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Project Title: Entangled lives in post-Suharto West Kalimantan, Indonesia

Abstract:

Indonesia's New Order government under President Suharto (1966-1998) is marked by the excessive use of violence to eliminate political opponents and the pursuit of a problematic path of economic development through rent-seeking and cronyism. The fall of the regime brought only fleeting moments of elation as the country quickly plunged into widespread corruption, economic uncertainty and ethnoreligious strife. Through the prism of individual lives, this research project aims to study how the themes of decentralization, neoliberalism, ethnic politics, and transregional and transnational mobilities play out in West Kalimantan in the post-Suharto era.

West Kalimantan, the fourth largest province in Indonesia, has made global headlines with the ethnic killings between the Dayaks, Malays and Madurese in 1997 and 1999 - tragic events which have resulted in hundreds of deaths and the flight of tens of thousands of refugees. For the Singaporean audience, memories are still fresh from the severe haze problems caused by intensive deforestation and the burning of logged lands to make way for plantation estates in this neighbouring region during the early 2000s. Within Indonesia itself, West Kalimantan features as a province inflicted by poverty and sending its desperate people across the border to work as domestic helpers and oil palm plantation labourers in Sarawak.

While several scholars have analysed the phenomena of ethnic violence, political foul play, illegal logging practices and unsustainable plantation monoculture, far less known is how common people of West Kalimantan today lived these processes that are often not of their own doing. Combining ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in select sites in the province, this project will study how the local people perceive these developments and their lifeworlds. Taking into account the hardships and challenges they faced, we will also examine how these individuals make the best of the situation and pursue their conceptions of utopia as their lives become entwined with one another and entangled with wider developments.