Border City as Subject Matter: Ethnographic Reflections from a Maritime Borderland in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Tanjungbalai, a border city on the eastern coast of Sumatra, as an active producer of border practices rather than a passive periphery of the Indonesian state. Using long-term ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis, the research reveals how residents negotiate and reinterpret state boundaries in their everyday lives. The findings show that the city's spatial orientation is fundamentally maritime: informal ports function as the true centers of mobility and trade, embodying deliberate strategies of spatial illegibility that resist state surveillance. The informal economies of undocumented motorcycles and used clothing further demonstrate how activities deemed illegal by the state become locally licit within a moral economy shaped by survival and limited formal opportunities. Dense transnational kinship networks linking Indonesia and Malaysia act as critical urban infrastructure, circulating capital, labor, and protection across the strait. At the same time, the region's porosity has enabled the rise of large-scale narcotics trafficking and digital fraud, positioning the city within broader criminal geographies. Overall, the study argues that Tanjungbalai is a dynamic social laboratory where legality, mobility, and identity are continuously contested and remade.

A. INTRODUCTION

As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia possesses a border configuration that is not only geometrically complex but also historically layered, making it one of the most dynamic geopolitical theaters in Southeast Asia. While its terrestrial borders are clearly demarcated against Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste, its maritime frontiers form a vast and fluid interface intersecting with the territorial waters of seven distinct nations: Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, Thailand, Vietnam, India, and Palau. Collectively, these ten neighbors constitute a sprawling borderland that functions as a strategic and profoundly heterogeneous axis. Long before the Westphalian state model imposed rigid lines on the map of "Nusantara," this region functioned as a deeply interconnected world. It was, and remains, a maritime continuum where human mobility, commodity exchange, cross-ethnic kinship, and traditional maritime practices move in rhythm with historical currents rather than political decrees. Historian Eric Tagliacozzo (2005), in his seminal work on smuggling in Southeast Asia, posits that the region's frontiers have

historically been "porous" by nature. He argues that the colonial and post-colonial state's attempts to seal these borders have always been engaged in a contest with the agility of local strategies. Consequently, the national border in this context is not merely a static line dividing sovereignty. Instead, it is a lived arena animated daily by fishermen, middleman traders, migrant workers, and coastal communities who have woven intricate webs of social relations that predate and often supersede the modern institutionalization of borders. For these communities, the Strait of Malacca is not a barrier of separation but a corridor of connection, functioning more like a "sea of islands" rather than a collection of islands scattered in the sea.

Despite this historical fluidity, the dominant discourse surrounding border regions is often confined within a rigid, administrative, and security-centric framework. From this vantage point, the border is fetishized as the physical manifestation of state sovereignty. It is viewed as a political line that determines jurisdiction, a binary zone separating "us" from "them," and a vulnerable periphery that requires strict surveillance through regulation and a military apparatus. This approach constructs a specific "state imagery" that

positions the border city not as a place of human experience, but as a space defined by cartography and international law. This phenomenon aligns with what James C. Scott (1998) famously termed "state simplification," or the drive to make society "legible." In the bureaucratic imagination, the borderland is a space that must be ordered, standardized, and disciplined. The state views the inherent messiness of border life, such as unregistered boats, dual currencies, and fluid identities, as a pathology to be cured. Consequently, the perspective that dominates policy and public discourse is inextricably derived "from the outside." This external gaze ignores the social, cultural, and epistemological dimensions that constitute the heartbeat of life in border cities. Within this logic, the border is imagined as a frontier waiting for the civilizing touch of the center. It is treated as a location that must be managed to ensure order, modernized to mirror the capital, or secured against external threats.

