

# Borneo constituencies: Japanese rule and its legitimation

Thinking of wartime occupations, we tend to picture suppression, looting, and violent and arbitrary rule. For the Japanese occupation of Indonesia, the prevailing image is one of a brutal regime ruling Indonesian society at gunpoint and spoiling the lives of thousands, while incompetent administrators ruined the country. Or was the Japanese period a prelude to revolution and the harbinger of independence?

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It was, of course, both. Trying to avoid generalisations which judge a period by its outcomes, it might be useful to look at the *zaman Jepang* (Japanese period) differently, by assessing the workings of the Japanese state in Indonesia. Instead of looking at the effects of occupation for different peoples or classes, one might examine how Japanese rule operated as a state, more specifically the way it produced or tried to produce a certain legitimacy.

I am not concerned here with legitimacy according to international law, but with the inner workings of the Japanese state in Indonesia. Recent thinking on rulers' legitimacy stresses the mechanisms by which rulers legitimate their power and through which they influence their subjects to accept their authority - it is the process of legitimation that is considered crucial to the workings of the state.<sup>1</sup> Borneo poses an interesting case. Few historians have given attention to this large island, which was of crucial importance to the Japanese. Sources are relatively scarce, but Allied intelligence reports and Malay-Japanese newspapers provide us with a fascinating window on the workings and rituals of Japanese rule.

In colonial states, the legitimacy of rule is often translated as the loyalty of colonial subjects. The Dutch, for instance, were almost obsessively concerned with the issue. Japanese authorities showed a similar preoccupation with the issue of loyalty, understandably exacerbated by the wartime situation. But their interest in the population went further than obedience and subservience to the Japanese war cause. Whatever their practical reasons for conquering the Dutch East Indies (oil, for one), they came with a message (to free Asia from the bonds of the western powers) and an aim (to create a new Asian society under Japanese guidance). An extended period of rule and exploitation would be impossible

without a full measure of legitimation; the build-up of a constituency was thus essential to the immediate restoration of Borneo's industrial output, but also to the longer-term objective of a pro-Japanese Indonesia.

## A new Borneo

Borneo fell under the command of the Japanese navy as did all Indonesian islands except Java and Sumatra. At the outset, it was unknown how long the Japanese would stay. As related in his memoirs by Okada Fumihide, minseifu soka or chief of the Naval Administration Government in East Indonesia based in Makassar, the occupation was to be permanent (*eikyū senryō*). This is an interesting remark, as whatever the short-term needs of an empire at war, in the longer term Japanese rule had to concern itself with the legitimacy question. It did so in all sorts of ways, ranging from the ideological to the simple exercise of authority. Drawing mainly on newspapers, we might distinguish several strategies of legitimisation.<sup>2</sup>

A first, obvious method was the identification of a common enemy: the Dutch, Americans and British. Linked to this were Japanese appeals to form a block against the West and to join the Asian forces under Japanese guidance. A second source of legitimation was in some ways more tangible: the old colonial power had been defeated and its formal presence removed - Indonesia was entering a new era. The fact of victory was accompanied by the profession of Japanese liberation ideology: according to the newspaper *Borneo Shimbun*, Borneo had been *terlepas dari perboedakannya* (freed from its slavery) and was entering a new phase in history. 'New' was the word which, in various forms, loomed large in the newspapers. *Masjarakat baroe* (new society) became the miracle word, as it did on Java and elsewhere. Interestingly, there was also *Borneo baroe* (new Borneo), which was thought to inspire inhabitants with regional patriotism. It seems the Japanese wanted to

foster regional identity on the island, as they did on other islands, the result of the Japanese wish to avoid premature development of a truly national Indonesian movement, and which also mirrored administrative and economic division into autarkic provinces. The new Borneo was even celebrated by a song of that title, while youth recruits in Banjarmasin wore insignia in the shape of Borneo on their breast pockets.

Whatever the claims and aspirations, both anti-Allied propaganda and the message of liberation were insufficient to inspire Indonesian men and women to embrace the Japanese state in Indonesia. Areas under navy command were less exposed to the Japanizing efforts of the new rulers; propaganda means were much more limited in Borneo than on Java. Public loudspeakers relaying broadcasts from Banjarmasin, Batavia and Tokyo were only put up in the big towns. Borneo newspapers such as *Kalimantan Raya* and *Borneo Shimbun*, however, seem to have been fairly widely read, as Allied interrogation reports of local inhabitants suggest.

