

THE WATER CITIES OF THE ASIATIC ARCHIPELAGO

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Much has been written and researched on the more permanent, monumental and land based urban structures that form the ancient cities of Southeast Asia. In broad strokes the monuments of Pagan to Hue and Angkor Wat to Borobodur have been captured on ink and print and stands as testimonies to the grandeur of Southeast Asia. This paper shifts the focus from the more permanent land-based monuments and explores the seldom discussed urban complexes of the water world of the vast Asiatic archipelago that forms the straits and island gateways for seaborne traffic between the Indian Ocean and the Eastern Seas.

The geographical region that we have come to regard as Southeast Asia is located between the subcontinent of India on its west and Mainland China on its east. This boundary of Southeast Asia was drawn on the war desks of General Louis Mountbatten and General MacArthur at the end of the Pacific War, and thereby replacing the term Far East which used to denote the region.

Southeast Asia is essentially geographical region between the ancient civilisations of Asia - that of West Asia, South Asia and East Asia. It was the region through which the trade routes (land and sea) between ancient Asia passed and which the peoples of the kingdoms in this region engaged. The urban complexes of ancient Southeast Asia functional as the nerve centers of these trade routes.

On Mainland Southeast Asia the six relatively large rivers were important overland routes linking the coasts with China and Indian markets. These rivers include the Salween, Irrawady, Sittang, Menam, Mekong and Red rivers. These rivers flowed into the Andaman Sea, the Gulf of Siam and the Eastern Seas. The upper reaches of these rivers were trade centres linking overland routes between South Asia and East Asia. Mainland Southeast Asia is the home of the Shans, Mons, Burmans, Thai, Khmer and Viet peoples and numerous minority communities such as the Karen, Kayin, Chin, Hakka, Meo, Jerai and others. Island Southeast Asia on the other hand refers to the extensive body of waters in which the Asiatic archipelago straddles. These islands are peopled by the Malays of Asia and the more important groups are the Minangkabau of the island of Sumatera, the Malay of the Straits of Malacca, the Javanese of the island of Java, the Bugis and Makaccarese of the island of Suluwasi, the Tausug of the Sulu Archipelago and the Tagalog of the island of Luzon. The crowd of smaller communities in island Southeast Asia, known as **nusala**ut, form the Malay world includes the Bataks,

Koronchi, Illanuns and others.

It was precisely the geopolitical and geoeconomic nature of Southeast Asia that attracted the Atlantic powers into the region, initially as traders in Asian trade and commerce and in the nineteenth century as its colonial masters. The multilateral and multicultural open trade features of Southeast Asia as part of a global Asian trading network was restructured under colonial domination into a closed bilateral European-Asian axis. It is during this period that Southeast Asia lost its openness and were driven from the seas and locked into the land in the agricultural and mining sectors. These two sectors were the backbone of the colonial export economy of Southeast Asia.

A continental definition of the Asiatic archipelago - the greatest archipelagic chain on planet earth, is that they are but islands surrounded by water. The Asiatic archipelago is therefore a huge body of water with islands in them that serve as gateways between the Indian ocean and the Eastern Seas. It is with such an understanding of this water world that the real significance of its maritime past and the nature of its urban complexes can be realised.

The water world of the Asiatic archipelago comprises the island of New Guinea, Borneo and Sumatera, the second, third and sixth largest islands respectively in the world. The majestic Asiatic archipelago is home of twenty three thousand islands strung out in a chain dividing the Indian and Pacific Oceans from many inland seas. From the decks of the Pacific Fleet it is the "Grand Area" and "Living Space". It is a water space of inland seas, straits and islands. In this living space merchant-kings organised their state structures and urban complexes. The more significant kingdoms controlled the key "choke points" in the long distance trade between the East and West while others controlled the direct trade between China and the Asiatic archipelago. In the latter category the kingdoms of Brunei and Sulu being the more important ones.