The repercussions of this state-centric hegemony are profound, particularly in how border populations are represented. Residents of these margins are frequently pathologized as high-risk populations prone to smuggling, disorder, and underdevelopment. Michael Eilenberg (2012) notes in his extensive study of the Indonesian borderlands in Kalimantan that the state often perceives border societies as ambiguous entities that potentially disrupt national cohesion, thereby justifying aggressive developmental interventions from Jakarta. These representations act as a form of epistemological violence, creating a significant distance between the researcher or policymaker and the subject. Border citizens are rarely viewed as active cultural agents capable of formulating their own values and strategies. Instead, they are reduced to objects of administration. This parallels the critique found in indigenous studies, where local groups are often stereotyped as primitive, static, or inferior in the face of modernity (Persoon, 1998). However, anthropological literature challenges this narrative by reframing the discourse on legality. Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel (2005) offer a crucial analytical framework distinguishing between the "illegal," which refers to violations of state law, and the "illicit," which denotes what is socially perceived as unacceptable. In many border cities, activities such as undocumented cross-border trade may be strictly prohibited in the eyes of national customs authorities. Yet, these same acts are considered entirely licit, legitimate, and necessary by the local community. These practices are not acts of criminal defiance but rather resilient adaptations rooted in a *longue durée* of regional exchange.

In response to the limitations of the administrative approach, recent years have witnessed a significant paradigm shift in border studies, moving toward an understanding of the border as a "lived space." Drawing inspiration from sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1991) and his concept of the *social production of space*, scholars now argue that the border is not a pre-existing container waiting to be filled by state policy. Rather, it is a space actively produced through daily social interactions. In this view, a border city like Tanjungbalai is an entity with its own socio-cultural logic. It is not merely a peripheral satellite of the nation-state but a center of economic and cultural gravity in its own right. Research groups focusing on "Cities, Borders, and Mobility" assert that border urbanity cannot be divorced from transnational mobility and the interlocking structures of power. Michel Agier (2016) suggests that the "border city" is a unique urban actor defined by the constant circulation of people and goods. Unlike the industrial cities of the interior, the border city thrives on the friction and flow of the frontier. Its identity is constructed not through isolation but through the negotiation of "being between." This perspective shifts the analytical focus from the "controlled zone" to the "productive zone," which is understood as a space that generates new meanings, hybrid identities, and alternative economies.

Contemporary anthropological research deepens this understanding by highlighting three critical dynamics that define the social life of borders. First, the concept of "entangled borders" becomes paramount. Sarah Green (2013) argues that the nation-state border never operates in a vacuum. In a region like the Malacca Strait, the formal administrative border is inextricably intertwined with other less visible boundaries. These include the expansive boundaries of Malay ethnicity, the functional boundaries of informal trade networks, and the ecological boundaries of marine resources. These layers overlap and collide to create a hybrid social condition that cannot be understood through simple binaries, such as formal versus informal or legal versus illegal. Second, the role of mobility acts as a structural force. Anthropologist Johan Lindquist (2009) illustrates in his ethnography of Batam how the borderland serves as a magnet for migrants seeking merantau, or circular migration. This influx creates an economy heavily reliant on "brokers" and middlemen who possess the specialized knowledge to navigate the regulatory gaps of the state. These brokers become essential infrastructure in the border city as they facilitate the movement of labor and capital in ways that the state cannot fully capture. Third, the persistence of transnational kinship remains a defining feature. Historian Leonard Andaya (2008) reminds us that the Straits of Melayu have historically functioned not as a divider but as a corridor uniting coastal ethnicities. For families in Tanjungbalai, a cousin in Malaysia is often functionally closer than a bureaucrat in Jakarta. These kinship networks constitute a form of "social capital" that is frequently more robust and trustworthy than formal state institutions in facilitating trade and migration.

In the context of Indonesia, while the literature on border regions is expanding, a significant imbalance remains. The majority of research continues to prioritize issues related to

maritime security, territorial disputes, sovereignty defense, and the development of hard infrastructure in frontier areas. There is a paucity of in-depth ethnographic studies that position border cities on the eastern coast of Sumatra, such as Tanjungbalai, as fully realized subjects of knowledge. Tanjungbalai presents a paradigmatic case study. Once a thriving colonial port and a hub of the spice trade, it currently occupies a liminal space in the national imagination. It is often reduced to a hotspot for smuggling and a "rat port" (*jalur tikus*) for undocumented migrant labor. However, the internal dynamics of the city reveal a complex tension between rigid territorial nationalism and fluid transnational practices (Horstmann, 2002). Questions arise regarding how the people of Tanjungbalai negotiate their identity when their economic survival depends on the neighbor across the water, while their political loyalty is demanded by a distant capital. Furthermore, how do they reconcile the state's demand for order with their historical right to movement? Reed Wadley (2004) has shown in Kalimantan that local histories often diverge sharply from national histories. Similarly, Tanjungbalai possesses a memory of the sea that challenges the terrestrial logic of the modern Indonesian state.

