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Abstract

In the Heart of Borneo, the Lun Bawang people are divided by the Malaysia–Indonesia boundary, resulting in distinct but interconnected migration patterns. This note discusses how internal migration within Malaysian Sarawak and cross-border movement from Indonesian North Kalimantan intersect to shape inequality and identity. Rural depopulation in Sarawak’s uplands has left aging communities and threatens traditional livelihoods and cultural preservation. Meanwhile, persistent underdevelopment in North Kalimantan drives many Lun Bawang to seek work in Malaysia, driving cross-border labour flows. These dynamics create an asymmetric interdependence: Indonesian workers fill labour shortages in Sarawak but remain vulnerable in informal roles, while Sarawak’s Lun Bawang depend on this labour yet are wary of a permanent Indonesian presence. Divergent demographic trajectories have emerged: Sarawak’s Lun Bawang villages shrink and age, whereas communities in North Kalimantan remain youthful, bolstered by in-migration, fuelling tensions over land ownership and resources. Ultimately, a colonial-era border has produced contrasting opportunities and national identities that override shared ethnicity, complicating notions of belonging. Overall, the interplay of internal and cross-border migration reinforces inequality while offering new livelihoods, highlighting the complex links between mobility, development, and identity in this borderland.

Keywords: Borneo, Lun Bawang, migration, identity, inequality, border

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Introduction

In the highlands of northeast Borneo, where forests cover steep terrain and old colonial borders still shape the land, the Lun Bawang (or Lundayeh) live across three administrative areas in two countries: the Malaysian states of Sarawak and Sabah, and the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan. Sharing a common cultural identity, the Lun Bawang have long sustained family, cultural, and economic ties that cross national borders. Yet, in recent decades, divergent trajectories of development on either side of the border have reshaped the nature of mobility.

In Sarawak, young Lun Bawang increasingly leave the highlands for better opportunities in urban centers. Their departure has led to the aging of highland communities and the gradual erosion of traditional livelihoods. Meanwhile, on the Indonesian side, the Lun Bawang people face stark underdevelopment and limited access to essential services, pushing them to cross the border in search of work, healthcare, and basic goods, often as low-wage labourers for their Malaysian kin, particularly in Sarawak. In recent years, the situation has become more complex as transmigrants from other Indonesian islands, spurred by border development policies, move in seeking new economic opportunities, bringing both growth potential and social challenges.

These mobility patterns - urban-bound internal migration in Malaysia, cross-border informal labour, and transmigration in Indonesia - intersect in complex ways that both reinforce and challenge existing inequalities. While internal migration provides upward mobility for Malaysian Lun Bawang youth, it also results in the hollowing out of rural communities and increased dependence on foreign labour. Conversely, cross-border migration from Indonesia offers survival and limited opportunities, but under conditions of precarity, asymmetrical power, and

often contested legitimacy. The older generation, remaining in the Malaysian highlands, becomes simultaneously dependent on and defensive against their Indonesian counterparts, hiring them for labour while resisting their permanent presence in efforts to protect status and identity.

Focusing on these forms of movement in Sarawak and North Kalimantan, this note contributes to our understanding of how internal and international migration intersect in the Global South, and how these intersections shape patterns of inequality and sense of belongings. It does so by tracing the intertwined pathways of rural depopulation, cross-border labour mobility, and the everyday politics in the Malaysian-Indonesian border zone. The note is built upon information collected during field trips in 2022-2023 organised by Forever Sabah and PACOS, via semi-formal and informal exchange, and is supported by literature review.

Sarawak: Irreversible Outmigration

Lawas district is often regarded as the heartland of the Lun Bawang people. The district spans a diverse landscape from lowlands to highlands and holds a unique geographic position, connecting Brunei, Sabah, and North Kalimantan. Lawas town, situated near the coast, functions as a vital node in this border region, strategically located at the intersection linking Sarawak with Sabah, Brunei, Labuan, and the Krayan Highlands of Indonesia.

There is no official figure detailing the Lun Bawang population in Lawas. According to the 2020 Census, the district recorded 18,414 non-Malay Bumiputera residents, likely serving as a reasonable proxy for estimating the Lun Bawang population. Notably, the entire state of Sarawak reported a total Lun Bawang population of 17,315 (DOSM, 2022a, 2022b).

At the southernmost edge of the district lies Ba'kelalan, a cluster of nine villages situated just 4 kilometres from the Malaysia–Indonesia border and approximately 150 kilometres inland from Lawas town, where the official border crossing to North Kalimantan is located. Located at approximately 910 meters above sea level along the Kelalan River, Ba'kelalan features expansive valleys fed by mountain streams, which support wet rice cultivation, including the renowned Adan rice, prized for its quality and cultural heritage.