The China market obtained from the Asiatic archipelago jungle produce such as rattan, sandiewood, beeswax and bird's nest and marine produce such as **trepang**, sharke's fin, tortoise shells and mother of pearl. The jungles of Borneo and the islands surrounding the Sulu Sea supplied raw materials of jungle and marine produce with the Kingdom of Brunei standing as the major supplier of these commodities in the period prior to the mid-eighteenth century. At its height in the early sixteenth century Pigafetta, a Spanish traveller, graphically captured the water city of Brunei:

The City entirely built in salt water, except the houses of the king and certain chiefs. it contains twenty thousand hearts. The houses are all constructed of wood and built up from

the ground on tall pillars. When the tide is high, woman go in boats through the settlement selling articles necessary to maintain life.

Almost two hundred and twenty years later Owen Rutter observed Brunei:

be sein 1840, there were said to be still some 30,000 inhabitants in the city, which was divided into four parts by two main waterways that intersected each other in the form of a cross. Three of these divisions consisted of strong wooden houses, built on piles over the water, and so close together that there was barely room for a canoe to pass between them. The fourth part of the city was built on the riverbank, and here were the mosque and the Sultan's palace. The palace, like the other houses were built on high piles driven into the mud, so that at high tide it had lapping water beneath it, and, at low, an expanse of stinking mud. The roof was thatched palm-leaf and the floor consisted of slats of the hard nibong-paim, set about a quarter inch apart.

On a fine day at high water the city must have looked like a picture from a fairy tale: the houses seemed to be floating like water-lilies on the surface of the river, and above them fluttered banners and streamers of every colour, indicating the rank and office of the princes and nobles above whose roofs they flew. As evening drew on, the throbbing of drums and music of gongs made melodies across the water. But it was the mornings that Brunei could be seen at its best. Since there were no shops, the daily market was held in canoes, which thronged into the city at sunrise, bearing their produce from every part of the river. They gathered in the main waterway of the city and were made fast to each other, so that they formed long lanes through which the housewives of Brunei could paddle their own crafts and examine the wares for sale with as much convenience as if they had been on shore.

In 1870, F.W. Burridge, a naturalist, made the same observation. Brunei he observed:

is a water-city of about twenty thousand inhabitants. The palm-thatched houses of which it for the most part consists are built on piles so as to be above the river at high tide. From one of the adjacent low hills the view 'Venice of the East' is a most novel one - indeed, unique in its way; and although the town is nearly fifteen miles from the river, yet a moderate-sized gunboat can anchor in the broad water-way in the very centre of the city, and within a few yards of the Sultan's Istana In some cases the blocks of houses are connected by bridges formed of long palm stems lashed together with rattans; but, as a rule, all communication must be carried on by boats. Some of the inhabitants grow a few flowers and herbs in boxes of earth; and occasionally papaw trees and gourds of different kinds are thus cultivated. Little rafts, or floating tree-trunks, are moored to the piles which support the houses for accommodation of ducks and fowls.

On market activities he commented:

The market held on the river every morning is one of the most singular sights of the place. Here you may see a hundred or more little boats containing fruit, fish, rice, and other produce for sale or barter. Among the petty traders the Brunei women are most prominent, and many of them present a most singular appearance, the hats they wear being made of neatly plaited Nipa leaves, and being from two to three feet in diameter, and they screen the whole body of the wearer from the hot sun.

The kingdom of Brunei should be seen as a riverine kingdom organising overland trade inland for international trade. It was challenged and soon surpassed by the Kingdom of Sulu located on the Sulu archipelago that divided the inland seas of Sulu with the Celebes sea. By the mid eighteenth century the kingdom of Sulu under the domination of the Tausugs had brought the entire Sulu seas and the littoral coasts, bays and rivers of east coast Borneo under its subjugation. The Sulu Kingdom was heterogeneous consisting of the Bajau, Illanun, Balanini, Iranun while others were more land based such as the Idahan, Tidung, Rungus, Murut, Dayak, Kayan-Kayan and Kelabit.