Consequently, this research is urgently situated to fill this academic lacuna. By rejecting the gaze that views the border merely as a line of defense, this study adopts the framework of "borderlands anthropology" to analyze Tanjungbalai as an arena of social production. Through this lens, the inquiry focuses on how local actors, including fishermen, petty traders, brokers, and migrant families, interpret state boundaries. It examines how they exploit regulatory differentials to survive and maintain a collective memory of a unified maritime realm that is now politically fractured. Ultimately, this study argues that the border city is not the residue of state development but a dynamic "social laboratory." It is a place where new forms of citizenship, economic resilience, and identity are being continuously tested and reassembled. Understanding Tanjungbalai from this perspective provides not only empirical richness to Indonesian studies but also contributes to the global discourse on how local communities retain agency amidst the tightening grip of the global border regime.

This research aims to explain how urban maritime residents of Tanjungbalai construct and legitimize informal mobility infrastructures (tangkahan), negotiate state-defined illegality through moral economies, and reinterpret loyalty within a bi-national kinship system spanning the Malacca Strait. By framing these dynamics through legibility resistance, localized moral legitimacy, and relational infrastructures, the article argues that Tanjungbalai operates as an autonomous maritime system that continuously produces alternative orders of legality and mobility beneath the surface of the state map

B. METHOD

This study applies an ethnographic design to examine border practices, informal economic movements, and kinship-based infrastructures in Tanjungbalai and the coastal riverine zones of Asahan Regency. Fieldwork was conducted intensively over two weeks in July and August 2025, utilizing a living-in strategy to gain direct access to the mobility, trade, and security reasoning of residents. Unlike survey-based border research, this method emphasizes immersion in everyday spatial practices, informal river piers, anchovies, warehouses, fish auction networks, and passenger/trader mobilities crossing the Malacca Strait." "Data collection combined three main techniques.

First, participant observation was conducted at maritime economic nodes, including riverbank areas, fish markets, and anchovy warehouses, as well as formal movement funnels at the Teluk Nibung International Port. Fieldnotes were written reflexively and descriptively following ethnographic observation principles (Emerson et al., 2018; DeWalt & DeWalt, 2019).

Second, 16 in-depth interviews were purposively conducted with fishermen, anchovy traders, boat owners, dockworkers, cross-border commuters, transport intermediaries, and local officials. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and coastal Malay, with narrative flexibility to capture the moral reasoning behind practices considered illegal by national law but legitimate locally. Third, snowball sampling was used to expand access to hard-to-reach networks, relying on kin-brokers and trader referrals as recommended in undocumented community studies (Martinez et al., 2015; Horst & Grabska, 2020)." "

Document triangulation was employed using secondary sources, including port archives, local government reports, maritime trade regulations, local media coverage, and prior empirical studies on borders. Documents were served to verify consistency between observed practices, interview narratives, and official representations, supporting the systematic use of ethnographic documents (Scott, 1998; Tagliacozzo, 2005). The study followed ethical standards by ensuring informed consent, anonymizing interview materials, and maintaining awareness of power relations during data access and interpretation (Pink, 2015)."

Data were analyzed thematically using inductive ethnographic coding, focusing on spatial, moral, and relational patterns emerging from field interactions. This involved initial coding, focused coding, and interpretive categorization consistent with multi-sited border ethnographies (Charmaz, 2016; Falzon, 2016; Leung, 2015; Feltran et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2021).

Analytical interpretation prioritized cross-verification between the perspectives of fishermen, traders, commuters, and youth to maintain an emic

analytical balance, thereby avoiding single-actor essentialization. This ensures that the study explains how Tanjungbalai is structured and practiced relationally, rather than framing the city or its residents as inherently producing crime."

