The Edge of Glory: Theorising Centre-Periphery Relations in and from Indonesia's Riau Islands

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Abstract: Scholarship on centre-periphery relations in Indonesia is often rooted in an epistemology of that derives from the institutions and knowledge practices of the modern state. This has left Indonesianists are well-positioned to appreciate the impacts of decentralisation and regional autonomy upon statecraft and political movements, but only partially aware of how such reforms have affected 'the construction of marginality' (Haug et al, this volume) in its broadest sense. This chapter expands the conversation by giving centre-stage to the political imaginations of people who rarely talked about centre-periphery relations, but nevertheless revealed themselves to be profoundly invested in them. These investments came to the fore in intense, affectively charged moments, the study of which reveals that decentralisation can be as much about the desire for connection as it can be about autonomy; that life in a borderland can engender distinctive responsibilities towards a centre; and that the bodily and psychic legacies of past marginality continue to stand out as problems in the decentralised present. Such material indicates that we should avoid any hasty conclusions about the 'effects' of decentralisation, as if administrative reforms in and of themselves are capable of creating new 'centre-periphery relations'. My argument instead is that decentralisation has created new conditions of possibility under which Indonesians can attempt to realise the imaginaries of 'centre-periphery relations' that are meaningful and desirable to them. Affects and ethics underpinning local ideas about how Indonesia's periphery should relate to its centre should therefore take centre-stage in analysis.

Keywords: achievement, affect, centre-periphery, Indonesia, marginality, nationalism, political imagination, Riau Islands

The Riau Archipelago is a place where people love to talk about centres and peripheries. When I told Pak Iman, a politics lecturer at a local university, that I was writing a paper on the topic, he almost fell off his chair. 'It's the most interesting thing you've ever worked on!' he exclaimed, 'That's a paper I definitely want to read.' He went on to outline many issues that my paper could potentially address. The new regional autonomy laws had made centre-periphery relations a 'hot topic', with intense debate surrounding the administrative ambiguities they had precipitated. Who, for example, had the authority to issue a contract for bauxite mining in the newly created Riau Islands Province (popularly and hereafter known as Kepri): the local district heads, the governor, or the central ministries in Jakarta? A local district head had recently redrawn the boundaries of a protected forest to facilitate resource extraction – but was this really within his jurisdiction? These were the kinds of issues, Pak Iman felt, where research was desperately required.

Vina, a local historian, was hoping I would write an account grounded in the longue durée. The Riau Islands had, she noted, once been a major centre in and of themselves: in the seventeenth century the island of Bintan had hosted one of the liveliest trading posts in Southeast Asia, whilst the sultan's and viceroy's palaces on Lingga and Bintan had been the epicentres of one of the Malay World's most important indigenous polities. Yet, after the territory encompassed by this sultanate was bifurcated by the 1824 Treaty of London, the Riau Islands had become a marginal backwater within the Dutch East Indies, their strategic significance rapidly eclipsed by the rise of Singapore. Things had changed further during the twentieth century, as the archipelago witnessed waves of migration from all across Indonesia: its low levels of conflict, numerous job opportunities (in factories, mining, and small-scale entrepreneurship), and widespread circulation of strong Singaporean and Malaysian currency all attracting Indonesians in search of a new beginning. Others still hoped to use Kepri as a stepping-stone to migrant work overseas, but ended up getting stuck. As a consequence of these demographic shifts (described in more detail in Long 2013: 30-43), the islands boasted an impressively multicultural population. However, this in itself led many Riau Malays – who conceptualised themselves as the 'indigenous people' of the region – to feel they had become peripheral. The 2010 census estimated Malays to make up less than 30 per cent of the province's population – just 14.4 per cent in the city of Batam (Minnesota Population Center 2011) – and many will not even have been 'indigenous' Riau Malays, but migrants from Borneo, Bangka-Belitung, or the Sumatran Mainland. For Vina, then, the possibilities afforded by regional autonomy – most especially the formation of a new province, created 'in the name of the Malay people' – were important precisely because they allowed Kepri and its

Malays to be 'at the centre' of something once again. This, she thought, would be a good story to tell in my paper. I could even note how a handful of Riau Islanders were going even further and arguing that Kepri should detach from Indonesia altogether, forming a new Republic of Riau, or reconnecting with the Singaporean and/or South Malaysian territories over which it had once presided (see Faucher 2005).

