

The floating houses of Sintang City: space, resources and political nexus

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Abstract. Sintang is a city in the interior of West Kalimantan, located at the confluence of two large rivers, Kapuas River and Melawi River. Growing from the river's edge, the present Sintang still maintains its riverine culture in the form of floating houses ('rumah lanting'), as its legacy of the past, when rivers played important role as main transportation routes for political and economic activities. This paper explores several concepts related to power, space, and resources, to examine the complexity of life of lanting dwellers, conducted at two locations of lanting houses that spread around Sintang urban area: Pasar Sungai Durian and Pasar Inpres. The results show that there are two main factors affecting the life as well as the spatiality of lanting dwellers: First, the relationship with river's ecology and river's behavior, and second, the linkages with the activities on the mainland, where both of them are strongly influenced by political and economic considerations. The impact of changes in the river's ecology and behavior on the lanting dwellers has shown how government policies affected the rivers and thus, the lanting communities. The key contribution of this study is a clear depiction of the political and power relations in the context of spatiality and resources on the riverine culture, especially the lanting communities along Kapuas and Melawi River in Sintang City, which tends to reveal the marginalization of the lanting community among the other urban community. So far, there has been no serious and detailed studies about the politics of space in relation to nature and resources and local livelihoods in the area. This paper wishes to explore the challenges to strive for a livable and just place for river community in the future.

1. Introduction

Sintang is a city in the interior of West Kalimantan, which is located at the confluence of two large rivers, Sungai Kapuas and Sungai Melawi. Growing from the river's edge, the present Sintang still maintains its riverine culture in the form of floating houses ('rumah lanting'), as its legacy of the past, when rivers played an important role as main transportation routes for political and economic activities. As stated by Evers (2015), "Considerations of security from floods, wild animals and human enemies have shaped housing and settlement patterns around Borneo and, indeed, in many other parts of Southeast Asia. This has been a common practice among various Austronesian groups throughout Southeast Asia".

In the decade of 1940s to at least 1970s, river transportation still played an important role for the people in inland region of West Kalimantan, i.e. Sanggau, Sekadau, Sintang, and Kapuas Hulu. At that time, people used to board motorboats and navigate to Pontianak. Floating villages became real transit points for passing motorboats, and were used for purchases of fuel, as well as other necessities such as



rice, sugar, etc. Motorboats used to depart from the upstream, usually carrying produce from the inland region such as rubber, ironwood, and bengkirai wood. The produce was brought to Pontianak and traded for basic groceries in the Chinese market. Those were then brought back into the inland cities and villages to be traded or exchanged for the local community's produce (Heidhues, 2003).