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Spatiality of the Border: De-centering the State Map

To understand Tanjungbalai not merely as a peripheral outpost but as an anthropological *subject matter*, one must first deconstruct the spatial logic that governs its existence. Traditional political geography views the border city through the lens of the state map: a Cartesian grid defined by fixed coordinates, clear demarcation lines, and the binary of national versus foreign territory. However, this state-centric cartography often fails to capture the lived reality of the borderland. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of *spatial practice*, space is not a pre-existing void to be filled by administrative decrees; rather, it is actively produced through the daily routines, movements, and social interactions of its inhabitants. In Tanjungbalai, the "lived space" (*espace véc*) of the community frequently contradicts the "conceived space" (*espace conçu*) of the state. While the state attempts to impose what James C. Scott (1998) calls *legibility*—ordering the city to be easily monitored, taxed, and policed—Tanjungbalai exerts its agency by maintaining a strategic *illegibility*. The city produces its own mental map, one that decenters the national administrative hierarchy and re-orientates itself toward the maritime flows of the Strait of Malacca.

solidified in the Teluk Nibung International Port. Architecturally, this space is the embodiment of state sovereignty: fenced, sterilized, and heavily bureaucratized. It is a space of "pauses" and rigid surveillance, where immigration counters and customs checkpoints dictate the rhythm of movement. During fieldwork, the official port often appeared desolate, its rhythm mechanical and lifeless, serving primarily formal passenger ferries that adhere to strict schedules. It represents the border as a barrier—a wall to be scaled only with the correct documentation.

In sharp contrast, just a few kilometers away along the winding riverbanks, lies the network of *Tangkahan* or *jalur tikus* (rat paths/informal ports). If Teluk Nibung is the state's monologue, the *Tangkahan* is the city's chaotic dialogue. Here, the border is not a wall, but a membrane. These informal ports are constructed from rickety wooden platforms, hidden behind mangroves or integrated into the backyards of residents' houses. They are spaces of intense organic vitality, smelling of salt, drying anchovies, and diesel fuel. In these zones, the distinction between land and sea blurs. Boats do not merely dock; they become extensions of the market and the home. The *Tangkahan* operates on a logic of fluid mercantilism that defies the static rigidity of state bureaucracy. It is here that the "real" city center serves its function. While the official city map places the Mayor's office and the civic square as the center of gravity, for the fishing community and traders, the true axis of the city is the waterfront *gudang* (warehouses). This is where information is exchanged, where labor is hired, and where the price of commodities is determined, not by Jakarta's inflation rates, but by the market fluctuations in Malaysia.

This displacement of the center reveals a profound geopolitical re-orientation. Spatially, Tanjungbalai faces away from the mainland. The architecture of social life