If Pak Iman or Vina ever read this paper, they may be disappointed. The issues they flag are interesting, certainly, but they are stories that have already been told elsewhere.[1] More significantly, they are quite problematic stories to reiterate yet again. Vina's narrative risks overstating the extent to which the history of the Malay World shapes contemporary political imaginations, and thereby silencing the migrant majority whose claims to place are grounded in principles of citizenship, rather than autochthony (Long 2013). Pak Iman's research agenda reflects genuine problems that are much discussed amongst Kepri's educated elite: academics, civil servants, journalists and activists. However, the vast majority of Riau Islanders are far too preoccupied with the mundane business of everyday life to give such matters much thought, and so an investigation into those issues would do little to capture what either decentralisation or the simple fact of living in the Outer Islands means to *them*. Even when people offer up narratives like Vina's or Pak Iman's, these may not be the only (or even the most important) ways in which they think and feel about their position in Indonesia's geographic margins – they may simply be the most familiar and most readily articulated narratives available. This would not be surprising: both narratives ultimately have their roots in an epistemology of centre-periphery relations that derives from the institutions and knowledge practices of the modern state, and so reflect stories that informants with backgrounds in the civil service or political activism have been trained to know how to tell. Problems arise, however, when a similar bias is replicated within academic approaches to centre-periphery relations – and as I will demonstrate within this paper, that very much remains the case. The result is a situation in which Indonesianists are well-positioned to appreciate the impacts of decentralisation upon statecraft and political movements, but have achieved only a partial grasp of how Indonesia's recent transformations have affected 'the construction of marginality' (Haug et al, this volume) in its broadest sense.

I therefore want to use this chapter to expand the conversation, by giving centre-stage to the political imaginations of people who did not often talk about centre-periphery relations, but who nevertheless revealed themselves to be profoundly invested in them. These investments came to the fore in intense, affectively charged moments, the study of which reveals that decentralisation can be as much about the desire for connection as it can be about

autonomy; that life in a borderland can engender distinctive responsibilities towards a centre; and that the bodily and psychic legacies of past marginality continue to stand out as problems in the decentralised present. Taken as a whole, the material indicates that we should avoid any hasty conclusions about the 'effects' of decentralisation, as if administrative reforms in and of themselves are capable of creating new 'centre-periphery relations'. My argument instead is that decentralisation has created new conditions of possibility under which Indonesians can attempt to realise the imaginaries of 'centre-periphery relations' that are meaningful and desirable to them – and that the affects and ethics that underpin local ideas how Indonesia's periphery should relate to its centre should therefore take centre-stage in analysis. Although the chapter concentrates exclusively on the Riau Island case, this broader theoretical argument would apply to any of the regions discussed in this volume.

Metanarratives of Marginality: A Critical Review

To date, much writing on centre-periphery relations in Indonesia has been inflected by theoretical models associated with structural Marxism, especially Wallerstein's (2004) 'world-systems theory', which draws a sharp analytic distinction between regions that can be designated as 'the core' – those that hold the greatest amount of economic power – and the 'peripheries' which supply resources, commodities and manpower to that core (Pitzl 2004: 38). The core-periphery relation is thus conceptualised as an inherently antagonistic one marked by domination and exploitation. Indeed, some scholars who built on Wallerstein's framework (e.g. Hechter 1975) included in their models not only a description of expropriation, but accompanying cultural denigration and political marginalisation of the 'periphery' by the central 'core' or 'metropole' as well.

This analytic vocabulary of periphery and centre/core/metropole has given rise to several patterns in academic approaches to 'centre-periphery relations' in Indonesia. Some scholars, most notably those affiliated with the discipline of economic geography, have been concerned with mapping the changing configurations of 'centre' and 'periphery' as economic relations in Southeast Asia have become increasingly transnational under a regime of globalised 'late capitalism'. This question is particularly complex in the Riau Archipelago given the creation of an international 'Growth Triangle' scheme between Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, in which the Riau Islands serve as a cross-border 'hinterland' for Singapore. Factories set up on the islands combine Singaporean management expertise with cheap Indonesian land and labour, offering an attractive package to clients, whilst Singapore has access to some of Bintan's plentiful natural resources, most notably its scenic northern

coastline (now developed into an 'international resort area') and its water. Scholars were quick to identify this as a 'cross-border hinterlandisation' of Singapore's economy (Bunnell et al. 2012: 466); a sign that the Riau Islands had become a periphery to Singapore's centre, even as this process was being carefully managed by the central Indonesian government in Jakarta (Phelps 2004: 217).

