

Land grabbing, conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations: perspectives from East and Southeast Asia

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Migration and multi-sited agrarian change: frontier capitalisms and their complex effects

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Please note this is an extremely preliminary paper; fieldwork in both sites is still on-going and in relatively intensive phases. We have not had easy access to journals or academic references so have chosen to reflect only on our own findings. Please do not quote.

Recent work by environmental sociologists, geographers, and environmental anthropologists writing on commodity and resource frontiers generally look to explain how contemporary frontiers are different from classic (and/or flawed) understandings of frontiers. Classic frontier analyses are based on interpretations of North and South American frontiers in the 19th and early 20th centuries when global capitalism was also on the move. The recent literature on new sorts of frontiers has exploded with the expansion of global production and so-called land grabbing; in this preliminary presentation it is not possible to review it all or to put it directly into conversation with the frontiers discussed here. We are actually in the middle of fieldwork and have not moved up to the realm of the conceptual: we offer the following as a very preliminary analysis of the ethnographic and other empirical materials we have been collecting in our sites.

We are trying to understand how labor migration, particularly circular migration, relates to land use change, changes in access to land and resources, and smallholder-laborer wellbeing in the midst of Indonesia's transforming agrarian environments. Our studies in the districts of West Kalimantan and East Java have thus led us away from the usual sites of agrarian production and expropriation to sites and stories of migration. We are following mobile labor, capital, investors, and smallholders to new frontiers where they are creating what we see as new frontier capitalisms.

Much writing about contemporary frontiers is concerned with BIG corporate commodity frontiers that have emerged in a neoliberal era, that is, in the years after big state development projects with foreign funding came on line. Today's commodity and resource frontiers still have some kind of formal state presence. These Big Frontiers are comprised of multinational and state-connected logging and mining companies, oil palm, and rubber corporations. They transform property rights, land uses, and patterns of access to resources.

The focus on the big companies and big state presences is important: it is studying up; it is looking at the powerful; and it exposes multiple ways that resources and land are being expropriated on global and national scales. However, only looking "up" can hide what is going on with smallholders and laborers. Smallholders in the areas of resource extraction and production are not passive victims but often involved in what is going on, that is: with both attracting big companies AND resisting their presence. Some smallholders buy into neoliberal or entrepreneurial discourses but reinterpret these through their lives and livelihood contexts. Nevertheless, smallholders have to survive; they seek to gain traction and mobility under conditions of massive (not always rapid) change; this is a challenge when BIG forms of extraction and production block the possibilities of their participation in the booms that companies can generate.

Smallholders are thus interesting in relation to the big corporate actors changing the landscapes because many smallholders are also workers ("labor"), both inside and outside these companies. Many individuals who are smallholder farmers in one site are mobile or migrant workers in other sites. Many families have become multi-sited households. They work and live in multiple places and in a variety of ways that either compete with or embrace corporate activities.

We are looking at smallholders in two very different regions of Indonesia, West Kalimantan and East Java, where migration to work is a major factor in the lives of smallholders and affects village economies and land uses. Both are areas where new or old commodities, institutions, and processes have been subjected to an enormous amount of recent or long-term attention from land grab analysts. In each region, and in each "local" site the specific patterns and qualities of migration, land control, and resource access differ greatly as do the uses of micro capital from migration. "Local" here

actually means multiple localities across and within which multiple actors, institutions, resources, and practices interact.

In the case of West Kalimantan, the resources grabbed have included extensive amounts of land for oil palm, rainforests for both timber and conservation, and more recently vast tracts of land for industrial mining of bauxite. The land and resource grabs in Westkal began about 45 years ago with the logging boom. State sponsored or sanctioned international logging as well as “illegal logging” took many forms—sometimes the illegal loggers were the state actors operating outside concession areas. Subsequently, the state experienced booms in other agricultural crops and minerals. The ways land and resources have been grabbed has been extremely complex, and has varied with the nature of the resource and its commodity character, particularly in recent years as oil palm and bauxite mining have spread across the province. In this process, land grabbers have included not only the usual suspects but also local leaders, customary leaders, newly elected officials, and others. Smallholders of all levels of wealth are caught in the middle.