Another channel of legitimation was the bureaucracy. The Japanese had initially proclaimed the continuation of Dutch structures of government, and Dutch administrative labels and terms were often retained, such as 'resident' and 'keur' (statute), even 'ambtenaar' (civil servant). Taxes remained unchanged from prewar days; only the obligatory *corvée* labour, abolished by the Dutch, was re-instituted. An important change, however, was the employment of local personnel in administration, with the double aim of efficiency in the use of Japanese manpower and 'gaining confidence of the local peoples'.<sup>3</sup> Only slowly were changes made in the structure of government. By December 1943, municipal governments were instituted in Banjarmasin and Pontianak, and residency and municipal councils erected, with the aim of 'normalizing' the administra-

tion and to attach local elites to Japanese rule. Of the maximum total of fifteen members, about half were elected and the others appointed. Their task was purely advisory, but their inauguration was widely publicized.

## Limits to legitimacy

It remains difficult to assess the precise effects of Japanese legitimation efforts, but avoiding the common branding of these efforts as sheer 'propaganda', it appears that the Japanese employed a wide range of tactics. Compared to Java, some peculiarities catch the eye: one is the marked difference between urban and rural areas. Organisations of youth militia and volunteers existed only in the big towns, where displays of Japanization were strongest. Mass-mobilization movements such as the Three-A movement and Poetera on Java had no equivalents on Borneo. This was also due to the absence of a large intelligentsia to lead these movements. Only on a much less intensive level, and restricted to more densely populated coastal zones, were similar policies of mobilization tried on Borneo.

During the latter part of the occupation the limits of Japanese legitimation became clearly visible, and political credibility crumbled. Without doubt, this had to do with intensifying pressures on the people and economy, and panicky and ruthless reactions to disobedience and anti-Japanese activities. In late 1943, the Japanese discovered a 'conspiracy' in Banjarmasin, allegedly led by ex-Governor B.J. Haga, which was quelled by arresting several hundred suspects and convicting and executing 26 'leaders' and secretly killing many others. In its wake, the Tokkei or naval police discovered other plots and cases of disobedience in western Borneo (Pontianak), which resulted in the arrest and killing of probably several thousand people, including most of the local 'Malay' sultans and intelligentsia. The motives for the mass executions are not entirely clear, but seem to have been triggered by fears of local powerholders.<sup>4</sup> The combination of a low-intensity occupation (the garrison in western Borneo consisted only of about 500 men), the complex political dynamics of the region (with Chinese kongsis and semi-autonomous sultans), and the economic value of the island to the war effort made Japanese rule tense and suspicious. A side-effect of the cleansing operation was the Japanese administration increasingly appointing outsiders from South Borneo (Banjarmasin) as officials. Problems were not only limited to coastal areas: in early 1945, upriver Dayak communities in western Borneo rose against the Japanese, staging one of the few large-scale armed actions against the Japanese in the archipelago.

While these 'incidents' instilled fear among the population, Japanese-led newspapers and bulletins had little

more to offer than the continued trumpeting of freedom and Borneo entering a new era. Government performance is a convincing source of legitimacy, especially in a colonised country where political identities had yet to fully crystallize. With the absence of a large elite holding strong nationalist feelings, administrative practice was of crucial importance. Japanese administration, however, proved to be ineffective and harmful, with increasing demands on labour and a break-down of local trade and infrastructure. Evidence abounds of the quality of life in the coastal areas being seriously affected by the occupation: food and textiles were already scarce by late 1943, while plantations and gardens were neglected and unmaintained roads were overgrown by jungle.

Nothing is more delegitimizing than a failing government. The Japanese state in Borneo suffered from serious defects and failed to institute or maintain a stable and reliable civil administration. The mass arrests probably created an impression of arbitrariness and a widespread atmosphere of fear. It is interesting to see that the newspapers changed their tone and subject in the last year of the occupation. While they had previously given much attention to the old aristocracies, in particular the sultans, by 1945, under pressure from the deteriorating war situation, they had shifted to preparation for independence. As a result, when Mohammad Hatta visited Banjarmasin in May 1945, his speech drew a large and mesmerized crowd. The success of Javanese nationalists was not just consciously created by the Japanese, as many Dutchmen assumed after the war, but was part and parcel of the same legitimation process that had promised a new Borneo in 1942. It was indeed a last resort of the Japanese in their attempt at legitimation. ◀

## Notes

1. See Rodney Barker. 2001. *Legitimizing identities. The self-presentations of rulers and subjects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Most of the following has been drawn from the *Kalimantan Raya* (5 March 1942-7 Dec. 1942) and *Borneo Shimbun* (8 Dec. 1942-15 Sept. 1945), and interrogation reports of the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Service (NEFIS), held by Netherlands Institute for War Documentation.
3. Benda, Harry J., James K. Irikura and Kōichi Kishi, eds. 1965. *Japanese military administration in Indonesia: Selected documents*. n.p.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 207.
4. Maekawa, Kaori. 2002. 'The Pontianak Incidents and the Ethnic Chinese in Wartime Western Borneo'. Paul Kratoska, ed. *Southeast Asian minorities in the wartime Japanese empire*. London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 153-169.

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