Such analyses have certainly led to the development of increasingly subtle and complex renderings of the means by which the jurisdiction of international political and financial 'centres' is exercised in a globalised world (e.g. Goldblum and Wong 2000; Ong 2000) – a development that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of political economy. Yet the *character* of the centre-periphery relation within such work remains sketched in an analytically conservative way, as indeed it must if the endeavour of charting emergent new configurations of centre-periphery relations is to make any sense. As a consequence, however, the question of how precisely Riau Islanders and Singaporeans might imagine their mutual encounters is left aside, despite the crucial role that such perceptions play in shaping both lived experience in the region and the concrete outcomes of cross-border collaborations (Long 2013: 201-204).

A second body of literature has paid more attention to the mutability of relations between Indonesia's centre and its peripheral regions, an issue of increasing significance once the post-Suharto regional autonomy laws offered up new opportunities for these relations to be recalibrated. However, the *level* at which such recalibration is investigated is typically a relatively formal, abstracted conception of the 'balance of power'. Such an approach continues to assume an underlying antagonism between centre and periphery, as consistent with the structural Marxist model. The periphery has been conceptualised as resentful of the way its resources were being expropriated by its centre, of the heavy-handed imposition of centrally appointed bureaucrats to manage regional affairs, and of the cultural hegemony that typically accompanied this (Diprose 2009: 108-111; Kimura 2010: 426). From this point of view, decentralisation – as well as the flourishing of regional-level democracy that it was believed to inculcate – serves as a means of ensuring the longevity of the Indonesian nation-state. By relieving long-standing tensions through a rebalancing of power, and giving the periphery relative autonomy, decentralisation was seen as 'reconciling' the regions with a 'a centre that had systematically undermined their local identities since the 1950s' (Aspinall 2010: 22).

This assessment remains the most dominant metanarrative of centre-periphery relations within contemporary Indonesian Studies. It is not without its merits, and illuminates

many of the social and political struggles that took place in the early years of *Reformasi*, both within and outside the Riau Islands. The separatist movement *Riau Merdeka*, for example, premised its legitimacy on correcting the injustice that had led oil-rich Riau to be the second poorest province in Sumatra, despite generating an estimated 20 per cent of Indonesia's total wealth (Long 2013: 47). Analysing a parallel separatist movement amongst Malay-Bugis aristocrats in the Riau Islands,[2] Vivienne Wee (2002: 500) notes that the movement was underpinned by a resentment of the cultural hegemonies visited upon the region by Jakarta, coupled with a 'logic of power' in which the periphery paid formal lip service to the official narratives promulgated by the centre, whilst preserving in informal spaces of everyday life a second narrative, inspired by memories of the precolonial sultanate, that could form the basis of an alternative sovereignty movement. Even away from the spheres of formally organised separatism, informants would sometimes tell me of how their province had placed too much faith in the central administration provided by Jakarta and would benefit from having a greater degree of autonomy over its own affairs. I encountered such sentiments most frequently amongst members of the civil service, who would have encountered constraints being placed upon their own agency by regulations coming from the centre. The dominant metanarrative of decentralisation is thus far from irrelevant to the Riau Islands case, but it is only one – highly situated – imaginary of what was involved in lobbying to become a new province. For many Riau Islanders, a somewhat different set of issues was at stake.

As noted by Booth (2011), Quinn (2003) and Kimura (2007, 2010), many of the political movements set in motion by the decentralisation process were directed not at Jakarta but rather at attempting to secure autonomy from *regional* centres. Examples include the creation of new provinces in Gorontalo, West Sulawesi and Banten, and the calls for greater autonomy in Madura, Luwu, and Toraja. In Kimura's (2007: 72) view, such movements can best be understood as responses to a condition of 'marginality in the periphery', in which a population feels held back by the actions of their regional government, and thus at a disadvantage in terms of infrastructure, economic opportunities, services and skills, compared to other members of the same district, regency, or province. In some cases the regional centre might be considered guilty of discriminatory practice towards those under its jurisdiction on the basis of their ethnicity and/or religion: a condition experienced by the Gorontalese with reference to the administration offered from Manado, in North Sulawesi (Kimura 2007: 74-85). A sense of 'marginality in the periphery' could also emerge from a centre's perceived or actual failures to invest in a province's remote outer regions. Both such themes were evident in the Riau Islands, where there was widespread dissatisfaction with the region's