The prices of the agricultural and forest commodities on which smallholders depend have dropped so low that farmers are experiencing unprecedented hardships. Some have two or three hectares of land. That land, if planted in rubber and or rice, is not sufficient to maintain a family of four at a subsistence level, in part because the basic costs of living have increased—they now include payments for electricity, school clothes, secondary and higher education, transport. The alleged “smallholder” schemes for growing oil palm have generally failed to provide a sustainable living for smallholders who have given up their land to companies, in part because of failures and broken promises on the parts of companies (to pay workers, to pay shares, etc). Those companies that do pay wages and shares do so on a monthly basis, and people need cash for both daily household maintenance and occasional (sometimes unexpected) big expenses. Thus they seek high paying options. Gold mining is seen as one of the only well-paying options for workers with few “modern” skills or education. Workers with an elementary school education or less can make money. It is risky and dangerous, but if the crew finds gold, the payoffs are high. Miners we met often ask, “what other occupation provides as much work for poorly educated, rural people?”

In mountain areas of East Java, the “land grab” took place nearly a century ago and was done first by colonial foresters; continued by Indonesian government foresters. In the mountains of Java they tended to take control of the highest elevation forests and any land still unconverted by peasant agriculture. In some cases they expropriated previously claimed land as well. They put the lower elevations of these areas into the production of resins or wood and the highest elevations into protection forests. The colonial government also sponsored or enabled plantations in the uplands for producing tropical crops such as tea, coffee, chocolate, and other global commodities.

Local people farmed low value subsistence crops such as corn, cassava, and upland rice around the edges of these forests and plantations. In the 1950s, Indonesian government foresters established production forests near the upper elevations of many of these mountains. In the site I am working, they planted mahogany and pine, and set up a settlement area on 12 hectares of the forest land that colonial foresters had reserved some thirty years earlier. Forest workers were able to construct simple houses of temporary materials (bamboo and wood) there. Some came from areas within the forest to settle, others migrated into the area from other regions in East Java and beyond. Today the population of this 12 hectares has increased by natural growth and in-migration. The small plots of land the workers had access to in the forest were planted in corn, cassava, and dry rice, just as on the private land around the forest village. In an adjacent tea plantation within the village bounds, worker-families were provided with simple, “temporary” housing, but did not have access to the plantation land for planting agricultural crops on the same land as the tea. Both forest dependent and plantation dependent villagers were largely landless. In the 1980s, three waves of people went to Sumatra, Central Kalimantan, and South Kalimantan as transmigrants, mostly from these two sections of the

village. Today, expanded access to forest land--because of changes in land use and the use of remittances to buy milk cows--is subsidizing the smallholder activities of landless households as well as those with small and medium amounts of land. Larger dynamics related to the shifting politics of land use empower local farmers or workers trying to gain or maintain access to it.

The results of our research (so far) have been surprising. Overall, we have found that migration plays a major role in the dynamics of the smallholder household economies and agrarian relations in both areas, though in very different ways both within and across sites. Migration has changed the relationships between smallholders and industrial, corporate, or big state agrarian enterprises. Migration also has affected socio-environmental relations in both sites, for very different and complex reasons. Yet in both sites, smallholder farmers have been able to maintain their viability as smallholders or to become smallholder farmers BECAUSE OF the remittances or funds sent or brought back by other family members from sites of migration.

It is important to recognize that many smallholder farming families are simultaneously worker families. This is true for families whose members engage in locally situated off farm labor and for multi-sited households whose members work at long distances from one another. When one or more household members work off the immediate farm, the capital or income generated helps the families who stay on the land in various ways. For example, “help” can also take the form of a family member leaving the household and “standing on their own feet” (*berdiri sendiri*). In other cases, children send money to struggling parents with or without other children at home; siblings collectively finance a younger sibling to attend tertiary education (university, college, or post-secondary skills’ training e.g., English language or computer programming); or wives or husbands leave home to work and send money home to pay for everyday expenses, to pay for the expenses of schooling, support a spouse’s family members, or invest in something less expensive and or more remunerative than farmland.

