

Making God and the Devil:

Commodity Fetishism and Capitalist Desire in a West Kalimantan Palm Oil Plantation¹

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Abstract

What might explain the rise of a new object of worship in a late-capitalism timespace, when life seems to be falling apart? A Dayak Desa farmer community's experience of agrarian change towards a new capitalistic—and mystifying—industrial plantation, has subjugated them to a world dominated by things/objects they themselves have created. Building upon Marx's "commodity fetishism," this paper investigates an allegory of production dialectic, involving a new symbol of god and the devil, in West Kalimantan's palm oil plantation area. I suggest that focusing on the regression of materiality, and into the realm of immaterial supra sensibilities of the palm oil tree, is productive to understand the absolute strangeness of the normal capitalist every day.

Keywords: Commodity fetishism, Dayak Desa farmers, agrarian change, palm oil plantation, production dialectic.

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Introduction

“Something strange is afoot. All mixed up and confusing. Used to be ... us here. Them there. Subjects knew their place and, as for objects, they were meek and would never dare trespass. But now? Objects! You have nothing to lose but your chains.”
(Taussig 2018)

“*Dengar pohon tu. Bicara dia tu, ingat dia.*” (Listen to the trees. They speak, they remember)
-a Desa shaman

What might explain the rise of a new object of worship in a late-capitalism timespace, when life seems to be falling apart? In 2016, while researching Dayak Desa farmers’ collapsing belief in the sacred Tapang Madu tree (*Koompasia excelsa*) in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, I observed their immediate search for a replacement. At the time, several farmers had tattooed palm oil tree (*Elaeis guineensis*) symbols on their bodies. Others had painted the same symbol on the walls of their houses. Two years later, when I revisited the area, palm oil trees had reached a new form of embodiment. They were worshipped in weekly church sermons and shamanic practices. Moreover, palm oil trees were in consistent peril from the lurking devil, in the form of eight-legged black dog phantoms that haunted farmers during plantation work. Apparently, palm oil trees were transforming—from a mere cash crop object to an abstraction that seemed to subjugate Desa farmers’ symbolic cosmology. Is the palm oil tree the future? Is it a god in the process of construction?

This paper examines the coming about of a new fetish² in Desa farmers’ symbolic cosmology—transitioning from Tapang Madu to palm oil trees. A deep-seated material change, reflected in a land-use shift from heterogeneous rain forest to expansive monoculture cash-cropping, and a religious conversion to Christianity, has provoked a symbolic—or rather

² I recognize the negative connotation the terms “fetish” and “fetishism” carry. Pietz’s genealogy of the fetish (Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988) reveals how the concept, developed under the influence of Hegel (2001), Freud (1997a, 1997b, 1997c), and Marx (1976), originated in the 16th-17th century. The term was *fetisso*, initially deployed by Europeans to accuse groups that sprang up along the coast of African Guinea of irrationality due to their “false idolatry” as opposed to (present) true belief. The term designates a “primitive” superstition (Matory 2018; Morris and Leonard 2017), as an attempt to undermine “the others.” Indeed, such an assumption is one of the first mistakes of the original theory of fetishism—a naïve belief in naïve belief, which is why fetishism is said to have been nothing but an “immense miss understanding” between cultures (Gemerchak 2004).

ideological—response from Desa farmers. This response attributed consciousness, will, and intention to the palm oil tree—an anthropological reality, a god in the making.

The farmers' change in belief might come across as a repudiation of “modernity” and signal a tendency to revert to their “traditional” state. To the contrary, I argue that Desa farmers' construction and mystification of the devil contributes to a hybrid form of a fetish which helps them constitute a reality in which they come to terms with the changing mode of production, from pre-capitalism to industrial capitalism. It is a fetish that embodies their collective representation of what it means both to lose control over and to be controlled by the means of production—a historical and on-going process of dispossession in which the social relations of capitalism are valorized and normalized. Even further, the fetish might also reinforce the expansion of capitalist relations into the farmers' web of life—modifying the very quality of their action and work (Latour 2010). Desa farmers' sense of loss entails inescapable enticements, self-consuming passions, discriminatory tactics, and devastating social costs (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Taussig 1980).

In this paper, I analyze the historical context in which one mode of production and life has been supplanted by another, and how the devil represents this process of alienation. I argue that historically changing land use has subjugated Desa farmers, outside of their cognizance, to a world dominated by things/objects that they themselves have created. This domination is nowhere more prevalent than in the expansion of the palm oil plantation, spearheaded by two private plantation companies PT Harapan Desa (HD) and PT Surya Pratama (SP), into the hinterlands of the Buayan river area in Meliau sub-district, West Kalimantan province.

My argument is based on Marx's understanding of commodity fetishism and the process of human beings' alienation from their nature to what Lukács (1972) calls second nature.³ The “commodity fetishism” concept is productive in illuminating the workings of

³Lukács' understanding of “second nature” builds upon Marx's idea of human alienation from nature. As Marx explains, workers could not create anything without nature, without the sensuous external world (Marx 2012). However, as the products of workers' labor are expropriated from them, nature is reduced to a mere means of subsistence that is eventually further and further removed from the worker. This alienation is a symptom of the rise of a new social formation—namely capitalism. Lukács' explains that “men are constantly smashing, replacing, and leaving behind the 'natural,' irrational, and actually existing bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality that they have created and 'made,' a kind of second nature which evolves with exactly the same inexorable necessity as was the case earlier with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form)” (Lukács 1972). Transition to “second nature” means that man is further and further distanced from “'first” nature, with the seeming immediacy of nature enjoyed in previous societies becoming increasingly rare. Instead, what humanity encounters is a system of commodities, goods imported from every corner of the globe, and serially processed through a complex division of labor before arriving to their consumer in their finished forms. In other words, *this* nature, “second nature,” becomes the world to which humanity is immediately accustomed. With the rise of capitalism, everything changes; in place of the

beliefs, for it takes us beyond a perspective that approaches beliefs as misrepresentations of social reality to attend to how social reality is generated (Žižek 1994b; Giddens 1979; Taussig 1987b). Here I refer to beliefs in a Lacanian sense: instead of being something solely interior, belief is radically exterior, embodied in the practical, effective procedure of people (Lacan 1998). Palm oil tree fetishism in Desa farmers' daily life operates in such a way.

Marx explains that a commodity is a queer thing—it abounds in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties which give it a rather mysterious veil (Matory 2018; Keane 2007; Meyer 1998); or as he describes it, a commodity is magical and filled with necromancy (Marx 1976). One reason for Marx's emphasis on the mysterious trait of commodity, I think, is his inclination toward elaborating capitalism as a necessarily mystifying phenomenon. As he writes:

“It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hand. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities” (Marx 1976:165).

Under a capitalistic mode of production, producers do not come into social contact with each other until they exchange the products of their labor (Marx 1976). They come to know the specific social character of their own private labor only in the act of market exchange (Stallybrass 1998), during which a new discursive social sphere is constructed (Habermas 1993). The producers do not know anything about the labor that congeals value in the commodity. In a sophisticated and complex system of exchange, it is improbable that they would know anything about the labor. Thus, fetishism is inevitable, as it is universal and necessary in the world market (Harvey 2010; Mulhern 2007; Spyer 1998; Rutherford 2003). In the context of my study, the market system—meaning agribusiness—disguises real social relations between persons by the exchange of commodities which in turn abstracts the relations among people as relations between things, between products of labor. Here, the commodity loses its material sensibility while simultaneously transfiguring into a thing of supra sensible

old self-sufficiency, people are embedded in a system of universal commerce, a universal dependence of nations on one another (Marx 1996).

qualities—the precise definition of the hysteria of conversion proper to capitalism (Stallybrass 1998; Keane 1998; Žižek 1994a).

The introduction and integration of palm oil cultivation into Desa farmers' daily life have obscured their definite social relations between men to the fantastic relation between material things (Marx 1976, 2005). The exchange ratio of palm oil mediates and determines people's activities. At first, most Desa farmers were against palm oil cultivation and the opening of big plantation companies because they were unaware of palm oil's economic potential. However, with the passage of time and an increase in the global market's demand for palm oil, farmers have begun to realize its high economic value. This realization has influenced their decision to reduce the time spent on personal field cultivation, to open up new lands for palm oil cultivation, and to submerge themselves in a capitalistic market—a vague and entangled system they have come to know only in the past three decades.

