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# **‘Lanting’ as a way of life: *A legacy of riverine culture and architecture in the present urban life of Sintang City, West Kalimantan***

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**Abstract.** The vast island of Borneo, in the heart of Southeast Asia, is an island famous for its large and powerful rivers. Along with their tributaries and numerous smaller rivers, they represent a key factor in communication and transportation. Sintang is one of the riverfront cities located in the middle stream of Kapuas river in West Kalimantan. In the midst of a rapid urbanization process, 'lanting' or floating houses, the legacy of culture and architecture of past Sintang, are still present and needed by the community. This paper discussed the way of life of lanting community in the midst of vast urbanization of the city. Through the grounded-theory method, this study found that lanting has a significant role as a linkage between the rural and urban community. We elaborated the concept of linkage and depicted the transition process of rural-urban society and the role of river community in the urbanization process of Sintang city.

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of living along the river is essentially part of the oldest human culture. Although most of river settlements in all parts of the world has experienced changes in orientation towards land, in several places along major rivers in Southeast Asia, there are settlements that still reflect the riverine culture as ancestral heritage [1]. In such culture, water can be seen as a steering factor for the development of human settlement along the river, but dynamically water is also affected by the settlement activities. Almost throughout the island of Borneo, the presence of large rivers is a vital means of communication and transportation, and for the growth of culture and economic activity[2]. Kapuas River, the largest and the longest river in Indonesia, plays important role as a unifying element of West Kalimantan region, where traditional settlements, commerce, and economic development have flourished along this river. Sintang is the capital city of Sintang Regency which lies in the middle-stream of Kapuas River and in the junction between Kapuas and Melawi River. Growing from river's edge with strong character of its riverine culture in the form of floating houses or 'lanting' (in local term), Sintang today is becoming more urbanized and land-oriented. Although the life of floating houses is no longer as popular as before, they still continue to survive and adjust to the situation of the increasingly modern Sintang city. So far there are no adequate references and discussions related to this issue, thus, this study will provide overview of the riverine culture and settlements in Kalimantan which have existed for hundreds of years.

## **2. Methodology**

The objectives of this study are: (1) to provide an overview of the definition and typology of lanting and history of the origins of lanting as part of the characteristics of river settlement in Kalimantan; (2) to reveal the way of life of the floating houses inhabitants, which are located between river-oriented and land-oriented settings, and how they evolved along with the process of urbanization and modernization

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of the city. This research uses a grounded theory approach that emphasizes on the quality of grounded data. Through depth interviews and participant observations, this study reveals how the actors dive into the joys and sorrows of riverine life and how they perceive their existence and their future in the midst of urbanization and modernization process of Sintang city.

### 3. Literature Review

So far there had been a large number of architectural and multidisciplinary studies related to riverine settlements in general, but only few discussed specifically about floating houses. Based on limited number of floating house studies, I categorized them into two research areas. First category, which is widely practiced by scholars in Europe and North America, is studies on advanced technology innovations of floating building design, that begin blooming since the early 2000s, which were carried out in order to answer the challenges of sea level rise, floods, or land scarcity for residential housings, such as conducted by Koekoek and Gibson [3][4]. Other research in this category which is quite different from Western approach was carried out by Prosun who designed affordable amphibious structures for low-income families in Bangladesh [5]. The second category is studies on traditional floating settlements mostly in Asian countries, which focus more on the historical perspective, vernacular architecture, and socio-cultural society, such as conducted by Travers in Cambodia and Jhearmaneechotechai in Thailand [6][7]. In Indonesia, studies related to floating houses are conducted in several locations, such as in Musi River, Lake Tempe, and in many big rivers in Kalimantan [8][9][10]. The literature reviews have made a number of significant points which respond to the gap identified in this study, so we will elaborate further the existence of floating houses in the midst of urbanization process of the city.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Understanding Lanting and River Life