Some landless or near landless families comprised predominantly of workers have no desire to become crop farmers. Indeed, in both East Java and West Kalimantan, the purchase of agricultural land is not the only goal of migrants; nor is “returning to the land” to farm. Some families start out as landless worker families; migration enables them to become smallholders on their own land or on land they gain access to through other agrarian dynamics. Others move into other rural pursuits—raising livestock for dairy or meat; opening a shop or serving food; transporting stones, soil, sand, and wood from village to factory or construction sites.

In sum, we have been looking at how smallholder-laborers in the vicinities of forests and agroforests have acted, reacted, resisted, or adapted to huge agrarian transformations in their regions in order to maintain or improve their family livelihoods and to maintain or create smallholder identities as independent production units or entrepreneurs—even those smallholders who do not aim to farm the land. Many smallholders have changed their household economic strategies in response to the changes in the land and its access. Yet, success in maintaining a smallholder livelihood seems increasingly to require off-farm work or the willingness to migrate to off farm work. The costs and nature of “basic needs” are changing – families have increasing needs for cash, capital, and collateral for credit.

So let me give you a few more details about our current field work in West Kalimantan and East Java.

West Kalimantan: I have been working in peri-urban Singkawang on the northwest coast of WestKal, where small scale mining and circular migration associated, occurring in the wake of two massive agrarian transformations. When I say agrarian transformation what I am referring to are the massive changes not only in land use – a certain commodity such as rubber or oil palm coming into production—but also changes in land tenure—property rights, and access to resources-- and the production of governance territories—maybe a sort of reterritorialization? The first big transformation came after protracted political violence in the mid-late 1960s and early 1970s and the displacement of

over 100,000 Chinese from rural areas in the northwest. The productive and residential areas forcefully abandoned by the Chinese were given/taken over by local residents (Dayaks, Malays, Javanese, and Madurese) generating internal, if relatively localized, migrations. This important period of change and agrarian reorganization in the northwest region of West Kalimantan has received very little nuanced attention in either the literature on the violence and its aftermath, or the literature on transmigration and its effects. Yet it played a pivotal role in the structures of access to land and resources in this region. Five to ten years after the violence, the central government and the World Bank planned and financed extensive and numerous rubber plantations in conjunction with transmigration/resettlement projects across the province. Some of the locally re-allocated land was taken back for government resettlement and rubber or oil palm plantations. Indonesians from Java and other parts of the country were brought to settled to work in some of these projects in the early 1980s.

The second big agrarian transformation occurred when new oil palm companies came into the area in the early years of the 21st century. Oil palm in the districts of Sambas and Bengkayang—northwest West Kalimantan--came primarily in the 2000s, and expanded rapidly after 2006.¹ Mostly private companies, some Malaysian, some Indonesian, some mixed.

Many smallholders who have become oil palm company “partners” and or workers do not make enough money to live, and most oil palm projects are plagued with conflicts (often of their own making). However, the inability to meet a subsistence level on oil palm worker earnings alone is not only a result of land grabbing. It has as much or sometimes more to do with the commodity values of commodities that farmers have planted on their own land—the land that was not grabbed--and with the low wages and percentages of profit that participating farmers get from the oil palm schemes.

The villages to which I am referring in the Bengkayang area have maintained significant areas of their own land planted in rubber and fruit; some still have large amounts (1-3 ha) of paddy fields (sawah), and some have access to land for making swiddens. That said, if cash from both their own land and from nearby plantations with laboring activities is not enough to make a living, the livelihood possibilities for those who have given up all land to the companies and become wage laborers are even worse. At even the highest local wage we heard (Rp 72,000 or \$6/day) the costs of living are not enough to support even a family of four.