The advent of a capitalistic market—palm oil agribusiness—brings with it a split between farmers and the palm oil they produce and exchange (Marx 1976; Ripstein 1987; Taussig 1980), between material social action—or the real conditions of existence—and the representational forms in which this action is reflected back to the practitioner (Moyaert 2004). The result of this split is the subordination of Desa farmers to the palm oil they produce which appears to be independent and self-empowered. Not only are they separated, but also the price of their product constantly varies beyond their prediction and control. The companies decide the price they are willing to pay to each farmer, after deducting various production costs. A stable price over long periods of time is rare. With this condition, as Taussig (1980, 2018) suggests, the farmers are even more subject to the mystifying domination of the market as they base all of their everyday decisions on the price of their harvest. For the farmers, all of this appears to be very normal.

This paper utilizes primary and secondary data for the analysis. I was able to conduct field research on topics of “agrarian change” and “rural microfinance,” in 2014, 2016, and 2018, in the Buayan river area. The study focuses on several villages within PT HD and PT SP plantation concessions. The secondary data is from existing research on palm oil plantation economy and a rural land development project. I also use secondary resources for colonial data on the historical non-timber forest products (NTFPs) trade and the para-rubber economy in West Kalimantan, as well as Christian evangelical mission records. By bringing together ethnographic data on the palm oil tree as a fetish and historical accounts of the tree as a

commodity, I hope to go beyond Weber's "iron cage" and show the "mist-enveloped regions" and thereby the absolute strangeness of the normal capitalist every day.

Life Before the Palm Oil Plantation

The History of Land-use Change in West Kalimantan

Subjugation of the cognate mind may be achieved through ideology shift over timespace materialized in gradual dispossession of a mode of production (See Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, 2009). In the Desa farmers' case, the history of land-use change spans hundreds of years, encompassing their ancestors' contact with multiple exterior groups: Chinese traders, Dutch colonists, and the modern Indonesian government. Desa ancestors also established trade connections with other Dayak subgroups that they met during various sojourn expeditions. All of these contacts had a role in palm oil plantation expansion and contributed to the decay of Tapang Madu belief and the construction of a new palm tree fetishism. To understand the process of new fetish construction, it is important first to understand the historical context in which it began.

Borneo⁴ contains unique ecosystems that are among the richest on the planet (MacKinnon et al. 1996.) Prior to the introduction and integration of cash crops into Desa farmers' cultural landscape, the Borneo forest was dominated by a family of tree species called *Dipterocarps*. This family comprises 16 genera and roughly 700 tree species, more than 270 of which have been identified in Borneo Island; 155 of them are endemic to the island. *Dipterocarps* are largely arborescent, ranging in size from intermediate shrubs to towering emergent canopy trees. In West Kalimantan, these trees have an average height of 45 m to 60 m and produce high quality timber. Although this species is recorded to have once dominated the entire West Kalimantan forest, due to illegal logging, forest fires, climate change, and conversion to monoculture farming, the number of trees has decreased drastically.

The West Kalimantan forest has long been an arena of political economy contestation between both exterior groups from abroad and local Dayak subgroups, with the *Dipterocarps* tree species in the forefront of trade conflicts. The trade conflicts are due mainly to the multiple

⁴ Borneo is the name of the island on which three countries share borders: Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. The Indonesian side of Borneo is called Kalimantan. Kalimantan is further divided into five provinces: North Kalimantan, Central Kalimantan, South Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, and West Kalimantan. The Desas of concern lives in West Kalimantan.

interests of different groups regarding *Dipterocarps* timberwood and non-timber forest products (NTFP). With interests in both local and international markets, these groups compete for a monopoly over trade routes and access to NTFPs located in the innermost parts of the forest. Various NTFPs have caught the interest of various groups, including edible birdnests, exudates (resins, latexes, and gums), rattans, and illipe nuts (Padoch and Peluso 1996; Cleary 1996; De Beer and McDermott 1996; Sellato 2002; Wadley 2005).

For the purposes of this paper, I focus primarily on the NTFPs extracted from Tapang Madu trees that contributed to the construction of the Desa's belief in its most traditional form: honey and beeswax. This tree is one of several *Dipterocarps* species inhabited by bees (*Apis dorsata*). Traditionally, Desas harvested honey once every three months for their daily consumption and pharmaceutical needs. At this time, Dayak groups, including the Desas, were living graciously through their subsistence system in which they developed a set of forest access ethics to govern their access to and processing of extracting NTFPs. By living subsistently, the Dayak groups were poised to exploit their forest in a sustainable manner that would not lead to total deforestation yet would still be enough for consumption.

Honey and beeswax were among the first NTFPs that local Desas traded with exterior groups. Chinese traders were the first to voyage, sporadically, to North and West side of Borneo and conduct trade with local Dayak groups. Although Chinese in significant numbers had settled in Borneo since the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD),⁵ the revival of Taoism in China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279)⁶ promoted more intense NTFP trade with local Dayaks. The revival of Taoism carried with it a revival of the study of traditional Chinese medicine (Reid 1987). Beeswax served as an important material in the traditional Chinese pharmaceutical, since it could be processed into moisturizers, cosmetics, and even edibles.

By the year 960, Chinese traders had already intensively begun to establish their trading system with outer Dayak groups who lived by sea and river shores. Chinese traders went into the depths of the West side of Borneo forest to search for beeswax from bee hives on trees such as Tapang Madu. This systematic trading could occur only with legitimization by a newly emerging power, the Sriwijaya Kingdom in South Sumatera, which had been able to take control and monopolize the Malaka Strait at about the same time. Until the early 17th century,

⁵ Cheng Te-k'un. *Contact Between China and Southeast Asia in Ancient Times Through Archaeological Discovery in Sarawak*, translated by Zhen Ya (Nanjing: Southeast Culture, 1986.1), p. 149.

⁶ Ann, Wan Kong. *Examining the Connection between Ancient China and Borneo through Santubong Archaeological Sites*, edited by Victor H. Mair (Philadelphia: Sino-Platonic Papers, 2013. 236), p. 8.

historical reports (Warren 2007) noted that NTFPs in the West side of Borneo forest were still plentiful despite the ever increasing demand for trade and personal consumption. For every 0.45 kg of beeswax, local Dayak could harvest an estimated 10.9 kg to 13.6 kg of honey for trade (Sellato 2005). This description points to the wide availability of Tapang Madu trees during the era—a tree with an economic value just made known to the local Dayak.

The years from 1840 until the 1900s mark Dutch colonization over Borneo as an entire island. The emergence of this new political system had significant impact on the Chinese traders in the West side of Borneo. This impact would later also affect the beeswax harvested from Tapang Madu and the distribution of beeswax as well as honey to the global market. Supposedly, NTFPs were over-exploited during this era. In 1850, as Dutch colonists began to expansively set foot on Borneo land, Chinese traders were forced to move outside the borders of European authority. Those who were still interested in NTFP trade moved further inside the forest via river branches. Others, who lived in lowland river ports and coastal areas, sent their representatives upriver in a large, complex network of trade (Wadley 2005). Chinese *taukeh* (large merchants) funded these journeys, supplying credit and supplies so that forest products could be transported to towns (Chew 1990). De Vries (in Kaal and Crane 1992) suggests that trade resources between interior Dayak groups and exterior Chinese groups comprised mainly items that coastal people used extensively, with a high demand for honey and beeswax. Export statistics of the Dutch dominions included thousands of dollars' worth of NTFPs, including beeswax (USD 18,048). Chinese traders funneled most of the products downstream and sold them to the Dutch colonies on the shores.

Trade in NTFPs remained a major contributor to the region's economy until the late 19th century. However, the trade slowly began to show signs of change when the Dutch themselves began to process the NTFPs into manufactured goods. These products attracted higher prices than raw NTFPs. As world demand for goods such as timber and rubber increased from the end of the century, much of Borneo represented what Wood (1985:3) has termed a resource frontier, "a relatively unpopulated peripheral region that has natural resources sold on the world market." This transition increasingly entailed a restructuring of the long-established production pattern to one that was structured more by the demands of the world commodity market, mediated through the local state and its agencies (Cleary 1996). To meet these "luxury" product demands, the Dutch started to develop plantation systems all over Borneo.

