

Research Collaboration Report on West Kalimantan 2013

by Tim Nöldeke

I'm not really sure how it happened that I became interested in Indonesia. I just remember that I attended a seminar about different political and ethnic currents in Indonesia in my fifth semester. Usually my focus was more or less on India and West-Africa but then I decided to dabble in an exotic non-European language namely *Bahasa Indonesia*. In the following term I chose the basic language course *Bahasa Indonesia*. In my



eyes, the most crucial advantages of *Bahasa Indonesia* was the huge number of international speakers which is still steadily growing; most people forget the fact that Indonesia is the biggest Muslim country in the world. Secondly, it is not necessary to learn a new alphabet (in contrast to many other Asian languages). And finally, it is quite easy to learn the grammar and basics for rudimentary conversation. Even for students like me, who are usually untalented failures regarding languages, this challenge seemed manageable. The fact that Indonesia's growing economy is gaining more and more relevance in the (Southeast) Asian markets might be also an interesting fact for those who are planning to focus on this region after studying.

Indeed, the language course was a lucky choice. This enabled me to go to Indonesia, more precisely to Kalimantan for a short period of collaborative field-research. Half a year later, the five students from Heidelberg met again in the Universitas Gadjah Mada/UGM in Yogyakarta to prepare the field research. I will summarize the details of this month as following: the schedule included some private lessons in a language school as well as some days at the UGM. It was a nice and convivial month and



a good opportunity to adapt to the Indonesian lifestyle (and to learn how to drive motorbike in Indonesia's traffic).

Together with 40 Indonesian students and the lecturer and dean of the Faculty of Cultural Sciences we went to West-Kalimantan. The flight to Pontianak, which is the capital of West Kalimantan, was



followed by a 24-hour trip in a cargo boat up the river Meliau and a half-day ride in the back of a truck. Finally the students were dropped in small groups at different villages (Dayak, migrants or Melayu villages). Every student was analyzing different issues, my task was to collect GPS-data to create a map of the area and to conduct interviews about the changes in land use and the local farmer's attitude towards the big palm-oil companies.

I lived together with two Indonesian students in a Melayu village (former migrants from the Malaysian border). Despite their support, the language barrier was an obvious problem, especially in view to the local dialect. At the time of our arrival Ramadan had just started what means that drinking or eating during the daytime was not allowed. People who refuse fasting (*puasa*) are usually stigmatized in their community and are considered as displaying unmoral behavior (exceptional of young children,

pregnant women and old people). With the exception of young children, pregnant women and older people, those who don't fast (*puasa*) are often stigmatized within their community as exhibiting immoral behavior. And of course, for Europeans this kind of 'yearly spiritual diet' can be quite arduous regarding the stifling heat during the daytime. Because I was obviously a 'bule' (white person) I had a special status and was able to ask for some rice in the morning. But usually I preferred to go to the neighboring Dayak village, which was Christian. There usually they served me a fresh meal and furthermore this offered a great opportunity to compare the Dayak lifestyle and habits with those of the Melayu, who are strictly Muslim. The fasting also seemed to be an element which was used by both communities to underscore their identity and independence from each other. When I arrived for breakfast in the Dayak village, the Dayak people were usually joking about their neighbors whereas the Melayu people considered the Dayak as faithless (at least this was my impression, but of course there were many exceptions as well). I have to mention here, that I stayed in a Melayu host family, which of course was Muslim. On the surface, the lifestyle of Melayu and Dayak people looks quite similar, but a closer look reveals the differences. The Dayak practice a spiritual mixture of old traditional elements combined with Christian rules. For example in the past important events in community life were directed only by a member of the ministry of 'Adat' (the role of Adat is to guide and maintain the moral principles of the society,



punish any violation of these principles and to solve social problems). Today these kinds of events are usually accompanied by a Christian priest. I never saw this kind of spiritual symbiosis of traditional and new religious elements in the Muslim Melayu community.



As well as the religious differences the eating habits differed widely. Dayak people eat mostly any kind of animals (including snakes, monkeys, dogs and especially pigs), which are considered as highly impure from the Melayu point of view. Furthermore the male Dayak (at certain events the women as well) like to drink very much. This seems to be manifested in their culture, on the one hand- when they drink the traditional *Tuak* (rice wine) and on the other hand this habit also seemed to be pushed by Chinese merchants, who sell strong *Arak* (spirit) on

the black market in the nearest city. And last but not least the alcohol is partially responsible for the fact that the Dayak people like to celebrate in the evening and hang out in groups, whereas the Melayu people seem to stay more or less in their family units in the evening (but maybe this impression was distorted because of Ramadan).

In retrospective research experience had a big impact on me, because it was one of those adventures, which sometimes occur and influence your personal aims and shape your point of view. Inspired by this experience and following the insights from my Bachelor I decided to maintain my Indonesian focus and started a Master focusing on the economy and cultural aspects of Indonesia and the neighboring region.

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