Despite its remoteness, Ba'kelalan is accessible via small aircraft through Ba'kelalan Airport or by a rugged 125-kilometer logging road from Lawas. Air connectivity is currently limited to three weekly return flights with a maximum of 20 passengers per flight. Post-COVID-19, the Sarawak government has commenced construction of the Sarawak-Sabah Link Road

(SSLR), which will eventually connect scattered Lun Bawang settlements throughout the highlands to Ba'kelalan.

Youth outmigration remains a defining challenge for highland communities, driven by scarce local opportunities and the appeal of urban living. While precise figures are limited, village elders and local leaders note that nearly all young people have relocated to urban centres such as the Lawas town, Miri, Kuching, or even cities in Peninsular Malaysia for education, employment, or marriage. Supporting this, the 2020 Census shows that the population aged 0–14 in Lawas dropped sharply from 12,281 in 2010 to 9,774 in 2020 (DOSM, 2022a). This trend reflects broader internal migration patterns across Sarawak, where nearly all rural districts experienced population declines over the same decade.

Economic factors dominate: farming, once the backbone of Lun Bawang life, is increasingly seen as physically demanding and financially unstable. A 50-year-old farmer lamented, *“I know how to farm, but my children do not, and I do not wish them to do it. Hard work. They live well in the city. I am happy for them.”* In fact, he himself was not keen to remain a full-time farmer for the rest of his life, constantly seeking opportunities to leave the village. Younger generations, educated in urban schools, aspire to salaried jobs in sectors like hospitality or government services, viewing agriculture as a “last resort.”

The COVID-19 pandemic briefly reversed this flow, as unemployed urban workers returned to villages. As one returnee in his 30s noted, *“We come back to our land to farm or start small businesses. However, we lack infrastructure – look at the phone signals. Unless new opportunities emerge, such as tourism, we’ll be forced to leave again in search of better economic prospects and modern amenities.”* Ancestral land ownership provides a vital safety net in times of urban instability, though the situation remains uncertain for long-term.

Sarawak’s proximity to Indonesia’s North Kalimantan adds complexity. While its youth depart for cities, Indonesian Lun Bawang cross the border seeking low-wage work in farms, construction, and service sectors, filling labour gaps left by outmigration. This creates an unequal dynamic: while urban opportunities draw Malaysian Lun Bawang youth away from their highland communities, the border crossing becomes a gateway for Indonesians seeking livelihoods in roles increasingly shunned by locals. Notably, the 2020 Census recorded 1,814 non-citizen residents in Lawas, accounting for approximately 5% of the district’s total population (DOSM, 2022a). This pattern is reshaping both the demographic and cultural profile of the Lun Bawang highlands.

North Kalimantan: Isolated and Reliance on Neighbour

The Krayan Highlands, located in the western part of Nunukan Regency, are known for their relative isolation from the rest of the province and Indonesia more broadly, despite being directly adjacent to Ba'kelalan in Sarawak. The landscape features rolling plateaus and valleys at elevations exceeding 1,000 meters, with extensive wet rice fields nourished by mountain-fed rivers. Transportation options are limited, with only a few government-subsidised flights connecting Long Bawan to Nunukan, Tarakan, and occasionally Malinau. Even after subsidies, flight costs remain between IDR 400,000 and 500,000, and service is restricted to just one 12-seater flight per day - underscoring the inconvenience and limited accessibility faced by the local population.

Broadly, the Krayan Highlands are divided into five sub-districts: South Krayan, Central Krayan, Krayan, East Krayan, and West Krayan. Collectively referred to as the Apokayan region, these areas are home to approximately 10,874 residents, the vast majority of whom are Christians (BPS 2021). While there are no official figures specifically detailing the Lun Bawang population in the region, the number of Christians can serve as a useful proxy, distinguishing them from the predominantly Muslim Tidung communities in the lowlands, as well as Buginese and Javanese migrant populations.

Unlike Lawas, the population here has not declined but has experienced modest growth - approximately 1% annually over the past decade, from 9,483 in 2010 (BPS 2011). Moreover, the demographic profile remains predominantly youthful, sharply contrasting with the aging population found in Sarawak's highlands. During field studies, many informants noted a rapid influx of internal migrants from other parts of Indonesia, with several emphasizing that the number has been rising sharply in recent years. However, it remains unclear whether this trend is reflected in official statistics. A clearer picture may only emerge with the next national census in 2030, which could provide more definitive data on the scale and impact of this migration.

