



# Entangled Territories in Small-Scale Gold Mining Frontiers: Labor Practices, Property, and Secrets in Indonesian Gold Country

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**Summary.** — Small-scale gold mining territories emerge at the nexus of land use, property, and labor relations in some of Indonesian Borneo's most vibrant and populated spaces, entangling state actors while sitting comfortably beyond the reach of formal state authority. Based on 7 months of field research in a key gold-producing region of West Kalimantan, I argue that gold's presence, discovery, and informal extraction creates resource frontiers, and that within these frontiers, mining labor practices, property relations, and gold mining-related secret knowledges converge to generate resource territories. While development practitioners, agrarian scholars, and government officials represent mining sites as chaotic and lacking institutional order, I show that a clearly understood organization of life and work animates the territorial subjects and territorialized spaces that small-scale mining populates in both urban and rural mining territories. The article challenges views of territory and territorialization as an *imposition of government* on the people and resources within spatial boundaries. Territories with no formalized boundaries in Indonesian gold country *emerge through* specific production practices engaging labor, resource access, and situated knowledges. The complex entanglements of legalities and illegalities suggest that smallholder gold production spaces are ungovernable through centralized state regulatory institutions.  
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**Key words** — resource frontiers, territory, small-scale gold mining, agrarian-environmental change, Asia, Indonesia

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Small-scale gold miners have produced new resource territories in some of Indonesian Borneo's most vibrant and populated spaces. As in other parts of the country, miners occupy and transform the spaces of cities, densely occupied settlements, resettlement villages, oil palm plantations, swamp and other lowland forest, and rice and agroforestry fields that small farmers hold by title and by custom. Open mining pits, twenty to twenty-five meters deep and much broader in surface area, operate within and outside urban boundaries, unregistered and unregulated by state authorities. Analysts estimate that Indonesian small-scale miners produce some 30 tonnes of gold per year, most without formal permits, and largely unregulated (Adhari, 2014).<sup>1</sup> Attempts to estimate the numbers of small-scale gold miners in Indonesia range from 66,000 (Adhari, 2014) to 109,000 (Devi & Prayogo, 2013) to 250,000 (Ismawati, 2014); all estimates are low as a result of the quasi-legal status of small-scale gold mining and the associated deficiency of data on the sector. In regions containing gold and other valuable minerals, small-scale mining has become a major source of off-farm income for local and migrant miners and transformed agrarian, forested, and urban environments.

Small-scale gold mining has long had “frontier” associations, not only within settlement and conquest histories of the Americas (see, e.g., Cleary, 1993), but also in relation to capitalist frontiers, settlement frontiers, informal sector frontiers, and resource or commodity frontiers (Bryceson & Jönsson, 2010; Cleary, 1990; de Thelie & Heemskerk, 2009; Hilson, 2013; Lahiri-Dutt, 2004; Moore, 2015). Some observers of mining and development claim that small-scale mining is a “complete waste of human resources, natural resources, and loss of government revenue” (Aspinall, 2002, p. 4). Others recognize the importance of mining gold-endowed resource frontiers, including the emergence of unique property relations due to the materialities and value of the

metal and its geological formations (Bridge, 2006; Shoenberger, 2013; Bakker & Bridge, 2006; Verbrugge, 2015). However, even scholars sympathetic to small-scale mining—recognizing its capacity to inject income into sagging agrarian household economies—rarely analyze the governing effects of small-scale gold mining that miners and their variously situated communities produce through territorialization, that is, making the above- and underground spaces into territories within resource frontiers.

This is my argument: that small-scale gold mining constitutes an emergent and specific form of territorialization that

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takes place *within* resource frontiers. Constituting these small-scale gold mining territories are disciplined forms of governance, call them resource governmentalities, that emerge without the impositions of formal state institutions, policies, or laws (Foucault, 1978). Gold mining's specific means of making territory is due not only to its location inside these frontiers, but to the combined effects of its practices, claims, and secrets on their social and biophysical environments—where territorial governing shapes the mining territory subjects that are coming into being. Through a close-in look at the workings of small-scale gold extraction, I discuss a disciplined world of territorial practices that have bubbled and fermented almost entirely outside of state control. Nevertheless, if contemporary small-scale gold mining largely eschews the state and its specific forms of territorialization (see, e.g., Elden, 2009; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995; Watts, 2012), then its practitioners, organizers, and beneficiaries often mimic state institutions and enroll state actors in making its territorial realization possible.