Prices on the commodities—rubber in particular-- that traditionally have provided both the funds for everyday subsistence and some amount of micro or middle level capital have crashed. So have the prices on those less globalized commodities such as fruit that provided windfalls for households almost every year. Rubber is Rp. 7000 or about 50 cents a kilo right now for the export-quality dry rubber; this translates into about 25 US cents a kilo for the wet rubber slabs that farmers sell to middlemen. With the price of rice at Rp. 12000+ or about a dollar a kilogram, the math does not work for most families. Even cooking 2 kg of rice a day requires selling 3.5 kg of dry rubber. Rubber sold immediately, and wet—which most families do—will require 6-7 kg to buy 2 kg of rice. This does not count the cost of side dishes, or of other daily and monthly expenses such as gas, electricity, natural gas to cook, school fees, credit payments, etc.

“Traditional” rubber smallholders across northwestern West Kalimantan are thus seeking access to high value resource commodities [gold] as newer commodities such as oil palm come to dominate the Big plantation landscapes—and dominate the work opportunities in many rural districts. Many farmers participating in oil palm schemes have not yet begun receiving their 20-30 % shares. Note that it is the terms of the sharing process (80-20 or 70-30) and the implementation (paying or not paying) that makes it difficult for people to get by--not the specific commodities—hence farmers with 2 hectares of private land and access to an oil palm processing facility may choose to plant their 2

¹ This is different than oil palm in Sanggau District—there oil palm was the commodity the government chose to plant at the time that rubber was planted in the resettlement schemes in Sambas.

hectares in “private” oil palm. Domestic migration provides capital needed to maintain households on smallholder farms, to create new smallholder livelihood strategies by opening small eating and drinking kiosks or working gold in some capacity, to get training for or otherwise to access new occupations, to move into production of new commodities—including smallholder oil palm.

The bulk of our work in the Singkawang area of West Kalimantan has been focused on developing an agrarian history of that region, and collecting the stories of men and women who are or have traveled to far to the south of West Kalimantan to Ketapang District to work gold or to provide services for gold miners. The Ketapang gold mining region is huge; an estimate made from Google maps put it at larger than 200km². Ketapang was the site of a huge gold rush that reached a height around 200-2005 and again from approximately 2008 to 2012. The gold is thinning but the institutions for its exploitation and governance are getting thicker—these institutions have, in fact, emerged from the site and from other gold mining areas such as those around Singkawang. They represent major entanglements of illegal and legal practices. The 2009 Mining Law made small scale gold mining illegal without a formal permit issued by Jakarta’s Ministry of Mines, local government officials, police, and military enable “illegal mining” to continue through their entanglements with the miners and their practices. The details of the entangled illegalities are beyond the scope of this paper. [another paper!]

The amount of gold produced in Ketapang and in the vicinity of Singkawang-Sambas-Bengkayang seems to have declined since 2012. Yet capital as well as people of different economic classes and occupational groups have continued to move to the gold frontiers despite the lower yields. Miners large and small send earnings from the mining frontiers “back” to their urban, peri-urban, and rural home areas. Smallholder oil palm, wood plantations, gaharu plantations, rubber, bird nest hotels, and varied fruits (beyond durian) are sites of investment for small, medium, and largeholders (or miners) who have accumulated small and medium amounts of capital to buy land, seedlings, fertilizers etc., building materials, and other components of investment.

The attractions of gold mining lie in their institutional arrangements, the potential payoffs to even the lowliest workers, and the status of the firms as NOT corporate plantations or mines. Mobile capital, management, and labor are reproducing a contemporary version of an older style of frontier capitalism in small- and medium-scale entrepreneurial institutions. We are still trying to understand these relations and institutions and to find ways of representing them as products and producers of a rapidly moving land base.

What is also new in gold mining is the power of labor to negotiate and to determine some of the terms of their work—putting on the line their willingness to take risks. In what relationships can we see this? Some contract terms are shifting toward workers. For example, work in illegal small or medium sized gold mines involves verbal contracts between the manager or owner of the *dompeng* (the dredging technology and its accessories) with down payments on wages paid in the form of a loan given in advance of 3 months’ work. The loans are meant to support the household while the miner is gone, and range from 1 – 3 (even 5) million Rupiah for an initial loan. Wages are based on shares of gold found, usually on a 7-3 basis with the mine boss paying all expenses for labor and technology. Crew members divide the 30% share among them, and are fed three meals a day for the course of the contract. Their transport to and from site is paid if they work six days a week. If the crew finds no gold in this period, the advances loans are forgiven. During the season we were in Ketapang, literally every gold boss, large or small, had earned so little that they forgave all the loans of their workers—both the initial advances and the accrued loans for cigarettes and other maintenance. By the end of the contract, the workers may not receive payment of salaries but they have been fed for 3 months and wracked up several million rupiah apiece in debts for cigarettes, alcohol (*arak*) and, other things, plus the advances. Labor has some bargaining power on these gold frontiers. This is post gold RUSH migration.