Dutch colonists introduced the para-rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) to the Dayaks in the early twentieth century (Dove 1994, 1998), making para-rubber the first cash crop that the

Desas knew. The Dutch owned major para-rubber plantations in the Meliau area of West Kalimantan and swiftly expanded into the hinterlands (Semedi and Bakker 2014). One important private Dutch para-rubber plantation company was NV Kapoewas Rubber Maatschappij, established in Meliau in the early 1930s (Semedi and Bakker 2014; Fortin 2011). At the time, NV Kapoewas secured a seventy-five year land lease for 12,257 hectares (Brinkgreve 1947). Although the company was able to develop only 652 hectares of para-rubber plantation by the mid-1940s (Ibid.), NV Kapoewas' land concession formed the foundation for future palm oil plantation development.

Large scale para-rubber cultivation proved to be very lucrative, as it required little labor and fetched a good and stable price, with several major trading booms monthly (Sellato 2005). An official report in 1928 suggested a production in 1926 of 20,000 metric tons from the West side of Borneo, while Southern side and Eastern side of Borneo produced a total of 15,000 tons (Potter 2005). Seeing these booms and the economic gain that it brought, Desa farmers might have become interested in opening their own small scale para-rubber tree plantations, although they didn't have the equipment and chemicals needed to maintain a stable production rate. Those who were beginning to experiment with raising rubber seedlings for their own smallholder plantations had to face hostility from Dutch officials (Ibid.) Desas' own interest in para-rubber plants and the gradually expanding Dutch-owned plantations suggest that the heterogeneous forest areas were beginning to be opened for monoculture cash cropping. Hence, forest trees—including Tapang Madu—were felled in high number to meet the plantation land requirement. Although the Desas had learned of the high economic value of planting para-rubber trees, they still maintained NTFP trade with the Chinese. Supposedly, during this time Desa farmers' main interest was in shifting to more profitable cash crops rather than participating only in NTFP trade. Arguably, Tapang Madu's economic value began to decrease at this time.

The rise of industrial capitalism in West Kalimantan during the early 20th century commodified the Desas' land. The land began to be perceived as territory in need of appropriation by certain groups of people. The Dutch, who had acquired high political status through fraudulent deals with local elites, provoked interior Dayak groups to stage regular raiding expeditions on neighboring groups' territories. This aggressive strategy was meant to seize land control and to pillage other groups' NTFP resources, as the availability of NTFPs had decreased exponentially.

From the end of the 1960s to the early 1970s, the remotest interior groups started to join the mainstream forest product trade, with timber wood at the forefront. In approximately a decade, logging companies obtained rights to access and use extensive plots of the West Kalimantan forest (Semedi and Bakker 2014). The international demand for high-quality timber was at its peak, and prices soared compared to prices for NTFPs. Since the highest quality timber was located in the *Dipterocarps* forest deep upriver, interior Dayak groups in turn entered into the timber boom that had been going on for some time downstream by the exterior groups (Peluso 1983). Small amounts of NTFPs were collected during this time and traded at low prices. However, the upriver forest suffered massive damage from logging activities. The Tapang Madu was particularly affected as its high quality timber attracted the most attention, compared to other trees. The thirst for timber peaked in the 1970s, and timber companies established many new infrastructures, such as roads and workshops, to produce and transport timber more efficiently.

As new infrastructures were developed, the Desas witnessed a gradual influx of new consumer goods through the opening of new marketplaces in larger villages. They could now travel between villages more easily and were exposed to new technologies such as radios, motorcycles, and sometimes cars. Timber companies and the Desas were not the only beneficiaries from this development. Christian missionaries also gained advantage from the ease of transportation. New roads meant new access to the innermost Dayak villages which, for the missionaries, were golden opportunities for their conversion mission—a different kind of invasion from what the Dayaks had experienced previously.

The Godly Human Engineering

Christian missionaries reached Ne' Gambang village—some fifty miles upriver from Meliau sub-district—where the Desa farmers of concern resided in 1970.⁷ The missionaries

⁷ Although Christian missionaries experienced accelerated progress in their conversion mission during the 1970s, the introduction of Christianity—Catholicism in particular—to West Borneo actually dates back more than 150 years. It was 1865 when the Jesuit missionary Father de Vries visited Singkawang, a port town by the river Kapuas, to set up pastoral journeys inward to the West Borneo hinterlands with several Catholics of Chinese descent who had settled in the town and commenced trade decades earlier. Over the course of thirty years, Singkawang developed into a permanent base station for resident priests and missionaries who travelled from there to serve other places in West Borneo. These West Borneo missions had to stop in the later 1890s, however, due to a lack of mission personnel, and in the same period, the permanent station in Singkawang was closed. However, a 1903 report relayed that priests and missionaries stationed in Singkawang had accomplished 467 conversion baptism missions to hinterland Dayaks by the time of that closing (Steenbrink 2007). The arrival of Capuchin friars in 1905 signaled a new beginning for the previously ended Jesuit mission. In the first decade of their new mission, the Capuchins redeveloped Singkawang mission station with hopes of reaching even further into the Dayaks'

were never too welcome in this purely Dayak village due to their different skin color and, as perceived by the Dayak farmers, ill intentions. “[*Seperti*] *hantu!*” (They look like ghosts!) described one old farmer. This rejection prevented the missionaries from settling in Ne’ Gambang village, and instead they had to commute some four miles downriver to Pianggu village where they developed a mission post, church, and school. To ease their mission, the friars used Catholic-converted Pianggu villagers with kin-ties with the Desa farmers at Ne’ Gambang to lure the latter into the promises of Catholicism and an agreement to be converted. Although there are no exact records, it apparently took years of mission work to finally get some Ne’ Gambang Desa farmers to agree to conversion, and another decade to establish a church in the hills of the village.

Conversion is not an event, rather, it is a generational process (Hefner 1993; Kipp 1995).⁸ Theoretically, the introduction of Catholicism and Protestantism to Desa farmers — and eventually their conversion—occurred through several phases. The first phase involved the advent of the external stimulus and the introduction of stress. Protestant missionaries from Pontianak city—the capital of West Kalimantan province—were able to reach Ne’ Gambang Village in the early 1990s. Their mission journey was relatively easy compared to that of the friars because a new trans-village mud road built by a palm oil plantation company facilitated their transportation. The Ne’ Gambang Dayak farmers were also more receptive to these missionaries because of their past experiences with the Dutch Catholic friars. However, the Protestant denominations making these mission trips changed rapidly. The first of these missionaries, from Gereja Bethel Indonesia (Bethel Church of Indonesia), stopped their once-a-month mission trips after several years. In the early 2000s, Gereja Persatuan Pengabar Injil (Church of United Evangelists) missionaries restarted the Ne’ Gambang mission, but they stopped after about two years due to a decision to move their area of focus some six miles downriver to Kunyil Village. At this phase, only a handful of individuals began to transform

innermost villages. To do so, the friars employed a “moving back strategy”—an approach developed to continuously establish new mission outposts as they moved further inland to the forest (Steenbrink and Aritonang 2008). In 1928 the friars reached Sanggau, the last port town before entering Meliau sub-district. Here, the friars had to race against Methodist missionaries coming from Java and Moslem traders for religious influence over the Dayak who lived beyond the town borders. Eventually, the Methodists had to stop their mission due to their leader’s being sent back to the United States. The Moslem traders were able to maintain control of Sanggau through their ability to establish a profitable NTFP trade network between local Dayak groups and Chinese traders in the bigger seaport cities (Daulay 1996). The friars—although able to establish only a small amount of Catholic influence in the town—immediately resumed their mission to move inwards toward Meliau sub-district.

