customary land and the (most often adverse) incorporation into new systems of production.

Through a case study of a Dayak Benuaq community in the Middle Mahakam region, I examine how valuations of environment, labor, and self-determination shift as a result of palm oil expansion. I specifically address the experience of dependence and the aspiration to lead self-determined lives, which is of central value to the Dayak Benuaq and for them is inextricably linked to land ownership and a diversified economy. After the community lost a large portion of its land to the establishment of oil palm plantations in the late 1990s, the vast majority of villagers became initially dependent wage laborers on the plantation. However, the devaluation of their labor and the feeling of dependence provoked the villagers's resistance. On the remaining land, they first planted rubber and subsequently also oil palms,

thus regaining - at least temporarily - their self-determined lives as independent small-holders.

Using this case study as a point of departure, I argue that processes of dispossession and the re-valuation of socionatural landscapes within the context of oil palm expansion undermine not only existing customary valuations, but also the emergence of alternative palm oil futures.

### **Developmental Refusal and Farmers' Vulnerabilities in Central Kalimantan Peatlands**

Pujo Semedi

Dept. of Anthropology, Universitas Gadjah Mada

The conversion of the peatlands in Central Kalimantan into an intensive food crop production area places farmers in a situation of vulnerability. Their obvious vulnerability comes from their dependence on the market and exposure to harmful agricultural chemicals. Apart from that, the government policies of sponsoring migration of farmers to the peatlands on the basis of a view that local farmers do not have the ability to develop themselves had also created a social tension. By examining the Kalamangan local farmers' statements and their demands I argue that the land reclaiming is the farmers' way to negotiate the government's negative valuation.

### **Frontierization of wetlands in Central Kalimantan: dispossession and commodification**

Anu Lounela

University of Helsinki

This presentation addresses the dynamics of the frontier situation in disturbed wetlands, where state land management overlaps with indigenous peoples' land use and access rights. By frontier situation, I mean processes in which the 'state land' opens up wetlands to dispossession and commodification, as the state erases prior rights and replaces them with state rights, pushing people to make difficult choices about how to secure their access to land and living in the wetland landscapes.

The presentation is based on ethnographic research among the Ngaju people living in the riverine landscapes of southern Central Kalimantan. In the Central Kalimantan province, approximately 80% of the province is legally classified as state land. Originally shifting cultivators who have combined subsistence with market-based livelihoods, the Ngaju Dayak are increasingly caught between state and corporate territorial expansion and projects, driving them to become modern commodity producers and to abandon 'inefficient' or 'destructive' livelihood strategies and land tenure systems and participating in various state schemes that privatize or commodify land and resources. The paper examines how the state control over land is linked to the making of frontiers of dispossession and commodification.

## Panel 2: Mapping and revaluating environmental relations

### KEYNOTE

#### Mapping value: Cartographic conundrums on the West Papuan plantation frontier

*Sophie Chao*

University of Sydney

This paper examines how processes of frontierization reconfigure the material, sociocultural, and moral relationships of humans and other-than-humans in the Indonesian-occupied region of West Papua. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the southern Papuan lowlands, the paper centers the experiences, theories, and critiques of Indigenous Marind communities who in the last decade, have seen vast swaths of their customary lands and forests converted to monocrop oil palm plantations in the name of national food security, economic growth, and regional development. It focuses in particular on how Marind understand the role of state and corporate maps in alternately representing or enacting changing sociomaterial relations, knowledge regimes, and resource use on the Papuan plantation frontier. The paper further considers how Marind's own forms of "participatory mapping" challenge state and corporate understandings of *what* merits mapping, *how* it should be mapped, and on the basis of *whose* epistemic framework. Ambiguity, friction, and divergent horizons of hope emerge as central to these participatory mapping activities, as Marind struggle to reconcile maps' strategic value in advocacy contexts with maps' social significance as cultural artefacts.