Literally, the word "lanting" comes from the Banjarese language (South Kalimantan) which means: "a raft of arranged bamboos" [11]. People choose to built their houses on the water and live there for a number of reasons, for example, because they do not own property on land, or because their work is related to rivers such as fishery and water transportation. In Indonesia, lanting settlements can be found in several areas that have large rivers such as the Kapuas, Barito, Mahakam and Kahayan rivers in Kalimantan, and in Musi River Palembang, and also found in Lake Tempe, South Sulawesi. In Sintang, there currently remains two main locations of lanting settlements, near Pasar Inpres at Kelurahan Tanjung Puri and near Pasar Sungai Durian. These lanting settlements compose urban functions such as residential, lodging, stalls, restaurants, fuel kiosks, et cetera.



**Figure1.** Various types of lanting

Lanting has been traditionally built on a wooden raft made of big logs called Tengkawang wood. The process of constructing lanting was not easy. Tengkawang wood which is used as a base platform that can float stably on the water is increasingly scarce because of the deforestation in Borneo island. Only a few of them are left in the remote forests in the river upstream. Meanwhile, to bring these woods from the upstream is also not easy because of quite strict administrative requirements to avoid accusations of illegal logging. So generally the lantings are constructed in the remote upstream close to the source of raw materials, and then brought by tugboats towards Sintang or other destinations.

#### *4.2. Lanting as a legacy of the past*

There is a lack of historical documents that describes in detail about the origin and life of lanting in Sintang, while finding a resourceful person from academics or from government institutions who is knowledgeable about the story of lanting was insufficient if not impossible. So we tried to extract this information from the sources we interviewed. There are different versions related to the origin of lanting. According to Edi, A Chinese who owns a coffee shop in Sungai Durian, Chinese people who came to Sintang from Mainland China have an important role in introducing the riverine culture they brought from their homeland. This opinion is in line with the statement of Heidhuis in her book entitled "Goldiggers, farmers, and traders in the Chinese districts of West Kalimantan Indonesia", that generally Chinese who migrated to West Kalimantan were not wealthy merchants, but small traders and underprivileged workers, so when they came to Sintang they lived in their houseboats or built floating houses because they could not afford to purchase land [12]. However, some other sources disagree with this opinion. According to the relative of Sintang Sultanate, lanting had existed long before the first arrival of Chinese traders and miners to Sintang, because historically there were also indigenous people of Malays and Dayaks lived in lanting. Simon Djalil, former head of Sintang Regency confirmed this opinion. He said, there was lack of evidence that in the past riverine culture in the form of floating houses came from Chinese immigrants, although in fact, many Chinese are living in lantings in Pasar Sungai Durian. Even in the past, Pasar Sungai Durian was called 'Pasar Cina' or Chinese Market because there were many Chinese people lived and worked as traders in lanting.

The life of lanting community was very popular in the 1960s, where economic activities and the distribution of goods and services relied heavily on river transportation. Trading activities along the river such as in Sungai Durian or Chinese Market were developing especially after the sultan of Sintang moved the palace from Sungai Durian to Kampung Raja in the northern side of Kapuas River, in order to facilitate the royal authorities in collecting taxes from ships coming from the Melawi River and the Kapuas River [13]. In Tanjung Puri, in the eastern part of Sintang, lanting houses were not as old as those in Sungai Durian because this area used to be relatively empty until the Dutch came in 1820. After entering the territory of the Sintang sultanate, the Dutch also participated in collecting the excise taxes from passing merchant boats so that tax withdrawals were made from all directions, both by the Dutch and by the kingdom. They set up lantings at the river crossing as stations/posts for tax collecting [14].

#### *4.3. Lanting today: river's life in the midst of modern urban life*

##### *4.3.1. Docking*

In Sintang some lantings serve as jetty for boats. Since the government's dock is inadequate to serve a large number of boats, many lanting owners provide their lantings as docks using rent payment system. The boats coming to Sintang are usually originated from both upstream and downstream of the rivers and tributaries, carrying passengers and goods. The time-length for docking varies, ranging from hours, days, even weeks. Boats carrying passengers from countrysides usually arrive and depart in the same day. Boats coming from distant areas would usually spend nights in Sintang. Usually, they are freight vessels which require a longer time for their loading and unloading. The *kapal bandung* (wooden houseboat) can even lean for weeks, waiting until all the goods they carry are sold out.