⁸ Unfortunately, I don’t have any exact data to further elaborate the dogmatic differences each mission carried and how were they accepted by the Desas.

their pre-existing belief about *jubata*⁹. Unfortunately, it is not recorded whether or not the missionaries used violent force to convert Desa farmers. There are reasons to believe, however, that a small number of people freely agreed to be converted—although possibly unknowingly due to lack of information—and, by doing so, were labeled deviants by other members of their village

In 2004 a reformed church, Gereja Kristen Setia Indonesia (The Church of Faithful Christian Indonesia) sent missionaries to Ne' Gambang. Its mission strategy proved effective. They recruited one Desa farmer, Sengki, and trained him to be a congregational leader. With his kin-ties, Sengki was able to lure other farmers to convert to Protestantism and establish a church across from that of the Catholics. Such was the second phase of conversion. This phase involved ever greater numbers of Desa farmers shifting away from their prior beliefs to begin experimenting with entirely new types of bodily practices, such as changing their dietary pattern, limiting use of intoxicants, prohibiting tattoo-making, and engaging in new sexual practices. Desa farmers also began to embody the concept of sin as constructed by Catholic and Protestant belief systems, rejecting their own pre-existing belief regarding *jubata* and all other traditional elements related to ancestral worship (see Robbins 2004; Meyer 1999; Keane 2007; Kuipers 1998). All of these shifts were reflected in Sengki's statement "*Orang Protestan kan harus semakin maju, orang dulu belum mengerti Yesus, makanya mereka sembah apa yang mereka buat itu kan. Sekarang ya seharusnya kita semua puji Tuhan saja, nenek moyang itu sesat bah*" ([We] Protestants have to be more advanced, our ancestors did not understand Jesus, that's why they worship what they made. Now, we should all praise the Lord, our ancestors were misguided). As more and more farmers came to share Sengki's views and reject their pre-existing belief, the basic coherence of the entire group began to fragment, and people began to accuse one another of being either heathens or traitors.

Aside from following their already converted kin, I think another reason behind the sustainability of Desa farmers' conversion to Catholicism and Protestantism was a perception of the two world religions as forms of progress and modernity—ideas coming from the Java world. Desa farmers' worldview was subject to tension from the introduction of modern technology and information. The state-controlled television stations broadcast many Java

⁹ For the Desas, *Jubata* is believed to be the originator, the creator, and the keeper of the universe's life. *Jubata* is omnipresent—both here and there simultaneously. All Desas' morals are judged by *Jubata*, and it is to *Jubata* the Desas' life belongs. The Desas, as well as other Dayak subgroups, have a famous saying "*Basengat ka' Jubata*," meaning their breath of life is dependent to *Jubata*. For a more detailed account of *Jubata*-related Tapang Madu belief, see (Simanjuntak 2018).

productions—with Bahasa Indonesian subtitles—that portrayed a very different way of life from that of Desa farmers.

The third phase involved renewal proper of the new Catholic and Protestant beliefs, or revitalization (Wallace 2003). During this stage, an entirely new set of beliefs and concomitantly a new orientation of social life proper were adopted. Following Wallace's theoretical framework (Ibid.), as an increasing number of people adopted this new set of beliefs, an entirely new culture began to emerge. In the last phase, this new order became normalized and routinized in Desas' daily life, thus completing the conversion and transformation cycle to one filled with new ritual forms and new possibilities for sociality (Vokes 2007). Such is the condition of the Desa farmers today. Conversion to Christianity entailed less of an inward belief and more of a godly-proper practicality. Sundays became a day of worship during which work is prohibited. Another example is a change in the nature of work performed by the farmers. As the missionaries left church operational and maintenance processes to the Desas, funding became a problem due to the fact that most of the Desa farmers were living in a zero to minimum wage. To cover the church's needs, Sengki encouraged plantation work as a way of earning more money and thus contributing more to the church on a monthly basis.

Evidently, the mass religious conversion among the Desa farmers was not made possible by the rigorous work of missionaries and priests alone. The New Order Indonesian government (1966-1998) implemented a policy mandating all citizens to carry a personal identification card indicating their religion—a form of human engineering program through godly means (Bertrand 2004; Aragon 2000). Without an identification card, the Desas' access to government institutions—even schools—would be limited. The policy resulted in mass religious conversion in 1965 to the five official religions of the state: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. This rule was made to further identify and blame supporters of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) who were depicted as atheists. Most of the older farmers I met in Ne' Gambang claimed to previously having been scared of the possibility of being convicted as a supporter of the Communist Party 1965, as the state—through military intervention—had killed more than 500,000 convicted Communist Party supporters in an anti-Communist purge in many Indonesian rural areas.

Conversion to Christianity legitimated state-church relationship into a symbiosis that subordinated the Desa farmers. The church legitimated the state by giving it an otherworldly authority, while the state legitimated the church by providing it a construction of the godly-

proper with an institutional basis in empirical reality (see Berger 1990). As Weber (2012) and Tawney (1984) suggest, as a result of the state-church dialectic, the religious conversion to Christianity solidified the moral foundation for the final massive land-use change—transition to the palm oil plantation, the fields of God. Working in the plantation is now more than a function of economic accumulation *per se*; rather it is a moral compass of good-ness or bad-ness. This change was the backdrop in which palm oil fetishization came into being. Not only did palm oil bring immense economic gain for Desa farmers, but also it subjugated them, without their realizing it, as their life became fashioned by palm oil market price fluctuations. The history of Desa farmers’ dispossession, in which they no longer had control over the mode of production, was complete.

Living with Palm Oil

Third World Cult of the Modern

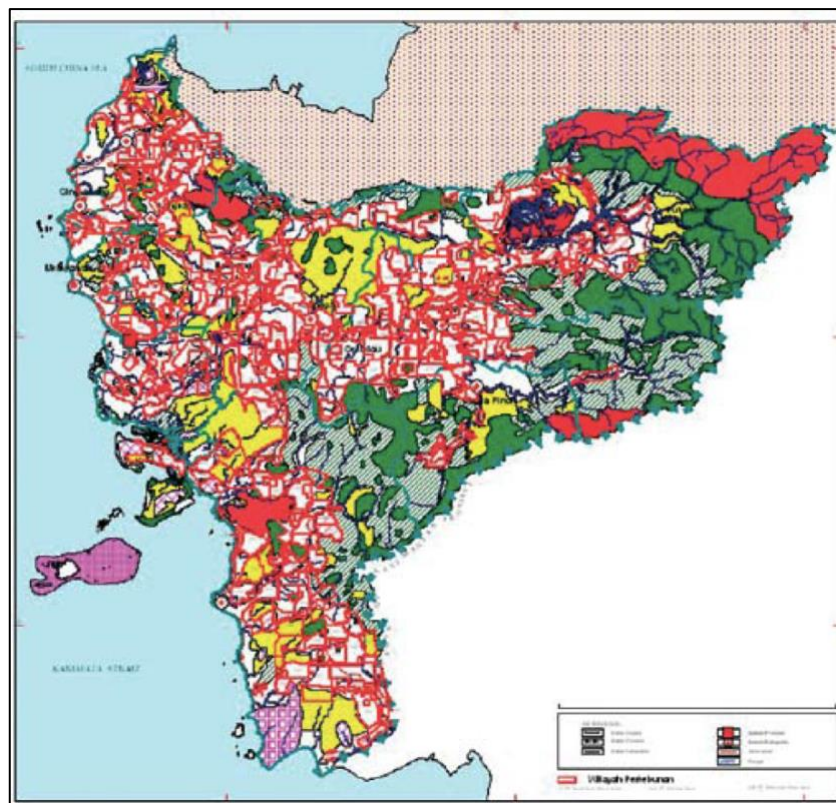


Fig. 1. The Distribution of Palm Oil Plantation Companies in West Kalimantan in 2006¹⁰

¹⁰ Source: Bappeda 2006, Inventarisasi Kegiatan Pemanfaatan Ruang Provinsi Kalimantan Barat, Laporan Final, Bappeda-Kalbar, Pontianak. (Note: red lines show boundaries of existing palm oil plantations, yellow areas are production forest, green areas are protected forest, and red blocks are nature reserves.)

Palm oil plantations have expanded rapidly in West Kalimantan in the last three decades. One half of palm oil companies in Indonesia are located in the province, as can be seen in the plantation concession map in Figure 1.

By 2005, 152 palm oil companies had been established, covering 3.2 million hectares (BAPPEDA Kalimantan Barat 2006). Within five years, the number of companies rose to 326, covering 4.8 million hectares (Setra 2013), or about one third of West Kalimantan's territory. These numbers will only increase for years, as the West Kalimantan provincial government is planning to expand the land concession for palm oil plantations by five million hectares, resulting in more plantation areas than in any other province in Indonesia. Over two decades, palm oil plantation expansion has played such a huge part in the national economic growth that the national government even participates in international lobbying to other nations to maintain current trade deals.