### SPEAKERS

#### What does care take? Saving and sequestering in orangutan conservation

Liana Chua, with the [GLO](#) and [POKOK](#) project teams

University of Cambridge and Brunel University London

This paper engages with the panel theme by conceptualising orangutan (and other biodiversity) conservation as a frontier of care: an inherently interventionist field of imaginaries, structures and practices that reshapes lives and spaces in the name of caring for orangutans. Drawing on multi-sited ethnography that my colleagues and I have carried out across the global nexus of orangutan conservation, I ask what care *takes*, in different senses of the term. What does it take to care about and for (non)human others at a time of sustained environmental crisis? What does it mean to be a care-taker? And what do programmes and practices of care take – as in demand, claim, or extract? Through these questions, care emerges as a prominent yet contested value with simultaneously intimate, local and geopolitical implications.

## **Pongo oeconomicus? (De)commodification across the global nexus of orangutan conservation**

Hannah Fair and Viola Schreer

University of Oxford and Brunel University London

In contrast to typical frontier dynamics in Indonesian Borneo, biodiversity conservation efforts do not extract resources from lands and forests. Still, they exploit and commodify images, figures, stories of, and affect produced by local flora and fauna to generate financial, moral, and political support for their cause, a process which in recent years has heavily been helped by digital technologies, as most prominently seen in the case of orangutans. Taking the case of this international conservation flagship as object of analysis, this paper investigates the ramifications of this form of resource-making. It asks how and for what purposes produce orangutans value at different nodes of orangutan conservation? With which implications? And how is the digital enrolled in these processes of frontierisation?

We trace orangutans' "object life" (Collard 2020: 6) from digitally mediated engagements with orangutans, on-the-ground rehabilitation efforts to interactions between orangutans and villagers in Indonesian Borneo to show the (de)commodification of these critically endangered apes. By shedding light on the diverse, often conflicting ways in which orangutans generate value across these various scales, localities and forms of encounter, this paper not only unveils the frictions within and between online and offline spaces, but illustrates that even geographically distant and digitally mediated encounters with orangutans can engender meaningful, ongoing interspecies relations of compassion and care. By highlighting the currently overlooked potential for digitally mediated engagement to decommodify relations with the non-human, this paper complicates the critiques of nature commodification, while showing how Bornean frontiers are made *with* and *through* animals and their (de)commodification.

## **Frontier Life: The Frontier Dynamic as a Source of Dayak Counterculture**

Isabell Herrmans and Kenneth Sillander

University of Helsinki

This contribution focuses on the subject of frontier culture in contrast to the more widely studied economic and politico-ecological dimensions of frontierization. It considers the influence of the frontier dynamic on local culture and lifeways among the Bentian Dayaks of East Kalimantan with particular attention to recent cultural developments. Based on long-term longitudinal fieldwork, the purpose is to offer a perspective on how the frontier may be lived and experienced in response to and apart from its constraining influence and constitutive quality of indeterminacy. The Bentian inhabit a geographically peripheral subdistrict close to the Central Kalimantan border which remains among the least developed in their province, but which has undergone radical ecological and economic transformation in the last two decades through expansive oil palm cultivation. A potential case for stereotypical dissident Zomians, their out-of-the-way remoteness along with the pace of change to which they have been subjected makes some facets of frontier development pronounced and others muted. Not quite as dystopian as Anna Tsing's frontier portrayal in another upriver area of south Borneo, the contribution makes a case for the possibility of cultural resilience and

revival. We propose that the frontier dynamic is instrumental in invigorating a sense of Dayak identity and modulating local culture in adaptive although contested ways, as exemplified, among other things, by *rijoq* song performances, gambling, tattoos, roadside residence and new-styled communal and private longhouses.

## **Panel 3: Land rights and frontier politics**

### **KEYNOTE**

#### **Frontier Politics and Rightlessness: Palm Oil Companies and Land Dispossession in Indonesia**

*Ward Berenschot*

University of Amsterdam

This lecture discusses the relative ease with which palm oil companies dispossess rural Indonesians of their land. Employing detailed documentation of 150 conflicts between rural communities and palm oil companies, I aim to analyze both the actual processes through which companies acquire land as well as the legal provisions that facilitate these processes. I argue that palm oil companies are succeeding in dispossessing rural Indonesians because of the ways in which formal regulations and informal machinations have produced rightlessness. This rightlessness has three main sources: curtailed land rights, ‘backdoored’ legal protections, and collusive business-politics relationships which enable companies to evade regulations. These particular features of frontier politics – a legal framework full of smoke and mirrors combined with pervasive collusive exchanges of favours between business actors and local authorities – is allowing many palm oil companies to have their cake and eat it too: while they benefit from the legitimacy afforded by state regulations, they regularly manage to evade the obligations associated with such regulation.