Figure 1. Map of Tanjungbalai City and the Strait Connecting It to Malaysia
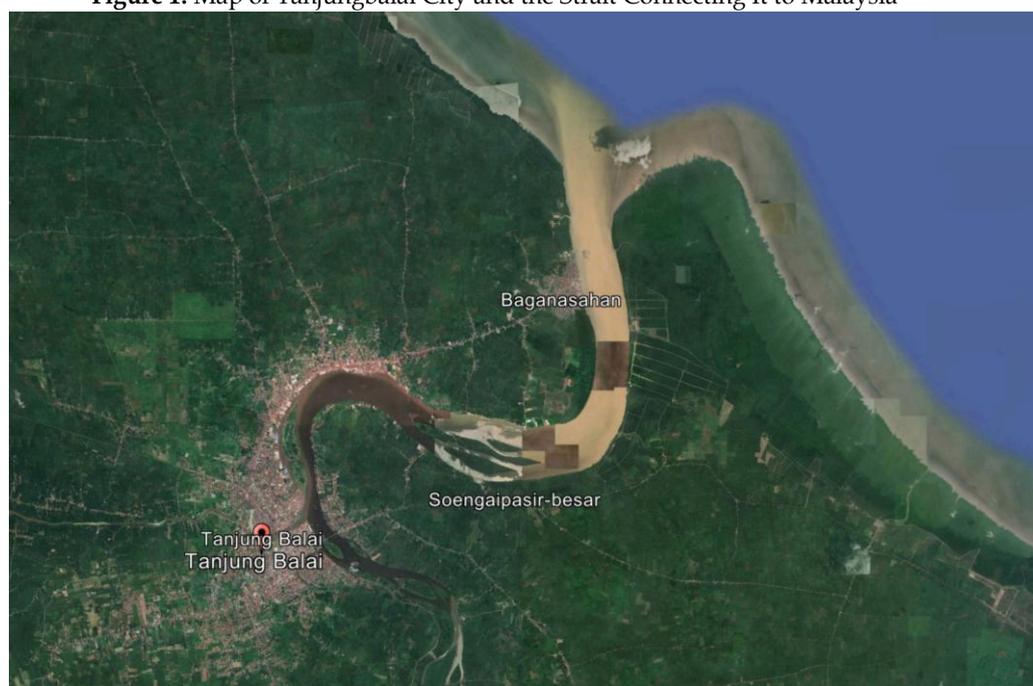
This spatial contestation is most visibly manifested in the stark contrast between the city's official and informal maritime gateways. The state's presence is

faces the water. To the inhabitants, the Sumatran hinterland (and by extension, Jakarta) feels distant and abstract, while Port Klang and Hutan Melintang in

Malaysia feel immediate and intimate. This sentiment was poignantly captured in an in-depth interview with Pak Usman (58)[1], a senior *tekong* (boat captain) and owner of a small logistics boat, who has navigated these waters for over three decades. When asked about the risks of navigating "illegal" routes versus using the official port, his response dismantled the state's cartographic logic:

> "*You look at the map, you see a line. I look at the water, I see a yard. For us here, the sea is not a separator. It is a bridge. Why should I go through the 'stone gate' [referring to the official port] where they ask for papers I don't understand and ask for money I don't have? In the Tangkahan, I park my boat behind my kitchen. If I want to go to 'seberang' [Malaysia], it's like visiting a neighbor. Jakarta is the one that is far away. Jakarta makes rules, but the sea gives us rice. We don't hate the country, but we follow the map of our stomachs. The police map is on paper; our map is in the tides." (*Interview, August 2025*)

Pak Usman's testimony serves as a powerful empirical anchor for the argument of the border city as a subject matter. His "mental map" prioritizes the tidal rhythms and trans-strait kinship over the rigid administrative boundaries of the nation-state.

The persistence of the *Tangkahan* and the maritime orientation of the residents should not be misread simply as criminal evasion or a lack of infrastructure. Analyzing this through Scott's framework, the *Tangkahan* represents a deliberate strategy of *illegibility*. The residents of Tanjungbalai maintain these muddy, unmapped, and fluid spaces precisely because their opacity protects their economic autonomy. If the *Tangkahan* were to be "modernized"—paved, lit, and registered—it would become legible to the state, and thus subject to taxation, regulation, and control, which would suffocate the micro-economy of the border.

Therefore, Tanjungbalai produces its spatiality as a defense mechanism. It is an active refusal to be fully absorbed into the terrestrial logic of the Indonesian state. By keeping its "real" centers informal and by orienting its social gaze outward across the strait, the city asserts its identity not as a passive periphery, but as an autonomous maritime node. The *Tangkahan* is not a place of disorder; it is a place of an alternative order, one that prioritizes the fluidity of the archipelago over the rigidity of the nation-state. In this sense, the city writes its own geography, rendering the official map merely a suggestion rather than a reality.

