



# Conference Report: Southeast Asian Frontier #1: Highlands, 18-20 August 2022, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Remote

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The Southeast Asian Frontier (SEAF) #1: Highlands took place at the Department of Communication, Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII), Yogyakarta, from 18-20 August 2022. Muzayin Nazaruddin (Department of Communications UII), Luthfi Adam (Research Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Research, Monash Indonesia), Sindhunata Hargyono (Ph.D. Candidate at the Anthropology Department, Northwestern University), Sari Damar Ratri (Ph.D. Candidate at the Anthropology Department, Northwestern University), and M. Fathi Rayyani (Researcher, Research Center for Ecology and Ethnobiology, National Research and Innovation Agency Indonesia) co-convened the workshop. SEAF received financial support from two institutions: (1) Universitas Islam Indonesia via the Global Engagement Grant 2022 and Forum Amir Effendi Siregar Program, and (2) the Regional Science Association International (RSAI) through the Nurturing Young Talent Program 2022. Volunteer coordinators affiliated with the Department of Communications UII also played a crucial role in running the workshop: Zarkoni (publication and administration), Yudi Winarto (consumption and hospitality), Putri Asriyani (Zoom technicality), and Marjito Iskandar Tri Gunawan (documentation).

The workshop, held for three days in a hybrid format, featured 30 selected participants chosen from nearly 60 abstract submissions. These participants represented institutions from 11 different countries, including China, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sweden, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, and the United States of America. The selection process prioritized Ph.D. students and early career scholars/researchers. The 30 abstracts covered a range of scholarly disciplines: anthropology, archaeology, architecture, biology, communication, forestry, geography, history, literature, philology, and sociology. We organized these presentations into nine panels with eight themes, each receiving constructive feedback from pre-invited discussants: conservation and environmentalism (Faizah Zakaria, Nanyang Technological University), development (Mona Chettri, independent scholar), government (Luthfi Adam, Monash Indonesia), natural hazards and social resilience (Fajar Thufail, National Research and Innovation Agency Indonesia), political economic changes (Micah Fisher, University of Hawaii at Manoa, and Sari Ratri, Northwestern University), religious changes (Imam Ardhianto, Universitas



Indonesia), representation (Muzayin Nazaruddin, Universitas Islam Indonesia), and scientific practices (Anthony Medrano, Yale-NUS College).

## Keynote

The workshop featured three keynote speakers who participated online. On the first day, Tania Li (University of Toronto) delivered her keynote speech titled, *Two Capitalism, Two Commodity Frontiers: A View from Indonesia*. We invited Tania due to her extensive and impactful research on Indonesian highland frontiers. In her talk, Tania argued that labelling corporate-occupied commodity frontiers as capitalist, with notions of free market and competition, obscures the fact that corporations behind large-scale concessions often rely on forced land seizures, labour coercion, and state subsidies. Additionally, this narrative normalizes the marginalization of small-scale farmers, who historically have been the most productive and dynamic actors on commodity frontiers, despite lacking the same support and recognition as their corporate counterparts.

On the second day, Michael Eilenberg (Aarhus University) delivered his keynote speech. We invited Michael not only because of his research in the highland borderlands of West Kalimantan, but also his recent co-edited work on the concept of Frontier Assemblage (Cons and Eilenberg 2019). Titled, *Smoke, Fire, and Crisis on the Indonesian Forest Frontier*, Michael's talk began with a comprehensive introduction to the frontier concept, particularly how it is influenced by the Turner Thesis. He then illustrated, in his talk, how the burning of land and forests is part of a broader assemblage of land appropriation that is essential in creating an 'investable' environment for large-scale plantation development.

On the third day, Timo Maran (University of Tartu) proposed a semiotic approach to investigate highlands, highlanders, outsiders, and their dynamic interrelations. In his talk titled, *Towards a Semiotics of Ecocultures: Semiotic Ground and Ecosphere*, Timo argued that semiotically-informed humanities and social sciences studies about highlands will seriously consider human-environment relations, including highlanders-highlands relations, as semiotic relations, not merely physical relations. Timo proposed some semiotic tools to analyse dynamic interrelationships between humans and environments, such as the concept of semiotic ground, eco-cultures, and eco-sphere. He further argued that iconic and indexical signs constitute a common semiotic ground for human and non-human species alike that is also



connected to the patterns of the material realm. In icons and indexes, there exists a connection between object and interpretation and, accordingly, between material and semiotic realms.

