

Preface

PUJO: A plantation is a giant, an inefficient and lazy giant, but still a giant. It takes up a huge amount of space. It is greedy and careless, destroying everything around. It is alien, strange, and unpredictable. It is human, but you cannot form a normal human relationship with it. It can trample you, eat you, or drain your strength then spit you out. It guards its treasure. You cannot tame it or make it go away. You have to live with it. But it is a bit stupid, so if you are clever you can steal from it.

TANIA: A plantation is a machine that assembles land, labor, and capital in huge quantities to produce monocrops for a world market. It is intrinsically colonial, based on the assumption that the people on the spot are incapable of efficient production. It takes life under control: space, time, flora, fauna, water, chemicals, people. It is owned by a corporation and run by managers along bureaucratic lines.

At some point in our collaboration when we asked each other, “What is a plantation?” we came up with these two different answers. Like most of our exchanges, when we talked through the two definitions, we concluded that both were useful for our analysis as they pushed us to reflect. Why the giant? Why the machine? Can it be both? Our definitions were different because they were the products of situated knowledge: our prior experiences, the books we read, the paths we traveled, and the affective hold “plantation life” had on us. Tania spent her teenage years in Singapore. Her family used

to drive to Malaysia on weekends, taking the old road that passed through rubber smallholdings interspersed with villages. It was a peopled landscape in which productive activities and village life were entwined. Around 1990 the new highway passed through monocrop oil palm plantations: mile after mile of monotonous palm, with no villages or people in sight. Every time she drove along it Tania experienced this landscape as machinic, threatening, and desolate. It also made her curious. How did these plantations come to be there? What happened to the villages that were there before? Someone must be doing the work, but where were the workers and how did they live? Tania also conducted undergraduate research upriver in Sarawak where Dayak farmers were concerned that the arrival of oil palm plantations occupying their land would turn them into wage workers, subject to someone else's command. How to read and navigate plantation landscapes became a theme of our Kalimantan research (figure P.1).

FIGURE P.1 Dayak Village on the Tangkos River



For our first trip together up the Tangkos River, a tributary of Kalimantan's mighty Kapuas, Pujo organized a boat. The huge trees and small hamlets along the riverbank reminded Tania of the interior of Sarawak circa 1980, but the gentle view from the boat was deceptive. Fifty meters (55 yards) back from the river, just out of sight, were thousands of hectares of monocrop palm. Had we taken the plantation-built road instead of the river, we would have seen no forest and no hamlets, just oil palm all the way. Malay and Dayak hamlets like this one are tiny enclaves excised from the plantation concession where the original landholders continue to live in their riverside homes but have no access to farmland and no guarantee of plantation jobs. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

Pujo's definition was inspired by the giant metaphors used by Indonesian intellectuals Rendra and Mangunwijaya to characterize the rapacious crony capitalism of General Suharto's New Order rule.¹ It also came from his knowledge of how plantation corporations appear to villagers and low-level workers (as persons writ large, with intention and force), and his intimate knowledge of how plantations work.² He grew up on a tea plantation in Java where his father was the head of transport, and his mother taught at the plantation primary school. For him the vast fields of monocrops that Tania found alienating were both normal and good. He noticed that the children of tea pickers came to school in torn clothes, without shoes, and were malnourished; the children of managers lived in better houses and wore better clothes than he did. He felt pity for the one, and a desire to emulate the other.

When Pujo returned to the tea plantation to conduct post-doctoral research, he discovered another order behind the one he had experienced as a child. This was the order of the giant and the thieves. Plantation archives showed the locations of villages that had been displaced when the plantation occupied their land, and he talked to former workers who had retired without pensions, thrown out like old rags. He found out that the plantation had seldom made a profit during a century of operation. This made him curious. What kind of business can routinely lose money yet still survive? A buried clay pipe (figure P.2), together with a hint from a retired foreman—"the plantation was robbed night and day for decades"—set Pujo's inquiry on a new path.³

This history from Java opened up for us the question of how a plantation corporation could be an occupying force (like a giant) and enroll differently situated actors (villages, workers, managers) who both support and steal from it. It was a pattern that emerged strongly when we began our joint research in Kalimantan. Pujo recognized it from our first day, when we witnessed plantation workers sitting in the popular riverside coffee stalls from 9:00 AM in the morning: "these people are all stealing." What surprised Pujo was not that workers stole time but their brazenness: the workers were wearing their official uniforms, publicly performing their disregard for plantation discipline.