2. The Informal Economy: Negotiating the 'Illegal' and the 'Licit.'

Within the framework of the *Border City as Subject Matter*, Tanjungbalai does not merely violate state laws; it actively produces its own economic logic. Here, an epistemological collision occurs between "illegality" (defined by the state penal code and customs regulations) and "licitness" (what is considered legitimate, necessary, and moral by the local community). Drawing on the moral economy framework, the city demonstrates how activities classified as criminal by the state are normalized by residents as essential adaptation strategies. In Tanjungbalai,

the informal economy is not a chaotic residue of development but a sophisticated alternative system that fills the vacuum left by formal governance. This dynamic is most visibly manifested in two primary commodities: *Motor Bodong* (undocumented motorcycles) and *Monja* (imported used clothing).

a. The *Motor Bodong*: Mobility Over Legality

Administratively, the proliferation of thousands of motorcycles without license plates or official documentation in Tanjungbalai represents a massive violation of the law. However, empirical data reveal that this phenomenon is not driven by criminal intent but serves as a rational response to structural exclusion. The state views these vehicles as stolen goods—often sourced from major cities in Java and Sumatra. Yet, for the residents of Tanjungbalai, these motorcycles are vital "productive assets".

Figure 2. Unlicensed Motorcycles in Tanjungbalai

In the local informal market, high-value scooters like the Honda Vario or PCX are sold for approximately 8 to 9 million rupiah, less than half their official dealer price. This price disparity is particularly crucial for a population facing limited formal employment opportunities. Field observations indicate that these vehicles are essential for the mobility of informal workers, particularly fishermen and traders who operate at night. The volume of undocumented vehicles is so high that they are estimated to constitute around 40% of all night traffic in the city.

The normalization of this informal economy is deeply rooted in the city's social structure, particularly within the extended family. Research indicates that a single household comprising only five members (parents and children) may own up to six or more *motor bodong* units. This surplus ownership suggests that the motorcycle is treated not merely as personal transport, but as a collective family asset used to mitigate economic risk and support the diverse informal livelihoods of the household.

The persistence of this specific informal economy also serves as a critique of state infrastructure. With almost no public transportation available within the city, except for limited and slow pedicabs, the community has created its own transportation solution. As noted in the findings, for low-income residents, the option of owning a cheap, albeit illegal, motorcycle is far more rational than relying on an inadequate public system.

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[1] Pak Usman (not his real name)

b. The *Monja* Trade: The Consumer Sovereignty of the Border

Parallel to the phenomenon of *motor bodong*, the trade in *Monja* (imported used clothing) reinforces Tanjungbalai's position as a zone where the informal economy reigns supreme. While the central government strictly prohibits the import of used clothing to protect national textile industries, Tanjungbalai—leveraging its strategic position as a transit point connecting Indonesia and Malaysia —has turned *Monja* into a cornerstone of its local economy.

Just as the *motor bodong* solves the crisis of mobility, *Monja* addresses the crisis of purchasing power. In the informal ports and bustling markets, bales of used clothing arrive not as "contraband" (as narrated by Jakarta), but as essential commodities that support the livelihoods of thousands—from boat crews and porters to small-scale retailers. This activity aligns with the shadow economy theory, where the informal sector develops as a survival mechanism in areas with limited formal economic opportunities.

The community perceives this trade through the lens of a moral economy: it provides affordable clothing for the poor and jobs for the unemployed in a city where competition for resources is intense. The "illegality" of the goods is rendered irrelevant by their social utility.

c. Synthesis: The City's Moral Economy

The widespread acceptance of *motor bodong* and *Monja* illustrates that Tanjungbalai operates under its own "Moral Economy." As evidenced by interviews, residents explicitly stated that the legal aspect of these goods was not a significant concern, provided they met immediate needs.

> "*For us, the law is about not hurting your neighbor. Buying a cheap motorcycle to take fish to the market is not a crime; it is survival. If we wait for the government to give us buses or cheap official bikes, we will starve. This bike has no papers, but it feeds my family.*"

The informal economy in Tanjungbalai is not a symptom of disorder, but a demonstration of the city's agency. By normalizing the *motor bodong* and the *Monja* trade, the city negotiates the rigid boundaries of state law. It transforms the "illegal" into the "licit," prioritizing the economic survival of the kinship network over the bureaucratic requirements of the nation-state. In doing so, Tanjungbalai asserts itself as a subject matter that dictates its own economic rules in the face of structural marginalization.