My research site lies in the Buayan river area, roughly 500 km² wide and located along the Buayan river and its tributaries, the Melawi and Rosan rivers. The area comprises one third of Meliau sub-district which is 1495.7 km². In this area, at least 20,443 hectares of previous forest and farmland have been converted to palm oil plantations, with the concessions owned by two private sister companies, PT Harapan Desa (HD) and PT Surya Pratama (SP), as can be seen in figure 2.

Dayak farmers first encountered palm oil trees in the early 1980s. At the time, State Plantation Company (PTPN) XIII in Meliau sub-district, was granted a lease of 5700 hectares of government land to establish a palm oil plantation (PTPN XIII 2008; Colchester et al. 2006; Rufinus et al. 2011). This concession included the former NV Kapoewas land that was nationalized and handed over to Indonesian military-owned NV Agris in 1957. In the 1980s, NV Agris gave its land concession to the PTPN XIII (Semedi and Bakker 2014; Colchester et al. 2006). For most Dayak farmers, whose ancestors had been living in the area and producing export commodities for hundreds of years, it was the first time they ever encountered palm oil (*Elaeis guineensis*). Immediately after the plantation's establishment, the state company started offering local Dayak farmers opportunities to work as wage labor. Initially, a large majority of Dayak farmers refrained from plantation work, as they would not have enough time to work on their own fields (Semedi 2014).



Fig. 2. Palm Oil Fields Distribution in Buayan River Area¹¹

However, after nine years of total state-controlled operation, palm oil production in West Kalimantan began to shift to a private sector-oriented operation. In its 1989 report, the World Bank noted that the management capacity of Indonesian state-owned companies was low due to slow financialization to the companies (The World Bank 1989). The World Bank urged the Indonesian government to encourage the establishment of more private companies and let them eventually lead the national palm oil production. The Indonesian government took the report seriously and decided to follow the World Bank's suggestion.

Three years later, in 1992, PT HD and its sister company PT SP established themselves in the Buayan area as a response to the World Bank's encouragement of more private companies and the ever increasing demand for palm oil from both domestic and international markets.¹² These companies were funded by various private sectors nation-wide. The government gave PT HD and PT SP the right to open approximately 39,000 hectares of palm

¹¹ Source: Semedi and Prasetya 2014, Oil Palm versus Rubber: GIS Empirical Check for Land Grabbing in West Kalimantan. (Note: Yellow areas are palm oil plantation land concession owned by PT HD and PT SP, green areas are production forest, and red lines are companies' axis roads.)

¹² It is estimated that in 2010 the total production of palm oil plantations in Meliau sub-district was 20,000–30,000 tons of fresh fruit per month, equivalent to \$2,354,000-\$3,532,000 of cash. Palm oil produced in Indonesia is used as cooking oil in the domestic market (26%), 73% is exported, and small amounts are used in processed foods, cosmetics and as a biofuel. (1.3%) (Obidzinski et al. 2012).

oil plantation as part of their initial establishment plan. However, since the companies did not own any land in the area, the property was obtained from local farmers through land grabbing, or the large scale acquisition of land or land-related rights and resources by the government, to then be sold or leased to corporate entities (Borras et al. 2011; White et al. 2012). The land grabbing in Meliau sub-district—locally known as *serah kebun* (field handover)—was legitimated by government intervention through Agrarian Law No. 30/1960 that classifies Indonesian lands into private and state property. The law mandates that land not privately owned—as proven by land certificates issued by the National Agrarian Ministry—is categorized as state or government land. Due to the inability of most local Dayak farmers to prove their ownership of cultivated land (because of its joint ownership by the village), the government confiscated the farmers’ land. Eventually the government leased this government-claimed land to PT HD and PT SP to develop palm oil plantations.

In practice, the land grabbing was made possible by the government’s nation-wide regulation for rural land management called Nucleus Estate and Smallholder (NES) scheme, through which palm oil companies receive “free” access to land. Under the NES scheme, a private or state-owned plantation company establishes a nucleus estate and palm oil mill and provides services to surrounding smallholder plantations called “plasma” (Barlow et al. 2003; McCarthy 2010; McCarthy et al. 2012). The scheme was initially designed to centralize the role of private plantation companies in developing the land surrounding their nucleus estate. Plantation companies are required to provide input, credit, and technical advice, as well as to collect and process the palm oil fruit (Cramb and McCarthy 2016). Thus, NES can be considered a form of contract farming¹³ in which landholders (farmers) forfeit plots of land for the plantation company to develop, receiving a part back to manage.

From the government’s point of view, implementation of the NES scheme was a necessary development strategy for improving the socio-economic livelihood of the poor rural population, most of which lived in the outer islands (Cramb and McCarthy 2016; Zen et al. 2016; Mubyarto 1992). The government perceived the Dayak farmers in West Kalimantan, in particular, as people living in severe poverty and exposed to devastating environmental problems, as most of their area was covered by the economically useless creeping grass *alang-alang* (*Imperata cylindrica*)—a “Third World Cult of the Modern” deemed to be less

¹³On the national level, the government adopted this form of land scheme from the 1970s (termed Perkebunan Inti rakyat or PIR) and formed a key part of its transmigration program (PIR/Trans) from the mid-1980s, often with financial support from the World Bank.

developed (Taussig 1987a; Tsing 1993). The government viewed this open area as the legacy of deforestation by timber companies and illegal loggers in the early 1990s, and of clearing for the purpose of food crop cultivation in transmigration schemes (Dove 1986). The frequent burning of both *alang-alang* and useless timber during the dry season posed an environmental hazard through smoke and haze which damaged the health of residents (Zen et al. 2016).

By arguing that such land had been degraded and was not suitable for use as a reserve forest or protected area (Hall 2013), the government justified the need to re-utilize the land for palm oil cultivation, transforming it into an area of extractive practices (Tsing 2003, 2005; Eilenberg 2014; Peluso 2017; Peluso and Lund 2011) which would bring rapid economic growth for West Kalimantan. With this justification, the state issued 25-30 year lease titles (*Hak Guna Usaha*) for new plantations. I suspect the government's inclination toward continuing the NES scheme was inseparable from the World Bank's insistence on "creating a dynamic partnership between private capital and smallholders ...[to encourage] technology transfer, innovation, and market growth" (Baumann 2000).

In the mid-1990s, the NES scheme required farmers to forfeit 7.5 hectares of their land to the government. Ideally, farmers would get back 2 hectares of land for plasma fields, while the nucleus estate would retain 5 hectares. Infrastructures such as roads and mill facilities would be developed on the remaining 0.5 hectares.¹⁴ During the first four years, a plantation company engaged in the NES scheme would have to clear the plasma land, plant the palm oil tree crop, and handle administrative matters regarding the field development while maintaining the growth of its own nucleus estate. Smallholder farmers were required to reimburse the plantation company for every service it provided to set up the plasma field during the four years, through deductions from their monthly income from selling the harvested fruit (Gaiser 2009). The program was termed "Interest During Construction" (IDC),¹⁵ reflecting the farmers' obligation to pay interest as well. According to the national regulation on plantation revitalization,¹⁶ smallholder farmers had to pay 15.5% per hectare developed, which amounted to roughly Rp. 24,980,000 (equivalent to \$1,764). After the four years, it would be up to the

¹⁴ Point 5 of Sanggau district head (Bupati) Decree No. 525.26/647/Disbun/1996.

¹⁵ The IDC consists of five cost categories: processing (including general production payment, mill staff salaries and allowances, direct production cost, maintenance, and packaging), marketing, transportation to the harbor, factory depreciation, and indirect operation costs. (Gillespie 2011)

¹⁶ Regulation Number 33/Permentan/OT/140/7/2006 and Finance Regulation Number 117/PMK/Kpts/1/2007.

smallholder farmers' cooperative to administer the entire plasma development and decide whether or not to continue the contract with the plantation company (Zen et al. 2016).

When Suharto, the then president of the New Order regime, announced that 2000 would be the year when Indonesia would “*tinggal landas*” (take off) economically, his statement helped heighten the Desa farmers' expectations and anxieties about the new millennium. They began to hear rumors of new plantation companies being built close to their villages, new job opportunities, and the amount of money flowing into their area. Yet at the same time, they realized the possibility of losing their land, as it slowly trickled out of their hands and into the grip of these companies. In the Buayan river area, development seemed to be perennially on the threshold—always about to come. The future not only was characterized by economic progress and technological advancement but also implied a new society (Bubandt 1998, 2015; Tsing 2015), one composed of development-oriented people who had voluntarily moved out from their underdevelopedness.