Compared to the other parts of the province, the Krayan Highlands shares strong ecological and cultural ties with Lun Bawang communities across the border in Sarawak and Sabah, fostering deep social and economic interactions, particularly with Sarawak's Lun Bawang population. Due to limited connectivity with the rest of North Kalimantan, Krayan communities depend heavily on supplies from Sarawak, especially from Lawas via Ba'kelalan and the Long Midang crossing point. This dependence has fostered a vibrant cross-border trade in goods such as rice, buffalo, and mountain salt, conducted through both formal and informal routes. According to local informants,

it is estimated that Krayan residents spend an estimated roughly US\$ 20,000 monthly in Ba'kelalan on daily necessities and construction materials like cement and steel. In return, Krayan exports rice and sand to Sarawak, illustrating a mutual, if asymmetric, economic interdependence.

Furthermore, many from North Kalimantan cross into Sarawak in pursuit of better wages, finding opportunities in rice farms, plantations, service sectors, and construction. This movement is driven by a pronounced economic gradient between Indonesia and Malaysia, where Sarawak's relative prosperity acts as a strong attractor for migrant workers seeking improved livelihoods. Cultural and familial ties further facilitate this cross-border migration. Shared kinship connections and linguistic similarities among the Lun Bawang communities create an environment where informal networks thrive, easing the movement of people despite the presence of national borders.

Despite the tangible economic benefits, traders and migrant workers from North Kalimantan often operate in precarious conditions within Sarawak's informal or semi-formal sectors. They function in a grey zone, a space where cross-border activities, while technically illegal, are tacitly tolerated by local authorities. This informal acceptance, however, comes at a cost: the absence of legal protections and social security leaves many workers vulnerable, reinforcing a cycle where low-wage, transient labour becomes the norm for those unable to secure more stable employment.

In recent years, the situation has grown more complex with the rising trend of internal migration from other parts of Indonesia into the border regions. Informants observed that newcomers, particularly from urban centres such as Java and Tarakan, are arriving with greater financial resources, enabling them to purchase land along the border. This trend is particularly evident in areas like Long Bawan, where wealthier migrants have begun acquiring land from local residents. These developments have raised significant concerns among the indigenous communities. There is growing unease about the long-term implications of land sales, especially regarding the potential loss of ancestral lands and the erosion of customary land tenure systems.

Perspectives on Mobility, Inequality, and Identity

Rural Hollowing

The internal migration of Malaysian Lun Bawang has indirectly triggered a cascade of changes in Sarawak's highland communities. As younger generations leave in search of education and employment elsewhere, the once-vibrant highland villages are becoming increasingly hollowed out, a phenomenon akin to the emptying of rural communities. This demographic shift has created new labour demands, prompting the migration of Indonesian Lun Bawang into Sarawak. Today, much of the paddy farming, harvesting, and construction work in the highlands is carried out by workers from Krayan, including Javanese migrants. This dependency on transient labour is unlikely to be reversed without strategic and systemic investment in local economies and infrastructure.

The migration trend raises concerns about land inheritance. Customary lands, which represent generations of indigenous land tenure, spiritual heritage, and ecological stewardship, risk being abandoned. With the elderly left behind and younger heirs residing elsewhere, questions arise about who will take responsibility for these lands and whether they will fall into disuse or be sold off under financial pressure. As land holds deep cultural significance for the Lun Bawang, detachment from land-based activities signals not only a disruption in heritage but also a gradual erosion of cultural identity.

Economic Tensions

Meanwhile, the eagerness of Indonesian Lun Bawang from Krayan to cross into Sarawak in search of trade and work opportunities is generating both economic and social friction. In general, their Sarawakian counterparts show less interest in border-related engagements and are wary of a growing Indonesian presence. While Krayan residents seek opportunities to uplift themselves economically, Sarawak's highlanders remain cautious, if not outright resistant, to deeper cross-border integration.

The economic relationship between these cross-border kin groups is fraught with complexity. Sarawakian informants report that Krayan traders often travel as far as Lawas town to sell agricultural products, especially rice, at low prices, creating stiff competition for local

producers. However, Indonesian informants counter that they are exploited by Malaysian middlemen who purchase their goods at very low prices, leaving them with little room for negotiation or profit. From the perspectives of the Krayan Highlanders, with only limited access to markets, primarily through Ba'kelalan and Lawas, they find themselves at a stark disadvantage. Their dependency on Malaysian routes leaves them vulnerable to market manipulation and logistical bottlenecks. As a result, they feel increasingly marginalised and economically “suppressed,” a sentiment that has deepened frustration and resentment toward their Malaysian kin.