3. Transnational Kinship as Urban Infrastructure

Following the conventional planning of a modern city, infrastructure is defined by the physicality of concrete and asphalt, roads, bridges, and drainage systems built by the state to facilitate the circulation of capital. However, viewing Tanjungbalai as a subject matter reveals a different structural reality. The true foundation that sustains the city is not the deteriorating physical infrastructure provided by the government, but rather the invisible, durable, and high-speed infrastructure of transnational kinship. In this border city,

bloodlines function as highways, and ethnic solidarity operates as a banking system.

d. The Strait as a Corridor: Fluid Mobility and the Split Household

Ethnographic fieldwork reveals that for the residents of Tanjungbalai, the Malacca Strait is not a formidable international border but a "liquid corridor" connecting a single cultural zone. The demographic composition of the city—comprising Malay, Batak, Javanese, and Minangkabau ethnic groups —is mirrored across the water in the coastal settlements of Malaysia, such as Port Klang and Hutan Melintang.

This mirroring creates a unique spatial consciousness. For a fisherman or a migrant worker in Tanjungbalai, the journey to Malaysia is often perceived not as "going abroad" with all its connotations of foreignness, but rather as *merantau* (circular migration) or simply "crossing over" (*menyeberang*). The mobility is fluid: a resident might spend the morning in Tanjungbalai and the afternoon in Port Klang. This fluidity challenges the state's rigid categorization of "citizen" versus "foreigner."

The extended family structure plays a central role in this dynamic. As noted in the research data, the extended family in Tanjungbalai is not only a social unit but also a critical economic unit, where multiple generations, parents, children, and grandchildren collaborate to support the household economy. In the context of the border, this household is often bi-national. It is common to find families where the father captains a boat in Tanjungbalai, the uncle acts as a labor broker in Malaysia, and the cousins work in Malaysian plantations. These split households function as a single organism spanning two nation-states, rendering the political border porous and, in many ways, irrelevant to the daily operation of the family unit.

e. Kinship Functions: The "Walking Bank" and the Safety Net

If the state provides formal institutions (such as banks, employment agencies, and courts) that are often inaccessible or expensive for the poor, the transnational kinship network provides an efficient alternative.

First, the family acts as a "walking bank" (*bank berjalan*). In an environment characterized by limited formal economic opportunities and high reliance on the informal sector, capital for buying boats, nets, or even "illegal motorcycles" to support mobility often comes from remittances sent by relatives across the strait. The flow of money follows the lines of kinship, bypassing formal banking fees and scrutiny.

Second, the network functions as an informal employment agency. Information regarding factory openings or plantation work in Malaysia travels faster through WhatsApp family groups than through official government channels. This validates the finding that kinship networks are crucial for accessing economic resources in the face of structural limitations.

Third, and perhaps most critically, the kinship network serves as a transnational sanctuary. When legal troubles arise, such as a crackdown on undocumented workers in Malaysia or a smuggling raid in Indonesia,

relatives on the "other side" provide immediate shelter and protection. This aligns with the observation that kinship networks operate as forms of community resilience and informal justice, where moral responsibility to the clan supersedes legal obligations to the state. The family shares not only assets but also risks, creating a buffer against the punitive mechanisms of both states.

f. Theoretical Synthesis: The Anthropological Border

The existence of this kinship infrastructure strongly supports Leonard Andaya's (2008) concept of *Ethnicity in the Straits*. The historical unity of the "Sea of Melayu" has not been severed by modern colonial or national borders; it has merely gone underground (or underwater). The sea remains a connective tissue for these ethnic groups, proving that anthropological borders (defined by ethnicity, history, and language) are far more resilient and "real" to the subject than political borders (defined by treaties and passports).motor

Furthermore, applying Sarah Green's (2013) notion of *Entangled Borders*, we see that Tanjungbalai is not simply "located" in Indonesia. Its social body is entangled with Malaysia. The city, as a subject, actively expands its reach beyond its territorial limits. Through kinship, Tanjungbalai "colonizes" spaces in Malaysia, creating a transnational urbanism where a neighborhood in Tanjungbalai and a dormitory in Port Klang are effectively the same social space, separated only by water.