From the 2000s onwards, the government continued to fully support the rapid plantation expansion into the depths of Desa farmers' forest territory. As exemplified in the words of the former Indonesian minister of agriculture Bungaran Saragih, “the agribusiness system approach is chosen ... primarily to protect, facilitate, and promote our small family farmers' better livelihood along with their fellow landless laborers. Since the beginning, our primary intention is to uplift the well-being of the poorest segment of our country ... the majority of our people” (Bissonnette 2013). The government has maintained the decade-long economic development rhetoric, positioning Desa farmers as a vulnerable society in need of saving through plantation intervention.

Struggles of the New

The new society that the New Order regime imagined turned out to be hard to achieve. It was not easy to convince the Desas to believe themselves to be underdeveloped, let alone to welcome palm oil plantation companies into their territory. However, their attitude towards this “inevitable” expansion has changed over time.

Regardless of the farmers' rejection of the development of PT HD and PT SP, by the early 2000s the two companies had succeeded in establishing their combined plantation of 12,000 hectares. Two decades into their operation, the companies together were able to establish some 20,000 hectares, or 53% of their initial plan. They utilized a number of strategies

to implement their business, both soft and hard campaigns. The soft campaign included at least two actions. First, companies raised local farmers' interest in participating in the plantation expansion through presenting a calculation of risks and benefits, citing high prices that the palm oil fruit could be sold for, in sessions called *sosialisasi* (socialization). As many Desa farmers said, during such *sosialisasi*, companies' representatives often promised development in the form of public infrastructures (i.e., roads, schools, clinics, and churches) which often failed to be met (Marti 2008). Of course, the representatives were doing no more than selling dreams and promises of instantaneous wealth to the farmers, while harboring the farmers' belief that they would remain the owners of their own land. Second, companies hired village heads to encourage farmers to join the plantation projects while also bribing authoritative local officials to award expansion permits (Marti 2008; McCarthy and Zen 2009). Both actions proved to be somewhat successful.

The realization of their lands' being expropriated and themselves being cheated impelled Desa farmers to employ subtle resistance techniques, described by Scott (1990) as "infra-politics," against the plantation companies. Some farmers were willing to sell their land and not join the crop conversion project. Others set up their own plantation, even though doing so was not permitted (Forest Peoples' Program 2005). Still others combined their plantation work¹⁷ with swidden farming. Such subtle subversions were overpowered by the companies through hard campaigns which involved police and military backed intimidations as well an outright takeover (Potter 2008). Farmers resisted by blocking plantation roads, damaging company infrastructures, and even taking up arms. Nonetheless, slowly but surely, Desa farmers began to realize the inevitability of the plantation expansion into the depths of their primary forest.

Yet, as I witnessed in the research field, participation in palm oil plantation work has brought local Desa farmers immense economic gain through more stable and continuous cash revenue. In 2010, the entire Buayan area received approximately Rp. 21,000,000,000 of gross revenue (equivalent to \$1,484,300) from palm oil alone, which was distributed among 30 hamlets (Semedi 2014; Semedi and Bakker 2014). According to several farmers, life today is better than ever, as they have a dependable source of income which opens up new opportunities to markets and other public facilities in town. Thanks to the palm oil money, farmers can now buy motorcycles, modern house appliances, and the latest model of mobile phone and laptop;

¹⁷ Plantations employed smallholders as laborers until their holdings became productive, after which they had to repay the cost of land preparation and credit for fertilizer and other inputs.

they can also afford to renovate their houses. Some farmers even manage to buy trucks to start a transportation business. Farmers do recognize the destructive impact that the plantation development has brought, but they choose to focus more on the economic gain.



Fig. 3. West Kalimantan Palm Oil Plantation Expansion¹⁸

To maintain such a comfortable living condition, Desa farmers are becoming less and less hesitant to sell their remaining land to plantation companies. Those who have enough funds buy others' plasma fields and open their own small-scale estate of 5 hectares. During my first field visit in 2014, selling plasma land to investors from urban areas such as Pontianak, Ngabang, and Tayan city became common. Desa farmers whom I met in several villages said that they had sold their remaining plasma fields to urban investors who usually own a “mini palm oil estate” concession of 20–100 hectares.¹⁹ Farmers are aware of the social and cultural costs of the plantation, but they no longer resist the presence of PT HD and PT SP. As one farmer said, “*lahan Klemantan ni’ masih luas, masih bisa buat sawit banyak gi!*”

¹⁸ Source: Greenpeace.org.

¹⁹ Desa farmers have told me that they know several urban investors who own more than 300 hectares of “mini palm oil estate.”

(Kalimantan's land is still widely available, [we can still use it] for more palm oil!). Even more, the selling price of para-rubber has been dropping gradually since 2002, prompting the Desa farmers to pause their rubber farming activities and focus more on their palm oil plantation work. It seems that for Desa farmers, bureaucratic processes and economic pressure lead to a more flexible landscape which eventually provides a structure to their territory-making and re-making process. What was once a "trial and error" crop has turned into a dominant element of the Desa's ecological landscape, gradually replacing pre-existing territorial regimentation of their land.²⁰

Unlike earlier forms of organization, which joined farmers into direct relationships for production and exchange (often predicated on their control over the means of production), the market has interposed itself between farmers, mediating direct awareness of social relations by the abstract laws of relationships between commodities (Taussig 1980). In a plantation-dominated life, Desa farmers do not directly relate with one another. This leads to a rise of different social spheres (Habermas 1993) where farmers interact differently depending on the rise or fall of palm oil prices. In 2014, a kilogram of newly harvested palm oil fruit (FFB) was priced at Rp. 1,778. Desa farmers were enthusiastic with the high price, and talk of purchasing new plots of land was common. They joined farmers from other villages in week-long parties and feasts. Yet, in 2018, when FFB price fell to Rp. 1,578, I never heard any talk among the farmers other than complaints and frustration whenever they would gather in one of their houses after work.

The farmers' gratitude over plantation expansion cannot be separated from the promise of salvation that the church has promoted. Preachers believe that salvation can be achieved only through the extinction of elements viewed as traditional (Keane 2007; Schiller 1997; Robbins 2004). Hence, radical sermons that invoke people to leave behind their traditional elements—such as ritual practices and dietary choices—are held repetitively. Moreover, because the missionaries have perceived the Desas as sinful due to ancestral and current "heathen" practices, the Desas have been told to modernize themselves to be more like urbanites. One way to achieve modernity is to work in the palm oil plantations.

²⁰ For a more detailed account of the Desa and other Dayak subgroups' traditional territorial regime, see (De Vos 2016; Peluso 1996; Peluso, Vandergeest, and Potter 1995; Peluso and Vandergeest 2001; Padoch and Peluso 1996; Wadley 2003; Wadley and Colfer 2004; Padoch, Harwell, and Susanto 1998; Dove 1998, 1993; Harwell 2010; De Vos 2016)

The new income gained from working as paid labor on the plantations, paired with institutionalized loan sharking through credit unions²¹ (CU) and a large influx of “Western” commodities to local markets, have led Desa farmers to disproportionate material desires and consumption, without mechanisms to channel their wealth into savings. For the farmers, modern media—TV, radio, cell phones, etc.—structured their perception of reality in advance and rendered reality indistinguishable from the “aestheticized” image of it (Debord 2012). When asked why a young farmer bought a sports motorcycle/bike, he answered “[*Karena keren! Kayak di TV!*]” ([Because it is] cool! Just like on TV). At first glance, this phenomenon might not be any different from other modern societies’ model of consumption. The problem, however, is that the farmers’ excessive consumption of modern appliances is not supported by properly working apparatuses. They routinely endure failing rural electrification, bad signal reception, unpaved roads, high gas prices, and similar problems in infrastructures.

Another example of a secularizing influence is the bulldozer, introduced in 1992, used to create logging roads through the rainforest. That the bulldozer operator could fell trees and clear land without first consulting *jubata* (the one most powerful spiritual being), getting *jubata*’s permission, or observing any omens, was, on one side, a challenge to Desa farmers’ traditional belief system; yet on the other side, it stimulated awe regarding the efficiency and “Westernized” value that it represented.