administration from the Mainland Sumatran city of Pekanbaru, which my informants told me was dominated by Mainland Sumatran ethnic groups and had preferentially invested in mainland development projects rather than the archipelagic Malay heartlands, leaving the islands – which had once been a vibrant and wealthy region of Indonesia – little more than a stagnant backwater. Thus, although some actors in the islands (such as the Malay-Bugis aristocrats mentioned above) hoped that the archipelago might become as free from Indonesian rule as possible,[3] the majority simply wanted to be free of interference from Pekanbaru. It was to this effect that a campaign to create a new province was initiated. As a result, we should be cautious about seeing the enthusiastic embrace of decentralisation laws within the region as being a negative judgement of Jakarta as national centre. Not only does the creation of a new province require the active co-operation of political actors within the central government (Kimura 2010: 442) – it can also reflect a desire within the marginal periphery to get a greater degree of unmediated access to the national centre, which in many regards represents a powerful and desirable resource (Wollenberg et al. 2009: 7).[4]

In short, decentralisation may not have been about pulling away from the centre so much as about engaging it more directly, and on more equal terms. Although this involved a tug away from the stymieing control of Pekanbaru, it would be a mistake to interpret the push to decentralise as an attempt to achieve a relatively high degree of self-determination vis-à-vis the rest of Indonesia (cf. cases such as Aceh and Papua). My informants often saw it as a move towards a form of peripherality that was neither 'marginal' in terms of the social and economic wellbeing of its inhabitants, nor 'marginal' in the eyes of those who mattered – other Indonesian citizens, outsiders, and indeed the government at the centre.

It could thus be perfectly logically consistent for Riau Islanders to celebrate regional autonomy and its achievements (infrastructural improvements were most widely cited on this front), and yet also hold a sense of responsibility towards, or a need to make claims upon, a 'centre' – typically Jakarta, but sometimes Singapore. Such feelings were made particularly evident in discourses surrounding one of the most negative consequences of regional autonomy: the rise of self-serving local elites, often described as 'little kings' (*raja kecil*), who exploited their capacity to grant business tenders, and who issued contracts for bauxite mining that destroyed the natural beauty and heritage of the province, as well as endangering the livelihoods of regional fishing communities. These feelings of frustration were widespread, and typically resulted in impassioned calls for the central government to intervene over tables in coffee parlours and late night domino games. Sometimes journalists, outraged by the latest announcement of a bauxite extraction project, would go up to Regents

directly, and demand to see their letter of authorisation from the centre – a phantasmic enactment of the centralised authorities that were in fact not exercising the level of surveillance and discipline of the periphery that islanders wished they would. The Regent's response – typically described as 'falling silent' or 'fleeing the scene' would then be relayed in tones of bitter pride to the journalists' friends and colleagues, who would shake their heads and lament to each other, 'That's Indonesia!' As all this took place, however, Riau Islanders were never hoping for a return to the old days of 'centralisation'. Rather, the right to make such claims on the central government was itself a valuable part of what decentralisation had involved for them.

The Affective Life of a Periphery

As the examples just sketched make clear, the failure of the centre to comply with islanders' expectations generated strong emotions. Such affective dimensions of centre-periphery relations has received little attention in the literature, and yet I found it to be one of the most productive ways of understanding the deep-seated investments that Indonesians who, on the surface, had very little to say about matters of national politics might nevertheless have towards the central government and to their own status as inhabitants of the Outer Islands within the nation-state. One of the reasons these emotional responses proved such a profitable source of insight was that they prompted people to move beyond the conventional ways of thinking and talking about centre-periphery relations, and to instead articulate their feelings and about and emotional investments in particular configurations of the political. In this section, I discuss two such cases and reveal how each of them portray a normative vision of life under decentralisation that does not revolve around detachment and autonomy, but rather a repositioned form of deep engagement with both national and transnational 'centres'.