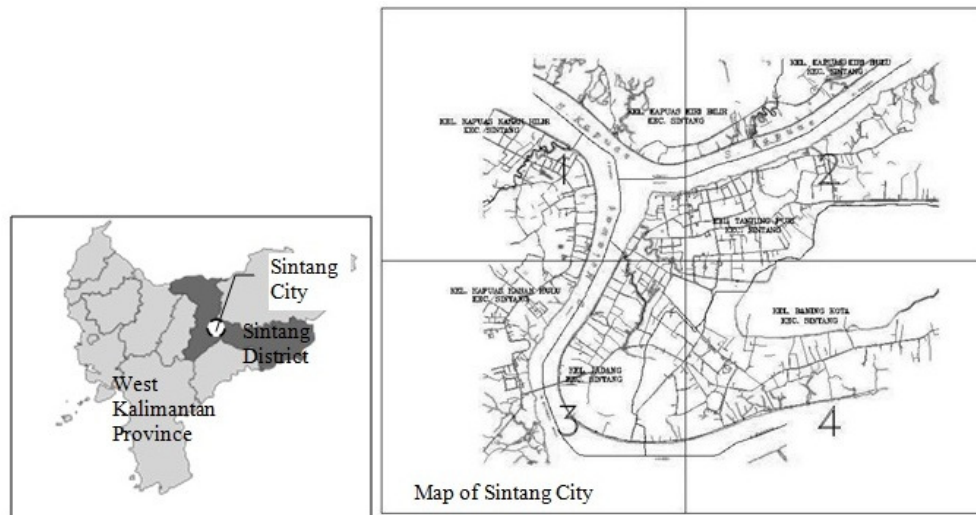


Figure 1. Map of Sintang City

After the construction of roads in the inland Borneo (around 1950s), the conditions of the river deteriorated. There were many illegal gold mining activities along the riverbanks; the waste was habitually and directly dumped into the water of the river. That made the river contaminated by the mine waste, including mercury (Cleary, 1992). The river that was once used as the source of clean water and fish became gradually ‘unreliable’, due to the high level of pollutants and sediments. Until now, all types of waste are increasingly polluting the Kapuas River, ranging from household waste, from pesticides and plantation fertilizers, to mercury.



Figure 2. Floating houses in Kapuas River

2. Methodology

This paper explores concepts related to power, space, and resources, in order to examine the complexity of life of lanting dwellers, in terms of relations within and between the communities; the inter-relationship of humans, nature and resources, and the consequent implications on the spatiality. This study was conducted at two locations of lanting houses that spread around Sintang urban area: Sungai Durian and Pasar Inpres. In this study, I used ethnographic methods, especially the spatial ethnography, which was also supported by the participant observation, in-depth interviews, and literature studies.

3. Space, resources, and political nexus from past to present

3.1. *Sintang in the past*

The arrival of the colonialists in Indonesia gave birth to the story of colonialism and the struggle for independence. It also created the cities built in order to serve the interests of the colonizers. At that time, Sintang was a kingdom located in the interior of West Kalimantan, which had the largest territory in the region. It was the old kingdom known to have existed since the pre-Islamic period and had a strong influence both on the upstream and downstream of the Kapuas River. In the upstream, the kingdom was respected for its political power, while in the downstream it became an engine of the economic development.

The establishment of the territories in West Borneo, especially along the Kapuas river, had foundations in the economic 'pockets' or river trading spots, which were generally located at the junctions of two rivers, typically in the form of boat houses and floating houses. These trading pockets had the opportunity and then control the economy of local people who cultivated and sold their produce to the traders. (Listiana, 2012).

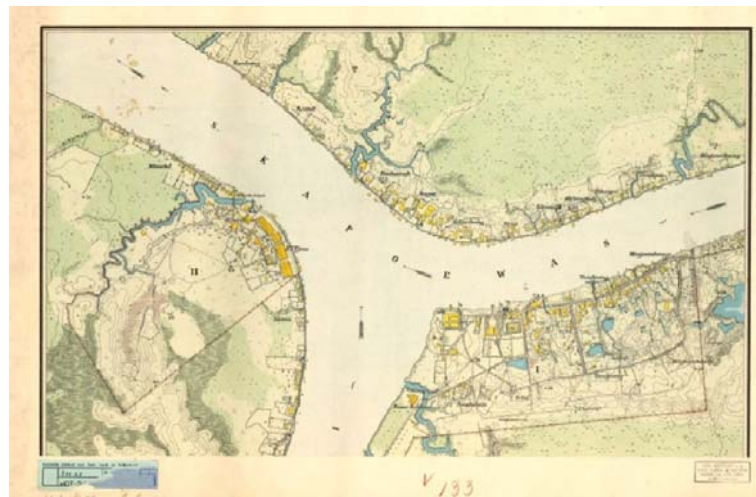


Figure 3. Sintang Map, ca.1888 (source: KITLV, Netherlands)

Furthermore, the growing trading centers would then engage in the political practice of conquest and expansion into the surrounding regions. In this phase, the kingdom has become the main ruler. The process of production and marketing was determined by the royal family and their bureaucrats through traditional bureaucratic and institutional networks, while the people were the only provider of labor and had no bargaining power to determine the size and value of production. It is known that the kingdom of Sintang had applied the concept of land ownership influenced by Hinduism, which states

that the landowner is the king (*vorstendomein*). Because families and bureaucrats of the kingdom assisted the king, he gave them plots of lands called '*apanage*' or '*lungguh*' (Pranoto, 2010 in Listiana, 2012).