Indeed palm oil plantations were organized to further alienate the Desa from the things they produce. Yet, such alienation—which comes with cloned palm oil tree stock, coerced labor, conquered and thus open land—lead to unprecedented profits for the farmers, economy-wise and belief-wise. Once central mill operations were started, all operations had to run on the time frame of the mill—farmers’ lives are fashioned by palm oil production, which in turn contributes to the survival of palm oil plantations (Tsing 2015; Thompson 1959). In other words, Desa farmers and their palm oil plantations are entangled in a symbiosis that goes

²¹ According to Kawai and Inoue (Kawai and Inoue 2011) the Credit Union (CU) institution was introduced into Indonesia in 1970. CU financial cooperatives are categorized as semi-formal financial institutions because both are regulated by cooperative law in Indonesia. Originally, CUs were spread by small entrepreneurs in urban areas and small farmers in rural areas on their own initiative, as a cooperative movement to cope with the threats posed by large capitalists and loan sharks. The two main principals wereself-help and self-governance. After the end of the ORBA regime and the emergence of the Reformation regime, CUs were free to organize and carry out education in both urban and rural areas. From that time, CU activists begin to nurture the seeds of CU activities throughout Indonesia (CUCO 2011a.) In 2009, there were 47 CUs that served 398,190 people in Kalimantan (CUCO 2011b.) Today, there are at least 51 CUs in West Kalimantan alone that serve 800,000 people (Source: pontianakpost.co.id.) In the Meliau area, the development of CUs is well supported by Catholic and Protestant churches, with some of the congregation leaders appointed as CU advisors. Most Desa farmers take out loans to pay primarily for their daily needs, including their children’s school tuition, chemicals for their plantation work, and repair of their broken motorcycles.

beyond economic growth *per se*. Nowadays, such symbiosis shapes the dream of the Desa and the Indonesian state, although previously their dreams were not in line with each other. Notably what both call progress and modernity is characterized by continuous capitalist development.

Such was the condition when I encountered the Desa farmers. Rows of palm oil trees neatly lined the muddy trans-village road. Farmers efficiently planted one tree after another to minimize—even eliminating—unproductive gaps between them. They did all of this work while envisioning how tall the trees and how long the leaves would grow in the next four to five years when all their labor would come to fruition. Although most of the fields were not their own, working intimately with the palm oil trees had provoked their imagination of emerging wealth—that having more palm trees was and would always be better. This belief is why farmers utilize the smallest amount of open space they have, even the slightest gap between their houses, to plant palm oil trees. In Buayan river area, Desa farmers boast not about the size of their smallholder plantation land but about their quantity of palm oil trees and the profit they will get. In fact, during my fieldwork, this topic was the only one I heard farmers talk about in their daily social spheres. A magic of capitalist accumulation is at work here, invoking farmers' imagination of possibilities, thus driving them for more and more palm oil trees.

Fetishizing the Palm Tree

The Capitalistic Desire

As more palm oil is produced, it is as if the very quality of wanting more gets “caught up” in it, constantly changing the farmers' drive to grow palm trees and expand their fields. Desa farmers' appetite for palm oil—possessing it and being possessed by it, greed and fancy—emerges within a material dialectic between their sensory routines and the “objects.” In return, a new imagination surrounding palm oil agribusiness emerges, as if it is trying to veil and protect the continuation of production. The continued conversation between Yami, Victor, and their son Secung on a strikingly hot day in Ne'Gambang in 2016 highlights this process:

Secung had just returned home from work. All of the sudden, his mother became angry.

Yami: *Kenopay nda' kerja perusahaan ko tu? (Why don't you work at the plantation company?)*

Secung: *lebih untung ngereke' bah ma', banyak duit tu bah* (It's more profitable to work in the gold mines mom, there's a lot of money there)

Yami: *Gila ana' tu ngereke' terus dia, nda' kerja perusahaan! Kerja ja sama Semon!* (That kid is crazy, [he] only works in the gold mine, not at the plantation company! Go work with Semon!)

Victor: *ada pilihan opay gi'? kerja di perusahaan tu pilihan terbaik' nyaman bah! Sawit mensejahterakan kita am.* (What other options are there? Plantation work is the best option, it's good! Palm oil enrich us.)

Secung was correct, (illegally) working in the gold mine is more profitable than plantation work. On a daily basis, if he is lucky enough and willing to work from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., Secung could return home with one gram of gold, priced at Rp. 420,000 per gram (equivalent to \$29.60). There were weeks when Secung was able to bring home three to six grams of gold—a considerably high weekly income. Yet Yami and Victor's response indicated the direct opposite desire. They wanted Secung to work in the plantation just like his brother Semon. However, plantation work, as described by Semon, was less profitable than gold mining. After a month of contract farming, Semon was paid Rp. 1,000,000 (equivalent to \$70.50) from which 60% was deducted to repay his debt to the farmers' cooperative for "operational cost." In the end, Semon was able to bring back only Rp. 400,000 (equivalent to \$28.2). He lamented, "*Stress bah, apalagi karena sudah berkeluarga. Makin banya' pengeluaran. Dudung bah nda' pernah minta kue macam-macam, tapi aku kan nda' tega*" ([It's] stressful, moreover because I have a family. The expense is even bigger. [My son] never asked for food or anything, but I don't have the heart [to not spoil him]). If Yami and Victor's consideration to have Secung work in the plantation were for an economic reason *per se*, they certainly were not correct, let alone calling him crazy for working in a more profitable sector.

Victor's statement about plantation work's being the single best option is the imagination veiling the palm oil agribusiness. Other Desa farmers shared the same belief, that for them accumulation of wealth could be achieved only through plantation work alone. Indeed, historical reasons might contribute to the reason that plantation work became the best option for the farmers—for example, profitless modern NTFP trade, gradually declining para-rubber price, and massive land conversion to palm oil plantations. However, for the plantation work to gain a certain quality—a "good-ness" as Victor puts it—that drives the Desa farmers to work only in the plantation, shows how palm oil trees, to some extent, may produce values of their own. In turn, this value might triumph Desa farmers' reasons—if there are any—not to work in the palm oil plantation.

I suggest that such a value, a “good-ness,” is the product of the magic of capitalist accumulation. The magic itself is desire, an interminable becoming-more without being, an ongoing process of becoming that is the becoming of reality anchored in the act of collective palm oil production (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Lazzarato 2017). In a capitalist mode of production, desire can be understood as a proliferation of possibilities that comes with a continuous production of commodities. To satisfy the desire, every day the Desa farmers would have to consume palm oil trees and produce palm oil even more than the day before. Yet concurrent with the emerging possibilities that palm oil brings (i.e. power, growth, and expansion) is the impossibility of production: satisfaction. Desire—posited as synonymous with production—endlessly explores reality for a satisfaction that is never forthcoming. Hence, palm oil production is an inherently paradoxical process—it satisfies and dissatisfies desire at the same time.

The Fetishistic Reality

The Desa farmers’ reality is characterized by a lack of satisfaction over a capitalistic palm oil production. “*Lebih banya’ lebih bai’!*” (More is better!) one farmer said eerily to another after a day of laboring for one and a half tons of palm oil fruits. Indeed the farmers feel the irony in their own work, as is apparent in their remark “*nda’ habis-habis bah*” (it never ends), referring to the abundance of palm oil trees to be harvested. The notion of lack presumes a dialectic production relationship in the farmers’ daily life, with dissatisfaction as one of its elements, producing an everydayness that they perceive as somewhat natural. As I observed, resistance on various scales, from questioning to rejecting to subverting, against this everydayness is relatively rare.

Yet the reality of “lack” is never directly itself. It presents itself to the Desa farmers through a symbolic cosmology of figurative embodiments of horror-excess that both promotes and threatens the integrity of palm oil production. It is two sides of the same coin—the god in the form of palm oil fetishism worship and the devil in the form of an eight-legged black dog phantom (Lacan 2006; Fink 1997; Žižek 1994b; Graeber 2002).

The church is the proper place for the “mystical” confrontation between god and the devil. Because the palm oil commodity provides the necessary fetishistic supplement to the “official” spirituality, it may well be that the “official” belief of the modern Desa farmers is Christian spirituality, but its actual foundation is, nonetheless, the fetishism of the palm oil.

However, this is not to say that palm oil fetishism replaces Christianity. The fetish is as crucial to the operation of industrial capitalism as are beliefs in the divinity of sovereigns to tribute-based agricultural communities. In short, there is no “pure” spirituality separate from the obscene realm of the mystified matter. Indeed, although the sensuous object—the palm oil tree—exist apart from the farmers, the supra sensible object form of the commodity—the god form—exist intimately within them. One Sunday church sermon in 2016 highlights this production dialectic.