In West Kalimantan, as in many Indonesian mining sites, most gold mining sits comfortably outside the reach of formal state authority (Lestari, 2007). Government permitting requirements for small-scale mining have been malleable and mutable, as late as 2015 when the bulk of my field research in gold mining districts took place. Miners have minimal interest in seeking permits, and the occasional raid on an illegal mining camp—often when no one is there—provides little incentive for informal miners to formalize their operations (Spiegel, 2012). Gold is sold through underground networks, so trade as well as production taxes are lost to local governments (Aspinall, 2002; Hilson, 2013). “Small-scale” mining, moreover, is far from invisible: mining pits can be seen on Google Earth and hundreds of small and large mines dot the landscapes of key gold-bearing sites in northwest Kalimantan. The open secret that thousands of informally contracted laborers have worked these pits unregulated and illegally for almost three decades suggests a more “underground” form of state entanglement with the small-scale mining sector, the type of engagement that some scholars have labeled the “Shadow State” (Erman, 2008; Reno, 1995). It is common knowledge that government agents benefit clandestinely from gold's trade and production; such informalities and illegalities have been reported in other gold-producing regions in Indonesia and the world (e.g., Hilson, 2013; Spiegel, 2012; Tschakart, 2009; Verbrugge, 2015).

The reasons why small-scale mining needs to be understood as governed without a formal state presence has as much to do with the sector's “persistent informalities” as with the mere (and not-uncommon) presence of a “Shadow State” (Verbrugge, 2015). Both shadowy government figures and ghostly presences are important to my analysis below. Informality—here meaning lack of formal-legal state recognition or authorization—reigns within West Kalimantan's small-scale gold mining spaces. Claims to land and gold are widely recognized though informal, institutions of access are informally and commonly understood among mining territory subjects, labor relations are negotiated, and employment in the sector is eagerly sought even as the pay-dirt in the subterranean realm runs thin and the number of fatal accidents mounts. Further, while state sovereignty in some gold-bearing land claims might be characterized as “fragmented” in cultural, material, and political ways (Lund, 2011), and productive of a proliferation of frontiers, the concept of fragmented state sovereignty does not work *within* gold frontiers. Gold frontiers end where realized state authority and sovereignty begin. These miners are not seeking to impose

a hegemonic territorial sovereignty; their hegemony, though incomplete, is *emergent* through production and organization processes.

The frontier qualities of small-scale gold mining territories result in compressed temporalities of settlement and production rather than formalized and more long-term claims, controls, and boundaries that derive from state territorializations (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001). Moreover, gold mining's institutional forms in West Kalimantan are not mere mimics of those in the state or in large resource extraction capitalist firms. Rather, the logics and practices of managing mining labor, of informal or illegal land use and extraction, means of claiming, accessing, and controlling gold and land, and understandings of gold as an agentive substance, derive from regional contexts and relational histories of mining and other small-scale resource commodity productions in northwest Kalimantan.<sup>2</sup>

Among local as well as itinerant small-scale miners, mining subjectivities are characterized by mobility rather than by rootedness and by uncertain rather than clear knowledges about the location of the resource. This is precisely because of the “nature” or materialities of gold—its geophysical properties as well as its cultural articulations. Gold lies hidden underground or among rocks and sand in a current or ancient river bed, is dispersed through water and land, and is considered by Indonesian miners to be an agentive and spiritual substance with the ability to make itself invisible (see, e.g., Soemarwoto & Ellen, 2010). The rapid temporalities of gold's presence and absence, the lack of clear and fixed boundaries, the mobility of mining subjects, and its character as an agency-infused resource are not typically associated with processes of state territorialization at any scale (Elden, 2009; Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008; Lund & Boone, 2013; Vandergeest & Peluso, 1995).

Based on 7 months of intensive field research during 2014 and 2015, and building on region-specific knowledge I have developed over two-plus decades of research in the northwestern region of West Kalimantan Province, this article maps the making of gold territory within its small-scale gold mining frontiers. During the 7 months of fieldwork, I lived and conducted interviews in and around gold mining sites throughout Singkawang, the province's second largest city, and adjacent sub-districts located in Sambas and Bengkayang districts.<sup>3</sup> I call the urban–periurban–rural complex that enframes this study region “MonSingSel” (see Figure 1) (Peluso, 2016). The moniker, “MonSingSel” encompasses key mining sites within and around Singkawang, an area roughly congruent with a pre-colonial area known as “Monterado” (Somers-Heidhues, 2003) containing multiple settlements that shared agrarian histories of mining, farming, and settlement. I also spent three weeks in a gold mining camp in Ketapang District, accompanied first by a friend from Singkawang, and then by a graduate student assistant; we stayed in a supply shop-cum-field residence owned by an acquaintance from Singkawang. Living in both these sites gave me constant access to people involved in mining as well as to people who opposed it. Through in-depth interviews, I collected over a hundred detailed life and work histories from current and former miners ranging from gold diggers to crew bosses, independent miners, and financiers; village and adat leaders, and landholders and workers in the support and supply industries associated with small-scale gold mining. The generalizations I make about local circumstances in this paper derive from this fieldwork and from my understandings of their experiences, stories, and explanations.

The next section demonstrates the limits of state governance in a major small-scale gold mining site of MonSingSel made

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