Regarding the territory of the kingdom, there are many conflicting pieces of information and opinions. Before Dutch intervention, the traditional kingdoms especially in western Kalimantan had no definite boundaries. The frequent occurrences of disputes between the royals could be identified as evidence of the vagueness of territorial boundaries. The claims of the royal territory were usually based on the statement of submission coming from small kingdoms in the upper stream, in the form of tribute to the kingdom. The territory of the royal power might have been referred to as a tax collection system to the districts of the Dayak community. The arrival of the Dutch colonialists to Sintang changed the politics and government system of the Sintang Kingdom. The Dutch managed to change the political status and territory of Sintang kingdom gradually, through the contractual agreements between the kingdom and the colonial government. Through the contract signed on November 24, 1823, the Governor-General Baron van der Capellen 'legally' ratified the transfer of the Sintang Kingdom to the Dutch power (Sjamsuddin, 2015).

The kingdom's glory was actually depended mostly on the trading and commercial activities along the Kapuas watershed. All commercial ships from the upstream had to pass through Sintang in order to navigate downstream. Also, the attempt to conquest the small kingdom in Selimbau were undertaken in order to control the trading routes leading to Sarawak (then under the British colonialists) in the north.

Being located at the confluence of two large rivers had made Sintang an important trading center with abundance of natural resources that could be found in the surrounding area. The rivers were not only important as transportation routes, but were also providing abundant amount of fish for people's livelihood (Enthoven, 1905). On land, the Dayaks used to extract bird's nests from the crack in the rocks of Mount Kelam, selling them to the kingdom, at a low price. Wax collected (by hundreds of loads) was a very important commodity during that time. The soil was also capable of producing a good quality rice, meeting the needs of the entire inland settlements during the harvest season. Rattan was easily found in the forest and along the Melawi's riverbank. Best quality gold was mined at various spots, as well as iron ore, grindstone and magnet (Heidhues, 2003).



Figure 4. Floating hospital in Sintang, ca.1920(source: KITLV, Netherlands)

3.2. From early Independence to The New Order era

In the early era of the Republic of Indonesia's independence, the socio-environmental conditions of Kalimantan have not showed drastic changes, compared with the previous period of time. Through the

Government Regulation no. 64 of 1957 issued by President Soekarno, the central government decentralized forest governance outside of Java, placing it under control of the provincial governments. The decentralization policy in the forestry sector during Soekarno was supported and shaped by the strategy of political economy based on the ideas of socialism and patriotism. This strategy was essentially against the Western investment. Therefore, in the Soekarno era, both foreign and local businessmen could not exploit the forest resources. This was in total contrast to the New Order era (New Order of Suharto) policies.

In the New Order era, Indonesia lost 40 million hectares of forest because they were converted into the palm oil plantations in the so-called transmigration areas, because of HPH and HTI concessions, agricultural expansion, and illegal logging practices. The damage to the environment of the forest and the river obviously affects people's lives, especially when it comes to the lanting dwellers. Illegal logging that utilizes the river for rafting timber down the stream; gold mining in the upper part of Kapuas River, and the 'clearance' of massive areas of land to give way to plantations, have been causing negative intrusion into people's lives, as well as suffer and insecurity to the communities along the river. In 1983, the head of Sintang District issued a Local Regulation (Peraturan Daerah) prohibiting people to live in the floating houses along the Kapuas River in the Sintang City area. As a result, the number of floating houses had decreased drastically, although they never disappeared completely.

3.3. *Post-Suharto Era*

The Asian financial crises and consequent collapse of several Asian economies in 1997, followed by rapid political upheavals, eventually forced President Suharto to step down from the presidency in May 1998. Since then, there has been an opportunity to voice opposition to forest destruction and environmental exploitation. Some positive changes in terms of policies and practices, related to the forest issues, begin to emerge. But the economic crisis also created 'new demands' that have encouraged even greater forest and environmental destruction. This is exacerbated by an ambitious but chaotic decentralization process and its implementation. (Chidley, 2002).