In conclusion, the infrastructure of Tanjungbalai is built on trust and blood (*darah*), not bureaucracy. By relying on these transnational networks, the city demonstrates its autonomy, constructing a life-world that persists despite, and often in spite of, the physical boundaries imposed by the state.

4. Border-Related Crime Dynamics

Geographically, the distinct configuration of Tanjungbalai and Asahan, characterized by their proximity to the Malaysian peninsula and a labyrinthine network of river creeks, creates a unique "geography of opportunity" for transnational crime. From the perspective of the city as a *subject matter*, the region has evolved from a mere transit point into a complex logistics hub within the global "Golden Triangle" supply chain. The porosity of the "rat paths" (*jalur tikus*) allows criminal syndicates to exploit the existing maritime infrastructure, where fishermen utilizing modified trawlers (*pukat tarik mini*) are recruited as transporters. This spatial vulnerability creates a strategic "choke point" where the flow of illicit capital is as fluid as the tides. Data from 2023 to 2024 confirms a significant escalation in threats; the volume of seized evidence is no longer measured in grams but in hundreds of kilograms, indicating that the border is now a site of industrial-scale illicit operations that utilize the "backyard" of the Malacca Strait to flood the Indonesian market.

Field data explicitly positions the region as a critical "red zone" for narcotics trafficking with a diversifying product portfolio. In 2023 alone, police in Asahan seized a massive 139.22 kg of methamphetamine (*sabu-sabu*), often disguised in Chinese tea packaging (brands like *Qing Shan* and *Do Hong Poo*), confirming the area's role as a provincial warehouse rather than a retail market. The dynamics shifted further in 2024 with statistical anomalies, such as the seizure of 130 kg of marijuana (*ganja*) in July 2024, a record-breaking interception of 86,500 ecstasy pills in November, catering to metropolitan nightlife demands. The impact of this flow is systemic; roughly 85% of inmates in Tanjungbalai's prison are incarcerated for narcotics-related offenses, signaling a severe social pathology where the prison system has effectively become a specialized detention center for the drug trade.

However, the criminal landscape has mutated beyond physical smuggling into the digital realm through the proliferation of *Palodes* (*Penipuan Lewat Online/Daring*). While police data recorded 8 official cases of fraud in 2024, this figure represents only the surface of a deep-seated phenomenon. Unlike traditional crimes, *Palodes* is primarily driven by tech-savvy youth who operate from the privacy of rented houses, utilizing sophisticated tools such as voice-changing software to deceive victims. These perpetrators impersonate close kin or public figures to manipulate victims into transferring funds. The scale and audacity of these operations reached a national peak when authorities dismantled a syndicate impersonating the famous Indonesian celebrity, Baim Wong. The case was so high-profile that it prompted Baim Wong to personally visit Tanjungbalai to witness the fraud mechanism firsthand. Thus, the border city presents a layered criminal ecosystem: physically, it functions as a high-volume funnel for international narcotics, while socially, it harbors a digital predatory economy run by a digital-native generation exploiting the anonymity of the urban frontier.

D. CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that Tanjungbalai is not a passive frontier shaped by the authority of the nation-state, but an active border city that continually reconfigures the meaning, function, and practice of the border through its own spatial, economic, and kinship logics. Far from being a marginal periphery, the city asserts a maritime orientation that renders state cartographies secondary to the lived geography of the Strait of Malacca, where informal ports, fluid mobilities, and transnational kinship networks form the true architecture of urban life. The informal economies surrounding motor bodong and Monja further reveal a moral economy that transforms state-defined illegality into locally legitimate strategies of survival amid structural exclusion. At the same time, the region's spatial porosity has given rise to new criminal ecologies, ranging from industrial-scale narcotics routes to digital fraud operations, that reflect the evolving vulnerabilities of contemporary border regimes. Taken together, these dynamics affirm that Tanjungbalai must be understood as a dynamic social laboratory where legality, identity,

mobility, and sovereignty are constantly negotiated, resisted, and reinvented from below.

E. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

F. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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