## Contributions to Southeast Asian Highlands Studies

Core-periphery relations, in their various manifestations, play a prominent role in spatializing socio-political relationships in studies of Southeast Asia's past and present. Departing from the premise that 'expansion' is a significant mode of spatializing power, especially from polities or institutions with a centralising tendency (i.e., the core), we are convinced that the concept of the 'frontier' serves as an appropriate heuristic, if not theory, to understand this predominantly one-sided imposition of relations between the core and periphery. In this workshop, we viewed the frontier as a socio-spatial framework where potentialities and limitations converge from the perspective of the core, often followed by attempts to subjugate marginal locations considered to be the 'frontier'.<sup>1</sup> The inherent ambiguity of the frontier acts as a lure that energizes actors from the core establishment to engage in expansionary activities into the periphery or margin.

We selected 'highland' as the theme for our first workshop due to its pervasive presence in Southeast Asia's geographical landscape. Additionally, core-periphery relations in Southeast Asia often mirror this geography, resulting in the prominence of the core/lowland and periphery/highland dichotomy as a prevalent understanding of how power is spatialized in Southeast Asian historiography and ethnography. However, we also recognize that significant works on Southeast Asian highlands have mainly originated from areas within the Southeast Asian mainland.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we intentionally leveraged our engagement with insular Southeast Asian highlands, particularly in Indonesia, in the hope of identifying and amplifying

1. In defining this framework we are inspired by works of Geiger 2008; Li 2014; Tsing 2005; Cons and Eilenberg 2019; Acciaioli and Sabharwal 2017.

2. For instance Leach 2004; Scott 2009; Jonsson 2014

more work from this region and bringing it together with research on highlands in mainland Southeast Asia through the lens of the frontier heuristic.

When we issued the call for papers for this workshop, we anticipated that most submissions would revolve around issues of state formation and capitalist expansion into marginalized highland spaces. Indeed, this was the case: we organized papers on these topics into three panels consisting of four sessions each (Political Economic Change in Highlands I and II, Highlands and Development, and Governing Southeast Asian Highlands). However, we were also pleased to see how participants responded to our call by delving into issues such as religious changes, conservation and environmentalism, and scientific practices in Southeast Asian highlands.

In this first round of SEAF, the selected papers deeply engaged with the forces that shape and reshape the past and present of Southeast Asian highlands, often situating the highlands within the context of larger and/or exogenous forces and actors. However, the degree of engagement with the frontier heuristic differed significantly among the selected papers, with some explicitly utilizing the heuristic to frame their analysis and others not even mentioning the term. Our primary goal as conveners remains the explicit framing of Southeast Asian highland studies using the frontier heuristic. Consequently, we are planning to hold a second workshop focused on the publication, where we will invite selected presenters to refine their papers and effectively employ the frontier heuristic in framing their excellent works on the Southeast Asian highlands.

## Additional Highlights

Aditya Kiran Kakati (International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden University) was awarded the workshop's best paper prize for his work titled, *Inviting and Evading States: A 'Vacuum' in Highland Zomia After Global War (1945) in the Indo-Burmese Border-worlds*. His historically grounded research complicates the narrative of Zomian highlanders 'evading the state' by revealing the oscillation between resisting and inviting states among highlanders residing in former colonial frontiers. Additionally, his work pays serious attention to the fragile temporality of post-war and post-colonial state formation.

## Challenges and Shortcomings

From the perspective of the conveners, we acknowledge three notable challenges and shortcomings encountered during the workshop. Firstly, the majority of the papers submitted and selected focused on Indonesian highlands. This issue may be attributed to the amplification of the conveners' network bias. In the future, we are committed to implementing a more comprehensive marketing strategy for our call-for-papers to encourage submissions from studies conducted outside of Indonesia.

Secondly, we experienced a significant technical issue related to Zoom during Tania Li's keynote speech. We express our gratitude to Tania for her commitment to completing her speech despite the interruption caused by an incorrect Zoom account used to host the meeting room. Moving forward, we will ensure greater attention to technical details to minimize such disruptions.

Thirdly, we failed to acknowledge the IMEI registration policy in Indonesia to participants from outside the country using non-Indonesian smartphones. As a result, some participants were unable to access cellular signals despite having an Indonesian SIM card inserted into their devices. In the future, we will be more attentive to this issue and ensure that appropriate measures are taken to address it.

## References

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