The capital of the Sultanate was among others located in Jolo in the tiny island of Maimbung. Through a series of marriages and conquests the Tausug rulers integrated the Kingdom politically. Owen Rutter in the mid-1840's commented:

Like Brunei, the town of Sulu was built mainly on piles above the water, running out in three lines to the sea; the piles of the outer houses were set in four fathoms of water, so that large barges could ride at anchor in the main street. Bridges of interlaced bamboo several hundred yards in length formed a means of communication between the houses, but the Sultan's palace and the residence of his chiefs and ministers were built on shore. On shore, too, were the batteries that command the main waterway of the town.

F.W. Burridge who visited Jolo in 1877, gives an account of the urban complex on the tiny island of Maimbung. The harbour was a jetty built out from the shoreline into sufficient deep water for trading vessels to berth. Around the jetty (jambatan) are built trader's houses on piles. On shore the more established traders had established their dwellings which were half house and half warehouse. It is usual for the trader to conduct his business transaction in the confines of his dwelling. The chief trader at the waterfront was the **Orang Kaya**. Outside his residence was the local market area for the people on the island. Here was also located the **rumah bichara** that housed the Council of Elders that formed the seat of government of the Sulu Sultanate. On the market he observed:

It is really a very pretty sight to see the market people coming to market from the hills, men and women alike, mounted on ponies or cattle with their baskets, bags, and bundles of produce flung across the saddle before and behind. The men, especially mounted on their high wooden saddles, armed with the national spear, and clad in chain armour tunic, forcibly reminded one of the illustrations of Don Quixote, a resemblance considerably heightened by the gaunt leanness of their steeds. A plurality of wives is general with the datu, and others who have means to keep up an establishment.....

The Sultan's residence is located at the foot of Bukit Timantangis, the highest mountain on the island. The Sultan's audience hall had two small Armstrong guns mounted on low carriages and a Gatling gun. When Burridge visited Sulu it was on its decline, but evidence of its former grandeur was in the woodwork carvings and details of its older dwellings, especially on its doors and windows. The earlier glory of the Sulu Sultanate was also evident in its manufacturing - especially its metalwork details on krisses, barongs, spear-heads and betel-boxes.

Members of the Tausug aristocracy were married into local maritime communities and took the title **Datu** and those appointed local rulers of Arab descent took the title **Shariff**. The urban water complexes of the maritime world were united in trade and commerce through interlocking marriages who traced their common ancestry to the Tausug royalty in Jolo.

Each of the urban water complexes had almost similar features in their morphology. At the river mouth on the river bank is the large house of the **datu** and in front of his residence is the **rumah bichara**. The later serves as a meeting place where all matters of transaction and exchange are discussed and settled. The **rumah bichara** is an administrative tax collection centre. Furthermore it serves as a ceremonial centre and a place to receive guests coming across the sea. Jutting out into the sea from the **rumah bichara** is a jetty which reaches out into the sea. It serves as a landing point for traders and where the boats of the **datu** are moored. The godowns on either side of the jetty are built and owned by the **datu** for storage purposes. The storage space is rented out. All work associated with trade is carried out on behalf of the **datu** by his followers.

The jetty serves as the main road as it were between the sea and the **rumah bichara** and the residence of the **datu**. At right-angles to the jetty are catwalks leading a maze of other catwalks leading to houses on stilts. At the very end of each run of catwalks are located small fortification for defence purposes. The whole complex of houses and catwalks are built on water. The only exception is the residence of the **datu** and the **masjid**. The **masjid** is usually built on higher ground than the residence of the **datu** and located near the **masjid** is the cemetery. The Islamic maritime community spend their life on sea but when they depart they

are buried on land. All over the Sulu seas such water based urban structures repeated itself with localised variations.

In the eighteenth century Sultan Mohammad Israel had control over the water villages on the river mouths of the Paitan, Sugut, Labuk, Kinabatangan and Bulungun. He commanded a fleet of 130 warships through which he maintained law and order in his territories. His naval armada was manned by the Iranuns who served to establish new water village centres of trade and commerce under Tausug domination. One such area that was captured by his naval fleet was Tempasuk that was subsequently administered by his emissary Sherif Usman. Sherif Usman dominated trade along the coast from Marudu, Balabac to south Palawan. In 1870, Sherif Yassin, the son of Sherif Usman, established a water village at Marudu Bay on the Tandik River where:

a considerable revenue in tortoise shells and pearls from the sea, and camphor, rattan, and beeswax from the interior ... every other year ... for the Sultan and himself as well.