Sri's story

A Javanese woman in her late forties who had settled in the Riau Islands after a period living overseas, Sri sustained her household through a variety of freelance businesses, including some work accompanying high-status dignitaries from Singapore to appointments around the islands. She told me of the time she had been asked to drive a group of Singaporean officials to a seminar that they had sponsored, which aimed to teach Kepri's civil servants about the latest innovations in healthcare policy. Since their office had paid for the whole event, including the hire of a luxury hotel and a free meal for all participants, the Singaporeans were shocked to discover that most of the Kepri civil servants who attended had asked them

whether it would be possible to receive any 'pocket money' (*uang saku*) to compensate them for their time. Such payments are a common feature of seminars in the Riau Islands, but the requests took the Singaporean visitors by complete surprise. When they got back to Sri's car, they animatedly recounted the events of the previous morning.

One dignitary described how he had rebuked an Indonesian who had asked him for money. 'No,' he had replied! 'The Singaporean government does not pay fees.' His colleagues had tutted in horror. 'You know,' another man had concluded, 'I don't know what is wrong with these Indonesians!'

All the time, Sri had felt her face darkening, a wave of intense shame (*malu*) sweeping over her. How could these officials have asked for pocket money when they were turning up to a free event that had been staged to help them?! Didn't they realise they were bringing their whole country into disrepute? A Singaporean caught her eye in the rear mirror. 'You can understand English, can't you Sri?' he had asked her, 'You listen to this.'

At the time, Sri had found the experience excruciating. The way in which her client had spoken of 'these Indonesians' was so dismissive, so generalising. And yet, who could blame him?! The officials he had met had behaved in terrible ways. It was then that she began to realise just how important it was that people in Kepri make a good impression. As a border province it was Kepri that overseas visitors would arrive in first; it was their experience of the Riau Islands that would shape their images of the whole nation, of the country that she loved. She came to realise that the province was the 'gateway' (*pintu*) of Indonesia; it had to be up to national standard.

The rhetoric of Kepri as a national 'gateway' was, by the time of my conversation with Sri, very widespread – especially with reference to the idea that the region was a 'gateway' for international tourists. But the corollary to this, keenly felt by Sri and many others to whom I spoke, was that it was vital that this gateway be impressive. As they understood the situation, visitors like the Singaporeans were not viewing the problematic behaviour of Kepri's officials as a reflection of the continuing marginality of Indonesia's Outer Islands periphery. Far from it – visitors would see it as a reflection of the characteristics of Indonesia as a nation, with features and dispositions that were believed to stretch throughout the nation with only negligible variations in evenness. Such fears were not unwarranted, as an equivocation of the Riau Archipelago with the nation is a common discursive manoeuvre in Singaporean commentary on the islands. Riau Island officials who showed low discipline and poor human resource quality often become ciphers for 'Indonesians' writ large, as in the case that Sri recounted. Meanwhile, a particularly mean-

spirited article by Tan Wee Cheng, an adjunct professor working at the NUS Business School, reveals how the very feel of Tanjung Pinang – a town he describes as looking 'dirty, messy and simply evil' (Tan 2004: 2) synecdochally evokes an image of Indonesia as a nation:

> "Mister! Mister, listen to me!" the Indonesian touts swarmed over us the moment we walked out of the jetty complex. Offering anything from "beachside" hotel accommodation in inland locations to deep fried fish chips [*sic*], these touts were a sudden reminder that we were no longer in First World Singapore but in a vast country with fifty times the population yet one-eighth the GDP per capita (Tan 2004: 1).

The modernity, development, discipline and high human resource quality that Riau Islanders imagined characterised life in the centre (i.e. Java) was thus not just something that they felt they were owed by the national government, but also something which it was their duty to cultivate. It would be in their own personal interests, as well as upholding – even improving – the image of their nation. This normative position was not derived from first principles or abstract reflection – it emerged viscerally, grounded in their apprehension of the gaze of their visitors and the profound shame and discomfort at the messages they saw their province to be communicating. As Sri's case illustrates clearly, the emotions that were evoked by synecdochal equivocations between the Riau Islands and Indonesia are not only evidence of latent attachment to the centre and to the nation, but served to imbue particular configurations of what it meant *to be a periphery* with personal meaning (Chodorow 1999) and normative force. Far from being a backwater clamouring to have their voices heard, it was precisely their status as an 'Outer Islands' province on the geographic periphery of the state that allowed Riau Islanders to imagine their region as integral to the reputation and international standing of the nation.