#### 4.3.2. Rest Area

Sintang which is located in the middle stream of Kapuas River is a strategic transit hub for both freight and passenger vessels which traveling from upstream to downstream and vice-versa. Some lanting owners run coffee shops, restaurants, fuel kiosks, and public toilets. This floating rest area is needed by the transit passengers since sometimes it is not always easy to go ashore through the quite tall and steep river bank, especially for mothers carrying babies or elderly people. To go ashore, one has to climb small, non-stable wooden footbridges and stairs. In the dry season when the water level is very low, the footbridge should be made longer, while in the rainy season this path becomes very slippery and sometimes coupled with the risk of riverbank's landslide.

#### 4.3.3. Staying Overnight

Some lantings serve cheap accommodation or lodging for commuting villagers by river transportation, who often have to stay for days or even weeks to do various things in Sintang, such as going to the hospital, banks, government offices, etc. I visited several lanting lodges in both Tanjung Puri and Sungai Durian as a participant observer and did some depth-interviews to the lanting owners and some of the visitors. Adam and Husin are the owners of big lodges which located adjacent to each other in a very strategic area close to the market and to the hospital in Tanjung Puri. Their lodges provide affordable accommodation for villagers during their stays in Sintang. The room price is only around 40,000 rupiahs per night, without any strict rules like in formal hotels. The lodging business is run on a sense of solidarity between fellow villagers. The demand for cheap accommodation is very high because people have to allocate more funds for relatively expensive river transportation costs, which could reach 1 million rupiah one way.

#### 4.3.4. Pop-up Market

Pop-up floating market is usually held from early morning until afternoon in Sungai Durian. This vibrant floating market is a meeting place for traders and buyers from Sintang and the surrounding villages. Types of goods traded are diverse, but mainly are fresh products such as vegetables, fruits, meat and fresh fish. Boats coming from Kapuas Hulu in the upper stream usually bring tons of fresh fish to Sintang, while boats coming from big cities such as Pontianak in river's downstream usually bring groceries, clothing, and other household goods. Simon Djalil, former regent of Sintang District, told me that the pop-up market is a representation of Sintang in the past. In 1960s, life in lanting was very popular, and almost all Chinese merchants opened their shops in lanting. It used to be said that what is called 'Pasar Cina' was actually the lanting market. At that time, rubber was a main commodity traded in Pasar Cina since the Dutch era around 1834. Dayak people came from upstream to Pasar Cina selling high quality rubber and other forest products. They then returned back bringing oil and household needs they bought from Sintang.

#### 4.3.5. Temporary dwelling

During observation and interview process I also asked the lanting owners about their feelings and their hopes in the future of living in lanting as their way of life. Surprisingly, almost all of them told me that they hoped that someday they could move to land, so they saw the phase of staying in lanting as only a temporary stay or temporary dwelling. Today living in lanting is more difficult than in the past. This is caused by various factors, ranging from the scarcity of wood for construction materials, the increase of river pollution and the more erratic river behavior (tidal patterns, wind, currents, etc.) as well as psychological factors for being treated as lower class citizens because their houses are 'down there' (water level is always lower than the land). Economic consideration is the driving factor for them to remain living in lanting. Asua, one of lanting owners in Pasar Sungai Durian told me that the number of lanting decrease because more and more people prefer to live on land once they have money. Today there are more lantings for business activities such as lodges, coffee shops, kiosks, etc rather than for residential. People who still remain living in lanting were those who have not been able to purchase

houses in land. Another problem that worries the lanting owners was that there is no policy rules that guarantee the legality of lanting as a form of housing in the city. They are always haunted by feelings of anxiety and worry for being evicted by the government since they do not have any legal documents or certificates. It actually happened once or twice in the past, when the governments whose in charge asked the lanting owners to move voluntarily to land or to move their lanting more to the city outskirts because their houses were considered a 'visual disturbance' for the city center.