Security Concerns

Beyond economics, cross-border mobility has heightened security concerns. Residents of Ba'kelalan express anxiety about crime and illicit activities associated with porous borders. Informants note the ease with which individuals cross into Sarawak via *jalan tikus* (informal forest routes), raising fears of smuggling, theft, and broader disruptions to local life. Some highlanders have grown disillusioned with life in a border zone, expressing little interest in cross-border exchange or even travel to Kalimantan.

For Krayan highlanders, however, the situation is one of desperation. Marginalized on their own side of the border and feeling “bullied” on the other, they are looking to President Jokowi’s “Developing from the Periphery” policy¹ as a possible lifeline. Many are willing to accept internal migration, including transmigrants from Java or other parts of Indonesia, if it brings long-overdue development to their remote region.

Fear of Cultural Erosion

However, Sarawakian informants voice strong apprehensions about such prospects, especially as the communities are aging rapidly due to outmigration. They worry that opening up Krayan through new roads to urban centres in Indonesia will not only allow outsiders to flood their own

¹ Indonesia’s “Developing from the Periphery” policy, championed by President Joko Widodo, aims to address the economic and social disparities between urban and rural areas by prioritizing development in remote and marginalized regions, including the 3T (terdepan, terluar, tertinggal) areas. See: <https://en.antaranews.com/news/231061/government-committed-to-developing-indonesia-from-periphery-mahfud>

borderlands but will also lead to land speculation. They cite what is happening in Long Bawan, where newcomers from Java and Tarakan are buying land, as a cautionary example.

Underlying these concerns is a deeper fear of cultural and identity erosion. Many Lun Bawang see their culture as protected, in part, by the geographic isolation of the highlands. If accessibility improves, they fear a “*campur aduk budaya*”, or a chaotic mixing of cultures, could dilute their identity. There is already concern that in Krayan, migrants from Java and Sulawesi may now outnumber the indigenous Dayak Lundayeh, though this shift may not yet be captured in official statistics. The prospect that these newcomers might one day cross into Sarawak, legally or otherwise, fuels anxiety about cultural displacement and demographic change.

Nationality over Kinship

Despite sharing the same language and cultural heritage, the border has created a psychological and political divide among the Lun Bawang. In Sarawak, national identity often overrides kinship ties. While there is some sympathy for the struggles of their Indonesian relatives, many Sarawakians assert their rights as Malaysians and are wary of being undermined by Indonesians. One informant, for instance, vehemently opposed the idea of selling subsidized goods to Indonesian buyers, insisting that “*they are not Malaysians*” and thus not entitled to Malaysian subsidies.

This emphasis on national boundaries over ethnic kinship reflects a broader shift in how identity is negotiated in borderlands. Where shared heritage once unified communities, today, national policies, economic disparities, and governance failures have driven a wedge between them. For many Lun Bawang people living in the borderland, the border is not just a line on a map. but a lived reality that structures everyday life, opportunities, and allegiances.

Final remarks

The mobility of the Lun Bawang people across rural-urban lines, international borders, and informal labour markets offers valuable insight into how internal and international migration intersect in the Global South to produce and reinforce patterns of inequality. Despite belonging to the same ethnic group and sharing kinship ties, Lun Bawang communities in Sarawak and Krayan

have experienced starkly different trajectories due to the presence of a relatively recent yet deeply consequential international border.

This artificial divide, practically imposed just six decades ago, has fragmented not only geography but also opportunities, rights, and senses of belonging. In Sarawak, internal migration has hollowed out highland communities, creating labour gaps filled by Indonesian Lun Bawang migrants - many of whom cross borders informally and remain excluded from state protections. Meanwhile, the Indonesian side grapples with economic neglect, pushing many to seek work across the border, where they face structural inequalities and social tensions despite shared ethnicity. The recent border development policies have further driven transmigrants from the other islands, creating new complexity to local socio-economic dynamics. These experiences reveal how the intersections of internal and cross-border mobility are embedded in a broader context of uneven development and state neglect - both within and across nations.

Importantly, this case complicates simplistic notions of national identity and ethnic solidarity. The metaphor of keeping a “*Garuda di dadaku*” (Garuda in my heart, symbolizing enduring Indonesian national identity) while depending on a “*Harimau di perutku*” (Tiger in my stomach, referencing reliance on Malaysia for livelihood) encapsulates the ambivalence many migrants feel - caught between loyalty to their country of origin and dependence on another for survival. National borders, rather than merely delineating territory, become lived structures of inequality that override ethnic commonality and entrench divisions.

By examining these dynamics, the case of the Lun Bawang contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how the entanglement of internal and international migration in the Global South generates complex geographies of exclusion. It shows that mobility is not only a strategy for survival but also a terrain where inequality and identity is negotiated, reproduced, and at times resisted - shaped as much by movement as by the borders that constrain it.

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