Under conditions where gold is actually found—or in abundance—social and economic mobility are not only possible, they are probable for the worker who manages to avoid the temptations of the mining site. ... more on generations, married versus unmarried miners, kintin economics, etc...

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My work in East Java mountain forests began with a more classic premise, i.e., that land scarcities initiated by a century-long government land grab of montane forests, furthered by localized, though slower, population growth and increasing differentiation, was finally driving people out of the area to find work. Having chosen a forest village to think about migration, the question was, what would be the effect of migration on the forest? This part of East Java was one of the poorest in Indonesia until very recently—when the district of Tulung Agung became a major sending area for legal international migrants, mostly women.

Rather than a story about a steam roller land grab by the forestry department, we have found a number of complex processes at work involving land, labor mobility, and diverse smallholder strategies. Importantly, continued loss of access to land is not the main driver of migration out, nor is it in fact the case. Rather, the low value of the subsistence crops on the land (corn, cassava, and dry rice), combined with intense fragmentation of private farmlands into tiny smallholdings, constrained people's need for cash. In the past 15 years, villagers have increased access to land in the form of the land in government forest. Field research in our forest mountain village in Tulung Agung District has shown that women and men are working in urban economies in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Sarawak and other parts of Malaysia, and sending back the money for their family members to engage in smallholder commodity production.

Investments are not necessarily to buy land—land purchases are in fact rare. The farm commodities migrants buy are milk cows. Milk cows are a new commodity in this area and do what rubber used to do in Kalimantan for smallholders: it provides both everyday subsistence money through milk production and acts as a savings for the kinds of big expenses that require them to sell the cows—school fees, house improvements, health funds, etc. Yet, in a short time, multiple village-level institutions have developed around milk (market cooperatives). The effects on land use inside and around the government's montane forest on Wilis Mountain (Gunung Wilis) have been significant. Milk production is also what has given the farmers in one hamlet a leg up in forest politics.

The connections between migration and forests would not be obvious at first glance, and they are somewhat different in each hamlet of the village. So far, we have found one thing in common across the hamlets we have been observing: as in most other sending areas, migrants want to go overseas as a way to radically and rapidly improve housing. In the “forest land worker residence area” (magersaren) in the hamlet of Jambuok, the connection between migration and the forest is a chain: Capital is sent home by mostly female migrants to Hong Kong and Taiwan; this is seed money to buy livestock: milk, beef cattle, or goats. In turn, traditional food crops once planted by poor forest villagers in government forest reforestation areas (tumpang sari land) have been replaced by elephant grass. The elephant grass's adaptability to varied shade and sun conditions has enabled it to be planted deep into the pine forest. Its growth is aided by the gaps created when trees fall in heavy windstorms; other gaps were created by cutting during the forest violence of 1998-99. Reforestation policies [formal] and informal “crop sharing” practices by the local foresters have given technically landless forest and plantation laborers almost free access to the land needed to grow elephant grass for their livestock. As a result, the poorest people with the deepest history of minimal access to land (former forestry-dependent forest workers) are achieving social and economic mobility of a kind unimaginable 20 years ago. The State Forestry Corporation has NOT grabbed more land—indeed it is losing ground to the village smallholders through these processes.