The Marudu Bay was the most important centre of commerce and trade for the Sulu Sultanate. It was:

the most fruitful, populous, and valuable district on all Borneo. The principal town, Sungai Besar, was strategically situated at the entrance of Marudu Bay. Neighbouring settlements with smaller populations were Bawegun, Tandik, Malasingin, Sipuni, Kudat, Tambalulan, Pangilan and Malubang. These communities were inhabited by Muslim merchants and settlers who moved towards the coast from the interior, attracted by the fish, tortoise shell, salt, cloth, porcelain, and metal utensils the Taussig offered in trade.

In other districts the Tausug ruled through the local community leaders. One such example was the Tirun District that was ruled by the Tidungs who controlled the river mouths of the Sibuco, Sambakong and Bulungun rivers. These areas were also populated by Bugis traders who hailed from the Celebes island. The Tidungs acted as intermediaries for local trade with the inland peoples and other maritime communities.

These islamized descendants, often chiefs or headmen, continued to function as principals in the barter trade between Taosug merchants from Sulu and non-Muslim forest people such as the Punan. The Sultanate relied on these chiefs as political agents to control the river trade and maintain Suii's influence among the larger heterogeneous population at the frontier.

The naval force of the Sulu Sultanate were located not on the island of Maimbung. It was organised by the Illanun, the Balanini and the Iranuns. The stronghold of the Illanuns was on the shore of a lagoon in the island of Mindanau,

On the east of an immense bay a long finger of land separated the lagoon from the sea; it was fringed with mangrove trees, which, standing upon their roots seven or eight feet above the water at high tide, provided a maze of narrow channels that afforded concealment from pursuit. To secure themselves further, the Illanuns were in the habit of constructing runnels of timber along which they could haul their boats swiftly into the lagoon.

The Illanuns in addition to their main fortifications on the lagoon have established a chain of settlements along the east coast of Borneo from Koti and Tunku on the east to Marudu in the north and thence as far west as Ambong and Tempasuk. The awesome Illanun naval fleet is described by Owen Rutter as:

Their cruising boats were built sharp in the prow and wide in the beam; some of them would exceed ninety feet in length and sixty tons burden. They were furnished with a double tier of oars, the largest carrying a hundred rowers, who sat cross legged, about a foot from the water line, on strong galleries built outside the bends.

The Illanuns were accustomed to sailing in squadrons thirty or forty strong, at times a fleet might number 200 vessels of different sizes. The Balanini were closely associated with the Illanuns and at times launched joint expeditions. They were located on the island of Balanini and had other settlements on the islands of Basilan, Binadan and Tawi Tawi. The island of Balanini is within sight of the island of Maimbung. Like the Illanuns of Mindanau, the island is a lagoon island and the narrow entrance to the lagoon was staked so that only one vessel could enter at a time. At its height of their power the Balanini could muster 150 war boats, each capable of carrying 30 to 50 warriors so taking an average of 50, they must have numbered at least 6,000 fighting men.

The elaborate connections between the Tausug aristocracy and the interlocking water cities all in the Sulu seas were severed by the onslaught of three European powers who round on to colonize the region. Together the Spanish, Dutch and British collectively brought down perhaps the greatest maritime power in eastern Southeast. Finally in 1881 after repeated raids the Tausug royalty capitulated and its extensive maritime empire of water cities was dissolved.

The administration of the Chartered North Borneo Company (1881-1941) shifted the economic base of the Sulu seas from marine produce to a land based economy. The water cities that once served the maritime trade ceased to serve its

purpose. A variant of the water city appeared in the form of water villages that developed in "log ponds" such as Kampung Air Kota Kinabalu, Kampung Bohara and Kampung BDC in Sandakan, Kampung Panji in Lahad Datu and Kampung Pengkalan in Kunak. These "log ponds" were home to the wage earners in the logging industry of Sabah.