Gunawan's Story

Such aspirations were particularly strong when it came to 'human resource quality', interest in which has been burgeoning nationwide as the Indonesian government seeks to ensure that its human resources are 'globally competitive', so as to secure a prestigious ranking in much-scrutinised international ranking exercises such as the UNDP's Human Development Index, attract foreign direct investment, and cultivate an autochthonous entrepreneurial class. Riau

Islanders, like Indonesians from all provinces, were entranced by the prospect of being 'world-class', and by the cosmopolitan possibilities that such high levels of human resource quality might offer them. But the issue also spoke to deeper concerns. Opponents to provincial secession had regularly cited the poor quality of the region's human resources as a reason to block the creation of an autonomous province; many in the archipelago thus felt compelled to prove to the rest of Indonesia that separation from Pekanbaru had allowed the islands' human resources to flourish. As a result, considerable interest was taken in inter-provincial competitions – ranging from school-level contests such as maths and science Olympiads to the regular Miss Indonesia and Qur'anic recitation contests (MTQ). In all of these, representatives from Kepri could compete against participants from across Indonesia in a bid to be crowned national champion and even earn the right to represent Indonesia on the international stage. Riau Islanders spoke avidly of how much they wanted to show their countrymen that they were of 'international standard', and many dreamed of the idea that they – even though they were from a backwater periphery – might be able to represent Indonesia to the world.

Such undertakings, however, were far from straightforward. One of the major challenges facing the province's population was their sense that the region continues to be deeply scarred by the legacy of having been Pekanbaru's periphery for over forty years. A pervasive perception that the region had long been 'held back' by its former centre meant that even after the creation of the new province had led to formal powers between Pekanbaru and Tanjung Pinang (the capital of Kepri) being rendered equivalent, there was still a widespread sense of inferiority amongst Riau Islanders when comparing themselves to the population of Mainland Riau and other regions of Indonesia. This was especially evident in contexts associated with 'human resource quality', where Riau Islanders saw their current quality as fundamentally compromised by the legacies of neglect that they and their region had received in prior decades. Teams representing Kepri in inter-provincial contests desperately wanted to beat Mainland Riau, their former 'coloniser', but were simultaneously terrified by the prospect of meeting teams from regions seen as advanced – including Pekanbaru, but also Bali, South Sulawesi, and all the provinces in Java – because of their conviction that such teams would visit upon them a defeat of humiliating proportions (Long 2013: 188-192). Indeed, their levels of anxiety were often so strong that they suffered sleepless nights before competition play-offs, with the result that their fears of defeat became self-fulfilling prophecies.

When I met with Pak Gunawan, a Sundanese man in his early forties who was now the head of a prestigious vocational school in Batam, these were issues with which he was extremely familiar. Gunawan was an educator almost obsessed with the category of achievement – *prestasi* in Indonesian. He explained to me that the whole point of *prestasi* was that it was something that one 'would do absolutely anything to get': it had to 'be reached for as hard as possible', and this meant that an educational institution such as his own had to devise 'all sorts of strategies' for obtaining it. The school management was thus oriented towards scrutinising the particular strengths of individual students and then pushing those as far as possible, 'so that [their strengths] could then be competed at (*dilombakan*) and [the students] can become champions (*dapat juara*)'. Yet despite this outlook, and a formidable track record of success, Gunawan's pupils still suffered from crippling fear of failure.

Teachers at the school all agreed: even mentioning the prospect of encountering Jakarta at a national level competition would be enough to 'make students' chests heave in terror' at what they might have to come up against. This frustrated Gunawan, for whom it made no sense that his students should feel such fear when 'amongst other provinces, Kepri is known as a province to beat'. Various members of staff proceeded to reel off a catalogue of cases in which this fear had led to self-defeating behaviour on the parts of their pupils, describing students who had performed very well in the provincial contests and in training sessions but who then imploded in the national finals.