In the Javanese plantation Pujo studied, theft was routine but somewhat disguised; it was also euphemized and embedded in moral evaluations. Dutch managers paid themselves a lavish salary and bonuses, blaming losses on coffee leaf rust disease. Native foremen marked up the price of low-quality manure, a practice that continued after the plantation was nationalized in 1958. Foreman manipulated labor by sending company workers to their

FIGURE P.2 The Pipe



On a visit to the tea plantation with Tania, Pujo stopped his ancient jeep on a steep plantation road and pointed out a broken clay pipe in a ditch. The pipe was laid in 1882 to flush coffee berries from the top fields down to a processing mill 8 kilometers (5 miles) below. The reason was theft: plantation workers, cart haulers, and surrounding villagers colluded to steal the plantation's coffee berries. Sealed in a clay pipe, the berries would be safe during the entire journey from the top of the plantation to the bottom. Theft continued, however, because thieves broke the clay pipe, and an even more expensive steel pipe did not stop them. The problem of theft was partially solved when the owners converted the plantation from coffee to tea, for which there was no local market. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

own fields, by adding ghost workers to their work gang (*nggundul*, Javanese for bald heads), or by inflating the number of working days in their section (*ngerol*, acting). They cheated workers by falsifying the weight of the baskets used by tea pickers; pickers also cheated, putting freshly plucked leaves under the rain to increase their weight. Stealing from the corporation was backed by a general sense that the corporation was both rich and wasteful. Workers did not call this practice stealing (*nyolong*) but *ngutil*—Javanese for paring a wart, i.e., removing something that is of no use to its owner but potentially useful to someone else. Managers called theft by workers theft and attempted to police it, but workers only laughed: “Thieves always outsmart police.”

Theft from subordinates was understood by both parties as a natural consequence of hierarchy: a foreman had a right to some extra food, called *pangan mandor*. A foreman's cut caused resentment when it exceeded the “normal”

amount. When workers talked about stealing by managers, they said *angkut-angkut*, Indonesian for “carrying something away.” They called a very corrupt manager *wong rosa*, Javanese for a strong person, someone capable of carrying a heavy load. Among themselves managers did not say corruption but “gathering vitamins and nutritious supplements,” suggesting that their rank entitled them to a diet of high quality. When a colleague was called by the plantation’s internal audit office, they said he had a problem (in Indonesian, *kena masalah*). This meant he had taken too much, causing intense gossip that made the internal auditors look stupid if they did nothing. Most of the time the outcome was light disciplinary action such as a temporary transfer to a nonjob or “dry position” without a flow of cash, or early retirement. Among day laborers with only outright stealing as a way to earn personal benefit, the rule was simply not to get caught red-handed.

Pujo’s ethnographic and historical research on the tea plantation left him feeling very sad, rather embarrassed, and slightly amused. The amusement

FIGURE P.3 Arrivals



Arrival narratives figured prominently in the students’ field notes, enabling us to see the plantation zone through their eyes. Most of them imagined Kalimantan as a land of exotic tribes and rich tropical forests, but they were disappointed. The eighteen-hour trip on a slow boat up the busy Kapuas River led them into an industrial zone with bauxite mines left and right, cut timber floating downriver in huge log rafts, bustling trading towns, and endless plantations. When the students arrived at our research site, Javanese plantation workers warned them that the native Dayaks could be dangerous, a racialized caricature they had to navigate alongside the unfamiliar terrain. PHOTO: PUJO SEMEDI.

came from the richly ironic language people used to describe their world. The embarrassment came from seeing his friends and informants do improper things. The sadness came from a sense of wasted opportunity: his research forced him to recognize that for more than a century Indonesia's natural wealth had been looted not only by foreigners but also by its own people, a pattern he saw repeated in Kalimantan. But Pujo combined sadness with anger: anger directed toward the giants that occupy people's land, destroy livelihoods, and accumulate wealth while turning everyone who interacts with them into thieves.

Our book explores the forms of life produced by corporate occupation of Indonesia's oil palm plantation zone. We conducted the research in the period 2010–15, together with more than a hundred students from our two universities who each spent one to twelve months in the research site (figure p.3). We describe our collaborative fieldwork methods in the appendix. For now, we invite readers to travel with us into the plantation zone as we attempt to make sense of the forms of life that emerge there