3.4. *Sintang today*

Today, floating settlements are still surviving along several rivers of Kalimantan, especially in the rural areas. In Sintang, floating settlements are concentrated in two different areas: Sungai Durian and Pasar Inpres. Besides living in their floating homes, the lanting dwellers are also running their businesses, such as mini fuel-stations, low-cost motels, cafes and grocery shops. In Sungai Durian, formerly known as the Pasar Cina (Chinese market), the majority of the residents of floating houses are of Chinese origin, and the rest are Javanese, Malay and Dayak.

One of the owners of the floating houses I interviewed is Mr. H (48), the third-generation owner of the house that he inherited from his grandfather; the first owner. Mr. H himself was born in lanting house, but unlike his predecessors who lived permanently 'on the water', Mr. H also owns a property on the land, which he is using for both residential and business activities. Life in the floating houses for already several generations forged a very close relationship between the communities and the river, but the current land-oriented urbanization process has led the lanting communities to live their lives in two interconnected spaces: the river and the land. Today, most of the Chinese lanting residents have their homes on the shore. However, they are still maintaining floating houses as their family heritage.

In Pasar Inpres, most of lanting dwellers are immigrants from surrounding villages seeking better jobs or continuing their education in Sintang city. Most of them are Dayaks who came from the areas of Ambalau and Serawai. They decided to stay in lanting mainly for two reasons: First, they could build or rent the lanting house at the lower cost than those on the land. Second, living on the water allows them to have easy access to water transportation, and their home villages are mostly accessible by boats.



Figure 5. Floating houses as foreground of urban scenery in Sintang

Unlike in the past, today there are not many Malays who are still living in floating homes. The availability of large quantities of land at relatively low prices, particularly in the floodplains of Kampung Raja across the river, has made Malays to choose to live on the land, above the surface in their stilt houses, still maintain the character of local traditional rural living. This is consistent with the ideas of Evers and Korff (2002) that Malays tend to choose to live in kampongs, even though these kampongs are administratively located within the city. The life of Malay people tends to circulate predominantly around the palace and the mosque, rather than in the entire city. That is in contrast to the Chinese way of life. Although most Chinese immigrants who arrived in Indonesia came from the rural areas in southern China, their lifestyle is urban in its essence. The concept of densely populated neighborhood settlements located in the city centers is typical of the Chinese communities in almost all Indonesian cities, and Sintang is not an exception. In other words, the areas of the city that have a distinctive urban character are usually the areas inhabited by the people of Chinese origin, while the areas populated by Malays are still retaining the character of the kampong (local traditional village).

4. Conclusion

Capacity of the river (as space) and resources (commodities) to shape particular economic and social mechanisms has made them synonymous with the 'instruments of power'. These elements (space, resources, power) are also forming a mutually constitutive relationship. Floating villages and riverine settlements are what could be described as clear manifestation of spaces that are constructed and reconstructed periodically. This is based on various purposes and motivations, and involving various actors and political considerations. The origin of the growth of floating settlement in Sintang was the desire of the authorities to control the territory of their power along the river networks. Eventually these settlements grew into the economic pockets, while being generally located in the junctions of the rivers. Their trading and commercial activities, as well as the availability of vital natural resources in the mainland of Kalimantan such as forest products and mining products, have been playing an important role in determining both direction and nature of Sintang's economy. However, the land-oriented urbanization process has made an impact on the riverine settlements, with many serious consequences. Communities began living a semi-urban existence in two different (although interconnected) spaces: the river and the land. The conditions of the rivers deteriorated, becoming increasingly polluted. The government's one-sided policy, geared towards the conventional land-based development, has become one of the main future challenges, even obstacles, to both hopes and desires to build a livable and just living place for the communities of the floating villages.

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