The second variant of the water city appeared in the form of water villages associated with the drying and salting of fish. These water villages were usually located in the shallow waters away from the river mouths of the numerous bays off the east coast of Sabah. They were often composed of one of the many ethnic communities of the Sulu sea such as the Suluk, Ubian, Sungai, Kagayan, Balabak, Iranun, Sisaya, Tidong and Bugis. Amongst such water villages were those located at Usukan Bay, Agal Bay, Marudu Bay, Paitan bay and Sibuko Bay. The common merchant in each of these villages were the Chinese merchants who dominated the salted fish industry.

A third variant that is noticed in more recent times are the urban squatters that are housed in water villages. Statistics indicate in 1990 that there are 239 such squatter water-villages in Sabah. These villages house as many as 139,985 people that is 9.5% of Sabah's total population. There are to be found mainly at the fringe of large urban complexes in modern Sabah such as Sandakan, Kota Kinabalu, Semporna, Tawau, Kudat and Papar. The closer these water villages are to the urban centres the more heterogeneous they are. These villages form the lumpun proletariat of the main urban centres. The more removed the villages are from the urban complexes, they tend to be single ethnic dominated and are engaged in the fishing and agricultural activities. The food they produce are sold to urban markets. These working class dwellings are classified by the municipalities as illegal squatters and they are subjected to constant encroachment by the state. They are usually migrant workers from the Philippines and Indonesia and together they form about two-thirds of the total labour population of Sabah.

The fourth and final variant is the new arrival of maritime migrant communities establishing footholds on the shoreline of Sabah. Their trade networks are extensive linking their original water villages of the islands of Southern Philippines and the coastal areas of the islands of Sulawesi and northeast Kalimantan. The latter two areas are in Indonesia. These shoreline settlers penetrate inland into urban markets and into the plantation sectors where they sell marine products and other provisions obtained from their home base. They exist outside state control and authority and their economic activities bypass state taxes and regulations.

The water world is the human domain of the island peoples. Researchers and Urban Planners should be sensitive to the water habitates and cultures of the peoples with extensive links across the Asiatic archipelago. The dynamic survival instincts of the water cultures should be reintegrated into the Development Plans rather than left marginalised and neglected.

ENDNOTES:

1. For a paper on **Nusalaut** in history see Shaharil Talib, "The Asiatic Archipelago: History Beyond Boundaries", **International Symposium on Southeast Asian Studies**, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 18-19th October 1996.
2. Mohammad Raduan Mohd. Ariff, **Dari Pemungutan Tripang ke Penundaan Undang: Satu Kajian Mengenai Sejarah Perkembangan Perusahaan Perikanan di Borneo Utara 1750-1990**, Jabatan Penerbitan Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1995.
3. Robert Nicoll (ed.), **European Sources for History of The Sultanate of Brunei in the Sixteenth Century**, Muzium Brunei, Brunei, 1975, p.10.
4. Owen Rutter, **The Pirate Wind: Tales of the Sea-Robbers of Malaya**, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1986, p.170.
5. F.W. Burridge, **The Gardens of The Sun: A Naturalist's Journal of Borneo and the Sulu Archipelago**, Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1989, pp.161-162.
6. **Ibid.**, p. 162.
7. Owen Rutter, **Op. Cit.**, pp. 28-29.
8. **Ibid.**, p. 218.
9. C.O. 874/71: Diary of Prettyman, 14th May 1879.
10. J. Hunt, "Some Particulars Relating to Sulo in the Archipelago of Felicia", **Notices of The Indian Archipelago and Adjacent Countries**, ed. J.H. Moor, Singapore, 1837, p. 53.
11. J.F. Warren, **The Sulu zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State**, Singapore University Press, Singapore, p.85.
12. Owen Rutter, **Op. Cit.**, p.31.