Borneo constituencies: 
Japanese rule and its legitimation

Thinking of wartime occupations, we tend to picture suppression, loot- ing, 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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was, of course, both. Trying to avoid generalisations which judge a period by its outcomes, it might be useful to look at the zamen japon [Japanese period] differently, by assessing the workings of the Japanese state in Indonesia. Instead of looking at the effects of occupation for different peo- ples 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 legiti- macy according to international law, but with the inner workings of the Japanese state in Indonesia. Recent thinking on rulers’ legitimacy stresses the mecha- nisms by which rulers legitimate their power and through which they influ- ence their subjects to accept their authority - it is the process of legitima- tion that is considered crucial to the workings of the state. 2 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 newspapers provide us with a fascinating window on the work- ings and rituals of Japanese rule.

In colonial states, the legitimacy of rule is often translated as the loyalty of colo- nial subjects. The Dutch, for instance, were almost obsessively concerned with the issue. Japanese authorities showed a similar preoccupation with the issue of loyalty according to international law, but I am not concerned here with legitima- tion 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 ques- tion. It did so in all sorts of ways, rang- ing from the ideological to the simple exercise of authority. Drawing mainly on newspapers, we might distinguish sev- eral strategies of legitimisation.3

A first, obvious method was the identifi- cation of a common enemy: the Dutch, Americans and British. Linked to this was a new phase in history, ‘new’ was the mass executions are not entirely read, as Allied interrogation reports

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 vice (NEFIS), held by Netherlands Institute for War Documentation.

Another channel of legitimation was the bureaucracy. The Japanese had ini- tially 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-instated. An impor- tant change, however, was the employ- ment of local personnel in administra- tion, with the double aim of efficiency and to gain confidence of the local peo- ple.4 Only slowly were changes made to the mass arrests probably created an impres- sion of a new era. Government performance is limited, but the traditionalism was of crucial importance. Japanese administration, however, was a new emergence of the loyalty of colon- ial inhabitants suggest.

While these ‘incidents’ instilled fear among the population, Japanese-led movements such as the Three-A move- ments of youth, workers and artists were similar policies of mobilization were used, but 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 legitimacy were visible, and political cred- ibility 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 1945, the Japanese discovered a ‘conspiracy’ in Banjarmasin, allegedly led by ex-Gov- ernor B.J. Haga, which was accused of recruiting several hundred suspects and committing atrocities and secretly killing many others. In its wake, the Tokesi or naval forc- e ordered other plots and cases of disobedi- ence in western Borneo (Pontianak) into autarkic provinces. The new Borneo administrative and economic division and to attach local elites to Japan- ese rule. Of the maximum total of fif- teen members, about half were elected and the others appointed. Their task was purely advisory, but their inaugu- ration was widely publicized. Limits to legitimation

Borneo administration, however, proved to be ineffective and harmful, with increasing demands on labour and a break-down of local trade and infra- structure. Evidence abounds of the qual- ity of life in the coastal areas being seri- ously affected by the occupation: food and textiles were already scarce by late 1945, while plantations and gardens were neglected and unmaintained roads were overgrown by jungle.

Notes
1. See Rodney Barton, 2001. Legitimising identi- ties. The self-presentation of rulers and subjects. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2. Most of the following has been drawn from the Kalmiyan Raya (1 March 1940-7 Dec. 1945) and Borneo Shimbuin, Borneo newspapers such as Kali- mantan Raya and Borneo Shimbuin, however, seem to have been fairly wide- ly read, as Allied interrogation reports on local inhabitants suggest.

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The success of the Japanese state in Borneo suffered from serious defects and failed to institute or maintain a sta- ble and reliable civil administration. The mass arrests probably created an impres- sion of a new phase in history. ‘New’ was the


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