Another different story came from Suhaimi, a retired civil servant who was one of the owners of Lanting. When he was still working as a civil servant in the 1980s, he built a lanting for his six younger brothers who came from their village hometown to continue their education in Sintang. Staying in lanting could save more money, because they did not have to rent expensive house on land, they did not have to pay for tap water, they can get fish for their food from the river, they could also save the transportation cost because their lanting is located close to major facilities such as schools, markets, banks, hospitals, etc. So they could save a lot of money for monthly expenses. Suhaimi financed his younger siblings until all of them graduated from high school, even one passed the university.

*"Alhamdulillah, ada enam orang adik-adik saya yang berangkat dari sini (lanting), dan adek angkat ada dua orang. Mereka selesai semua sekolahnya karena ditolong oleh lanting ini.."* -Suhaimi-

From cases like Suhaimi's story and other villagers who use lanting as transit dwelling to enter the urban life, it can be said that lanting is the initial representation of the presence of rural people who immigrate to the city to seek a better life. In a relatively poor physical condition of lanting as dwelling place without legal security, they try to feel at home while keep struggling to continue their education or find a better job in the city, for the sake of better future. Turner (1968) explained such phenomena by arguing that value which lies in the relationship between man and environment is not simply a matter of physical conditions. "A good environment is not necessarily one of the high physical standards; if the inhabitant wants to save money to send his children to school, a poor but cheap house will be better than an expensive one of high material standards that would ruin the family's long-term expectations" [15]. He even wrote: "Even if the dwelling is no more than a shack on a plot of rough land, it frees the owner from rent payments; it also provides him with opportunities for additional income and the chance to invest his small savings, skills, and spare time" [15, p.357]

Lanting as a representation of "being" or *Dasein* in Heidegger's concept, is an attempt of rural people to show his existence in an urban environment no matter how unfamiliar the environment to him. As Heidegger stated (Rose, 2012): "to say that mortals are is to say that in the dwelling they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations." As dwelling in an urban context, lanting can also be seen as the practice of marking and claiming, where lanting as *Dasein* exists in an urban setting, but this existence is not seen as considered merely as lanting itself [16]. In this context, lanting is made to mark and claim the site where the urban environment (as the "fourfold") can be disclosed as not simply the environment or unfamiliar environment, but as 'our' environment for them. So in this lanting, rural people as *Dasein* exists *vis-a-vis* the changing and transforming urban life. Through lanting they are struggling to hold onto this relentlessly changing world by claiming it as their own.

## 5. Conclusions

Lanting or floating houses in Sintang are part of urban settlements, which compose urban functions, such as residential, lodging, stalls, restaurants, kiosks, and so on. There are different versions about the origin of lanting in Sintang. Some stated that lanting was first introduced by Chinese traders, while others believed that lanting had existed long before the arrival of Chinese to Sintang. However, the strategic location of Sintang in the midst of river trade routes has made the lanting community played important role in the development of Sintang in the past.

Today, although the riverine culture is no longer as popular as it was once since the dominance of land transportation, lanting still exist and has evolved into transit functions. From the main activities

identified in the daily life of lanting community such as docking, lodging, pop-up markets, and temporary dwelling, it can be said that lanting plays an important role as one of urban elements in Sintang city that represents the urban-rural linkage between Sintang and the surrounding countrysides, in a complex hydro-social system. Lantings and the rivers, which cannot be separated from each other, have become a combination of nodes and lines that open the opportunity of urban-rural interaction which then influences each other. Lanting is also the initial representation of the presence of rural community, especially low-income people, who immigrate to the city to seek a better life, or in other words, lanting is a transitional space from rural life to urban life.

## 6. Acknowledgment

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