In other parts of the same village, migration is high but immediate access to government forest is not as available to all residents, as in forest residence (magersari). Farmers are planting their dry upland fields (*tegalan*) either with trees or with elephant grass, or with both—trees around the edges of grass fields. The village has won district-level prizes for best people’s forest. We are not yet sure of the effects of migration in the hamlets with predominantly private land (and deep differentiation based on land ownership), though migration rates are also high in these hamlets. What we do know is that for owners of dry fields, high value trees such as teak, mahogany, or fast-growing species like sengon, are attractive as commodities/savings and are replacing polowijo (dry field food) crops. We don’t yet know the number of milk cows and their distribution in these non-forest adjacent hamlets. However, some farmers (which ones?) are investing in milk cows; elephant grass is replacing rice in the rainfed rice paddies as well as the upland dry fields. Smallholders are thus changing their agrarian livelihoods and micro-investment strategies through new dynamics involving migration. Clearly, land as commodity or subsistence base is not the only or even the main driver of these agrarian changes.

Four potential/preliminary conclusions:

1. Global commodities: gold, forests, oil palm, rubber – are tied up with local processes, laborers, resources, and capital creating different land use and access patterns. Resource commodities are mobile as are people and capital. Indeed, it is the movable resources such as gold and milk cows that are attracting smallholder investment and migration and generating new capital and wealth.
2. There are other things going on with resource commodities in these frontier areas that derive from both old institutional patterns of extraction and production and new opportunities, technologies, and markets. They become visible by not only looking at small and medium scale productions and producers but also by looking at the movements of laborers, small business people, resources, and capital between contexts, toward sites of work and cash production, to and from their home bases. What has helped us understand these processes has been looking not only at the usual factors of production or land and labor constraints related to agrarian change, but also at land based resources and work that are not always considered interactively when analyzing agrarian change, such as gold mining and circular migration.
3. Some labor is mobile or in motion precisely because laborer-smallholders are willing (or required) to move toward opportunities that will provide them sufficient income to change their home circumstances. Unskilled labor may be attracted to risky but remunerative resource work (such as gold mining) or trained to work in sites of work (other Asian cities) where higher rates of accumulation are possible because of salaries and currency differences. Thus a “bad” situation of having to leave home to work can turn into an opportunity to accumulate capital, even small amounts. For many rural people, including those in forest areas, temporary or circular migration is becoming a necessity if some members of the family want to maintain a smallholder lifestyle. In many cases, this does not result in permanent migration or urbanization but multi-sitedness: circular movements of people, capital, and resources.
4. Something on frontier capitalisms: this is not developed in this paper but smallholder relations with big frontier enterprises as well as smaller investors and their own generation of micro capital needs more attention in resource frontier literature. Frontiers are more nuanced – the nuances are often blanked out of view by the huge footprints of the big capital.
5. What does this mean for understanding agrarian change? Resources and the capital produced through both labor and investment change the conditions of the land where they are produced as well as far away. The unexpected connections between places such as Hong Kong and Tulung Agung, or between Ketapang and Singkawang, can tell us a lot about current and future drivers of agrarian change in many places.

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International Conference Paper Series

The purpose of the 2015 Chiang Mai conference is to contribute to *deepening* and *broadening* of our understanding of global land deals, resource conflict and agrarian-environmental transformations – in the specific regional context of Southeast and East Asia, with special attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation policies as well as the role of China and other middle income countries (MICs) within the region.

The Conference Paper Series aims to generate vibrant discussion around these issues in the build up towards the June 2015 conference – and beyond. We will keep these papers accessible through the websites of the main organizers before, during and after the conference.

About the Speaker

Nancy Lee Peluso is Professor of Environmental Social Science and Resource Policy in the College of Natural Resources and the Program Director of the Berkeley Workshop in Environmental Politics, housed in the Institute of International Studies. She serves as a faculty member in the Society and Environment Division of the Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management, where she teaches courses in Political Ecology. Her research since the 1980s has focused on Forest Politics and Agrarian Change in Southeast Asia, primarily in Indonesia. She has done field research in various parts of Indonesia—West and Central Java, East and West Kalimantan and in Sarawak, Malaysia. Her work addresses questions of property rights and access to resources, forest policy and politics, histories of land use change, and agrarian and environmental violence. She is currently working on a comparative study on the formation of "political forests" in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand as well as a book examining the entanglements of violence and territoriality in landscape history in West Kalimantan. Nancy is a member of the Editorial Collective of The Journal of Peasant Studies.