I asked Gunawan what he thought might account for this self-defeating behaviour. He offered several possible explanations, all of which were linked to what might be described as a 'mindset of marginality'. In some cases, he thought, the long-distance air travel involved in attending national finals could be a contributing factor. 'Sometimes kids from here don't have much experience of the world,' he elaborated, 'We had a kid last year who wanted to go to the finals of the LKS [*Lomba Kompetensi Siswa;* Students' Competency Competition], but he was scared to even get in the plane. He'd never flown before. So before he'd even arrived at the contest, his heart was no longer calm.' Other cases were more explicitly linked to a vocabulary of centre-periphery relations. '[The students] still feel they're from a *hinterland* region, to the extent they maybe think they're behind other regions, they're a long way from the centre, they arrive and see Jakarta and how big its buildings are, and they start to get scared.'

It is important at this point to emphasise that the issue Gunawan has identified is not one of objective differentials in technical competency: pupils from the Riau Islands have

already managed to achieve a number of impressive successes in the vocational competitions, and Gunawan's assessment that the province is regarded as 'one to beat' is not inaccurate. Although there may be fewer highly skilled pupils in the Riau Islands competing for the opportunity to represent their province, those who are successful – especially those who have had the benefit of studying in a well-resourced and highly selective school such as Gunawan's – are at no substantial disadvantage compared to their metropolitan peers. What is at stake in the anxiety faced by Gunawan's pupils is thus not a condition of contemporary structural marginality – as a more political economic view of centre-periphery relations might have it – but rather a specific *social imaginary* of how the Riau Islands' human resource quality compares to that evident in Jakarta; a legacy of the marginality that the area did indeed once experience, the memory and narrative of which continues to cast a shadow over its early decentralised days.[5]

'So now I have a new strategy,' Gunawan continued. 'We need to have a concept for training our kids as well as possible, to build their resilience (*mental*) and make them more daring (*lebih berani*). They're scared of Jakarta. Okay. I'll take them to Singapore. To Malaysia as well. But above all to Singapore. We'll wander around, see the sights. If there's time, maybe we'll do a comparative study (*studi banding*), but what matters is that we see the sights.

'The school got passports for them all, so they could see what Singapore is like – a fantastic city, that is so close, that they're able to experience and enjoy whenever they like.[6] That's what becomes their focus. They will be Kids Who Often Go To Singapore. Kids who often go to a place that's *better* than Jakarta. Then, when they arrive in Jakarta, they'll no longer be afraid. They've already seen somewhere that's truly outstanding – really opulent and tidy. Then they see Jakarta:

'"Oh, this is nothing special," they'll say, "I'm already used to Singapore."

'That's my strategy to get the kids to enjoy the atmosphere here in Batam and to build their strength of will.'

Although only one dimension of Gunawan's strategy for achieving outstanding results in national competitions (which extended to intensive training regimes and subliminal motivation by professional hypnotherapists), the trips to Singapore are particularly interesting in the context of this chapter, given Gunawan's emphasis on overcoming a 'hinterland' mentality through the manipulation of affect. In his diagnosis, the metropolitan trappings of the Jakarta landscape elicit feelings of shock that are interpreted according to an imaginary of centre-periphery relations that has long enjoyed public circulation – one which sees the centre

as developed and advanced, and the periphery as necessarily inferior. Students' negative notions of the provincial self harden in response to these affective cues, in ways that threaten their performance. Interestingly, his response to this is not to challenge the structure of his students' interpretations, for example by reassuring them that they can be credible competitors to national level teams. Instead, he seeks to change the very affects that are elicited by encounters with Jakarta's urban landscape. Trips to Singapore tap into the same affective register of awe that students' arrival in Jakarta would, but with the emphasis on this being a fun trip where the purpose is, above all, to 'see the sights', this awe is turned into not terror but wonder. Through the visits, pupils are encouraged to see themselves as part of Singapore's periphery, rather than Jakarta's. Trips to Jakarta can then take place in full confidence, both because students have become habituated to and comfortable within a centre that is thought to shine even brighter than the national capital, and also because they have come to realise that they are 'so close' to Singapore that their own position in Batam is hardly one of the marginality or extreme peripherality they might otherwise have assumed.

How significant these trips really are for the pupils at Gunawan's school is debatable. Members of the highly successful mechatronics team accorded them only cursory significance, praising the dedication of their teachers, the high volume of training they had received and the excellent facilities in the school as the most important factors that underpinned their success. On the other hand, the trips were never designed to propel an achieving mindset, but rather to prevent a counterproductive form of fear from being experienced, and are thus interventions that the students themselves may not be best-placed to evaluate. What is clear, however, is that at the level of emergent institutional theories of achievement psychology, students' imaginaries of how Kepri, as a particular kind of periphery, relates to the centres of Singapore and Jakarta, has been seen as central to the outcomes students achieve, whilst also amenable to intervention. Moreover, this intervention is not made in structural terms, but in ways that are bodily, experiential, and affective.