### **SPEAKERS**

#### **Evolving images of smallholding in West Kalimantan**

Timo Kaartinen

University of Helsinki

Estate agriculture in West Kalimantan is promoted with the argument that it improves the livelihoods of swidden farmers by maximizing the value produced by a unit of labor. This economic calculus hides the consequences of estate development for diverse livelihoods and people who pursue various adaptive strategies to maintain their land and residential rights. My paper focuses on a recent shift in the pattern of landholding by smallholder participants in estate schemes in this area and the response of different groups to land access in the conditions created by industrial farming. While the model estates of the 1970s reserved a portion of land for food production for individual farmers, the partnership schemes of the 2000s kept a similar portion of land in the nominal ownership of the farmer but dedicated it to palm oil production. Individual title to specific land has therefore remained central for the justification of the estate system, in spite of radically altered conditions of actually earning a livelihood while participating in it. Peluso’s argument about the “smallholder slot” and Elmhirst’s discussion about migrants’ “ethic of fixity” provide useful frameworks for



understanding how local estate situations translate into positionalities in the broader political economy.

### **Frontier counterpoints: Media imaginaries of landscape transformation in Central Kalimantan**

Heikki Wilenius  
University of Helsinki

This paper discusses the media imaginaries of resource commodification in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, focusing on events that took place in 2000. The focus is on two distinct but interrelated media events. One of them relates to the way accounts of animistic phenomena are circulated. The other is about how the politics of natural resource commodification are debated, and how various actors are indexed in this debate. The data analyzed consists of three volumes (2018–2020) of a Central Kalimantan newspaper, a selection of news pieces from internet-based media (2017–2020), conversations under various keywords that have taken place on Twitter in 2020, and a selection of YouTube videos featuring supernatural phenomena, published between 2017–2020.

In the paper I argue that (1) the mediascape of Central Kalimantan is fragmented: the established media outlets represent various state interests fairly explicitly even though they claim to represent the public, while social media discussions and circulating multimedia narratives more often offer a counterpoint, if not a counterpublic, functioning as a venue for the mobilization and expression of the interests of citizens, but, animist perspectives are almost completely absent from these media. However, (2) in the (often sensationalist) accounts of supernatural events, animist perspectives are raised, and often presented as an indirect political critique. Finally, (3) it is argued that the discourses of animism and resource commodification are interrelated, even if they are not in direct dialogue with each other.

### **Occupying land, closing the frontier: The temporalities of frontier dynamics in East New Britain, Papua New Guinea**

Tuomas Tammisto  
University of Helsinki

In this paper I examine "the frontier" as a process during which a given area or location is presented by some actors to have abundant and "unused" resources waiting to be taken. As many scholars of frontier dynamics have noted, this image of the frontier as a location of abundant and cheap resources often displaces local uses, tenure rights and valuations of the area. "The frontier" is thus characterized by uncertain tenure rights and struggles over the control of the resources, and what counts as a resource in the first place. Emphasizing its processual character, I argue that it is useful to examine "the frontier" as spatial and temporal dynamic, or a time window, during which the frontier conditions are present. This means that the frontier "opens" with the emergence or creation of its defining conditions, and "closes" when the conditions change---for example when tenure rights are consolidated.

I examine these dynamics in the context of East New Britain Province in Papua New Guinea, where logging and plantation companies have operated at various points under frontier

conditions. I focus especially on how the inhabitants of rural East New Britain have sought to "close" the frontier and consolidate their tenure rights by making their presence visible---both administratively and materially---on the land. The local attempts to close the frontier and bring certainty to questions of tenure rights have taken surprising and even paradoxical forms, for example by allowing oil palm companies to operate in the area.