After his sermon, the priest stepped down to the altar, stood aside a young palm oil tree that was about to be planted, and asked the congregation to pray.

Priest: “*Mari kita berdoa ke sawit, minta’ ja’ agar dia tu banya’ buahnya bah. Supaya banya’ hasil, kita ni sejahtera. Kan nyaman kalo rumah nanti diperbai’, sekola ana’ bah.*” (Let us pray to the palm oil tree, let us ask that it produces many fruits. So that our harvest would be abundant, we will be prosperous. It would be good if we can repair our houses, for our kids’ education [fee])

The priest then continued with the prayer, and the congregation followed it in their hearts.

Such abstraction of the palm oil tree, materialized through the act of worship is an attitude that shows itself to be deeply mystical (Taussig 1980; Mulhern 2007). Due to losing their original connection to social life as new social organization is created, Desa farmers think of these abstractions of commodities as animate entities with a life of their own, akin to spirits or gods. For this reason, what was once a product of the interrelations of persons is no longer seen as such. Instead, these animated entities are perceived to be things that stand over, control, and to some extent may produce values of their own. The palm oil trees are exalted and thereby transcend their sensuous environment, into one that is supra sensible. Desa farmers end up treating their own creations as if these creations have power over them; farmers fall down and worship those very commodities which they have produced (Graeber 2005; Stallybrass 1998; Ellen 1988).

In the dialectic of production, worshipping the palm oil tree becomes a way to deny the intrinsic dissatisfaction of desire, effectively calling the Desa farmers’ desire to a standstill. By worshipping the palm oil tree, farmers understand the peril of possible production depletion and are driven to produce more. Less production, and thus less income, would lead to real social life problems. More importantly, less production would be problematic for their desire over lack. In other words, the Desa farmers “are the offspring of [their own] work” (Latour 2010). The tendency to produce more is not only a characteristic of the capitalist market; it also becomes the farmers’ attitude towards their own production model.

The confession of Mak Sengki and Mak Orin, two Desa farmers, during one church sermon provides an insight about the Desas' eight-legged black dog phantom, or the devil.

The priest has invited anybody from the congregation to confess their sins. Immediately Mak Sengki stepped up, followed by Mak Orin.

Mak Sengki: “*Kemarin saya dicobai sakit ketika meladang sawit. Ada hantu anjing hitam bah! Ini teguran Tuhan karena sudah dua minggu saya tida' bersa'si. Jadi sebagai ana' Tuhan, bai'lah kita bersa'si setida'nya dua minggu sekali.*” (Yesterday I was tested by illness during plantation work. There is a black dog phantom! This is God's warning because I have not confessed my sin for two weeks. As God's children, we have to confess our sins at least once every two weeks.)

Mak Orin: “*Kemarin hantu anjing hitam kembali menggoda Ogen di ladang. Langsung ia datang ke rumah dan minta berdoa sama aku. Anjing itu roh jahat. Mohon doanya dari semuanya agar ta' terjadi agi. Cucu kamek, kiting, juga sering sakit.*” (Yesterday at the plantation, a black dog phantom bedeviled Ogen. She immediately returned back home and asked to pray with me. That dog is the devil. I ask for your prayers so this will never happen again. Our grandson Kiting is frequently sick [because of the black dog phantom])

The congregation went silent in fear. Koci, the village elder, stepped up to the altar and tried to calm the people.

Koci: “*Anjing hitam itu kuasa setan yang sering ganggu ana' Tuhan. Kita doa untu' usir setan itu!*” (That black dog is the devil who frequently haunts us, children of God. Let us pray to drive out that devil!)



Fig. 4. Painting of the Eight-legged Black Dog Phantoms Surrounding a Palm Oil Tree in One Farmer's House.

The Desa farmers believe that the devil lurks in their plantation field, threatening the plantation's productivity. The priest told them to run for safety if they spot the devil, albeit with the consequence of getting cursed (usually in the form of illness). However, the priest reassured them that if they were ever trapped and cornered by the devil, they should take up their "Godly war equipment."²² Thus far, however, farmers have told me more stories of fleeing from the devil and getting cursed compared to directly fighting it.

Whether or not the devil materially exists is a matter of no importance for me. The fact is, the very notion—or rather the symbol—of the devil haunts the Desa farmers during and after plantation work, day and night. The devil is that which is neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive, arriving from the past and appearing in the present (Derrida 1994). I cannot say, however, that the devil haunting the Desas belongs to the past, nor that the devil-belief belongs to the present, as I have no data on the topic of the devil's origin. Yet the appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the devil in the farmers' daily life renders temporality paradoxical—it appears in a fractured timespace (Buse and Stott 1999). Almost every week during fieldwork, I would see a group of farmers scrambling around the Ne' Gambang village, looking for a shaman to cure one of their friends from the devil's curse.

The devil's paradoxical temporality resonates with Secung's story of "lack," to the extent that I suggest it is the symbolic reflection of the lack. The naturalness in how farmers live their "today," is not a simple matter. In fact, they were never simply given the present moment (Deleuze 1990, 2004); rather, the "lack" synthesizes and thereby retains the past within the present which in turn creates an expectation of a time beyond this present, namely the future. Expectation of the future is at the epicenter of palm oil production. The desire to fulfill the "lack" of palm oil satisfaction through continuous production is challenged by the devil's presence. As taught by the priest, the devil must be avoided or defeated.

What then might the devil represent? I suggest that the devil is an empty representation of total production satisfaction—the other element of the dialectic of production that is

²² The "Godly war equipment" that the priest spoke about refers to a scripture from the bible, taken from Ephesians 6:10-17. "¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. ¹³ Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (NIV)

impossible to reach and therefore should be maintained in order for production to keep on going. In a Derridean sense, the devil is of aporetic character; it is in itself empty due to its non-origin and non-substantiality, yet painful and troubling if experienced by the farmers (Derrida 1993; Berns 2004). The farmers' physical sensations of experiencing the devil might as well have other plausible explanations. However there are no neutral, objective explanation of human experience that supersedes the perceiver's supra sensible biases or their culturally and historically specific assumptions about what is valuable, about what or who is in charge of their lives (Matory 2018)—palm oil trees.

In the end, I agree with Krips (1999) that the fetish is pleasurable/worship-able precisely insofar as it prevents the subject—in this case, the farmers—from reaching its total desire, total palm oil production satisfaction. It is exactly the impossibility of the satiable that supports the Desa farmers' fetishistic every day. By placing the palm oil tree between the Desa farmers and the emptiness of pure desire, farmers avoid both their own dissatisfaction over stagnant or even declining production and confrontation with desire's impossible production satisfaction. In between the grip of dissatisfaction and satisfaction, lies the ambivalent capitalist social reality of the Desa farmers—to produce more but never too much so that the “production gap” is maintained.

Conclusion

The Desa farmers' experience with agrarian transformation to palm oil plantation is as much metaphysical as it is biophysical. In the structure of the commodity form, the palm oil tree, it is possible to find the metaphysical subject. Yet to discover the god within the commodity, one first must go through the history that led it into becoming an object of high value. Such god—the supra sensible and worshipped subject—is a product of subjugation of the farmers' cognate mind to the commodity produced through different modes of production. The subjugation-domination relation between palm oil trees and the Desa farmers, is the principle of commodity fetishism. Concurrently, it is important to be sensitive towards the godly subject's—the Desa farmers'—reaction toward such change.

In this paper, I have shown how thinking of the godly subject within the palm oil tree as a commodity fetishism is productive for illuminating the workings of a mystifying capitalistic belief in a farmer community living in a resource frontier area. Understanding such belief can clarify how farmers perceive and make sense of the capitalistic relations that have

subjugated their life under an alien mode of production. Following Feuerbach's famous saying that truth is profane, while its' obscurity is sacred (Feuerbach 1881), I suggest the importance to focus not only on the materiality of capitalism but also on its cognitive immateriality, not only on the sensuous commodity but also its transfigured supra sensible god-form. After all, the "making-sense" strategy that I am concerned with in this paper—and aim to further pursue—Is not carried out by the mind, but occurs *in* the critical mind of the farmers.

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