Conclusion

Studies of decentralisation and centre-periphery relations in Indonesia all too often focus on questions of resource flow or the 'balance of power' as if these were the terminal points of a social analysis. Clearly they are significant: decentralisation has led to very tangible changes in infrastructure and institutional practice, setting conditions of possibility for all the events discussed in this chapter. For example, while Gunawan felt that decentralisation had actually played 'very little part' in improving the human resource quality on Batam (he attributed the

high quality to the self-propulsive values that circulated in a city of economic migrants), it was clear that his own school had benefitted considerably from being identified as a flagship institution by the provincial government.

However, what I have hoped to demonstrate is that such structural changes are important only insofar as they lead to new conditions of possibility in which inhabitants of the Outer Islands might be able to pursue the forms of life that are most desirable to them. The question of what mode of life is desired and why thus stands out as a pressing matter for ethnographic investigation, rather than something that should be assumed on the basis of a theoretical model. In the Riau Islands, citizens' desires frequently involve relating to the centre in new ways so as to be a new kind of (non-marginal) periphery, rather than aspiring to become a centre, or longing for a condition of autonomy. Anxieties about marginality and the legacies of past neglect combine with an appreciation of the duties and opportunities that the region might bear as a geographic periphery: but in both cases what seems to be at issue is an intense desire for national parity, underpinned by a desire for full inclusion within the nation – and increasingly, desire for full membership of 'the global'. The recalibration of centre-periphery relations is consequently an affectively and ethically charged concern.

This strong level of personal investment in the political, I suggest, is precisely why my enquiries into centre-periphery relations tended to yield emotionally charged accounts of outrage, shame, or distress – and why Gunawan felt that forging affective bonds between his students and the metropolitan centre of Singapore could prove such an effective means of remedying the self-handicapping tendencies that were holding back his own desires for his school. Given the emphasis that the literature on decentralisation continues to place on the actions and motivations of self-interested elites – as if their supporters are simply held in thrall to their ambitions by similarly self-interested practices of clientelism – it is theoretically sobering to reflect on the intense passions that normative questions of centre-periphery relations continue to elicit, as well as to recognise that it was precisely the desire to connect more directly with a beloved national centre that led many Riau Islanders to embrace the prospect of provincial autonomy in the first place.

Notes

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[1] Vina's narrative finds echoes in the works of Carole Faucher (2005, 2007) and Vivienne Wee (2002), while Pak Iman's concerns have been widely recognised as affecting Indonesia's resource extraction industries on a nation-wide scale (see e.g. Casson and Obidzinski 2002; Spiegel 2012).

[2] Aristocrats descended from the viceroys of the Riau-Lingga sultanate self-define as 'pure Malays', whilst nevertheless tracing their patrilineal descent to Bugis seafarers who arrived in the Riau Islands during the eighteenth century. For further discussion of this complex 'Malay-Bugis' identity, see Long (2013: 70-97).

[3] These aristocrats had a direct incentive to advocate such a position since they envisaged themselves as being, by birthright, the future leaders of the prospective Republic of Riau.

[4] Note also that earlier anthropological accounts of the 'exemplary centre' stressed the desirability of access to a 'potent centre'. Proximity to such a source offered opportunities for cultivating one's own potency (Errington 1983), as well as the comforting, and yet also dangerously distracting, prospect of being 'enveloped in a superior authority's care' (Keeler 1987: 202). Relations with the centre were thus ambivalent, prompting a complex ethics of detachment and engagement. Contrast this with more recent attempts to use 'cultural' models of potency as a gloss for structural descriptions of centre-periphery relations. Phelps (2004),

for instance, uses Anderson's (1972) famous image of a cone of light to emphasise the darkness (and thus marginality) of the periphery – an interpretation that remains in thrall to structural models, and radically underplays the complex tensions and ambivalences that characterised the culturalist model.

[5] In some other cases, these two concerns exist in tandem (Long 2013: 190-191).

[6] Notwithstanding the immigration restrictions on visitors from Indonesia (Ford and Lyons 2006: 262-263).

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