

BRUNEI KAMPONG AYER : AN ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE AND THE CONDITIONS OF EVOLUTION OF A BORNEO MALAY URBANISM

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Abstract

For the past 15 years Kampong Ayer, Brunei's famous water villages and former empire's capital has been left to decay slowly. Debates about its future are held far from its inhabitants and away from Brunei's population that all have their roots in it. This paper attempts to show that this static phase of the village history, with centralized external forces holding its development and planning its redevelopment, has not occurred during 1300 years of history. This does not follow the traditional pattern of urban development of the Vernacular Southeast Asian Coastal Cities [VSEACC], thus any decision made with this new process will dramatically change the face of Kampong Ayer.

I argue that Kampong Ayer is an example of a unique type of city that existed during the historical period from the 7th century to the end of the 20th century. The *raison d'être* of these cities were to be polities and trading centres, connected with outside world, points of exchange between people, goods, ideas, between seas, rivers and land.

There is no research in the urban discipline about the structure of the VSEACC, I propose to use the anthropological model of urban definition developed by O'Connor(1983) as framework of analysis of its structure and evolution. As he postulates, in Southeast

Asia, urban fabrication is a corollary of social structures. To describe the urban form it is then necessary to understand these structures and spatialise them. This will set the background for a brief sketch of the history of Brunei Kampong Ayer.

Keywords: *Water Villages, Kampong Ayer, Southeast Asia, Traditional city*

The Southeast Asian City

The Southeast Asian coastal landscape, "the thinly-populated coastlines of the large insular and peninsular land masses of Malaysia, the Philippines, and western Indonesia" (Bronson, 1977), historically has been the theatre of the construction of trading cities and polities of particular form and purpose. These have been studied in fields such as Ethno-history, archaeology, sociology, anthropology (Brown, 1976, Tagliacozzo, 2007, Reid, 1980, Manguin, 1991a, Colombijn, 2003). Anthology and models of the VSEACC have been produced in the economic and social fields (O'Connor, 1983, Junker, 1994, Winzeler, 1976, Bronson, 1977). This paper aims at explaining and spatialising the structures and the evolution of urban form at the centre of these polities with Brunei Kampong Ayer as a case study.

Bronson (1977;p.51) in a seminal article stated "we are dealing with a social and economic system quite different from those we consider normal in the heartlands of other civilisations."¹ Tagliacozzo (2007;p.912) describes a recurring particular urban pattern in Southeast Asia that follows four factors: "first, the international orientation of the region; second, the dual functionality of port and political entity; third, urban adaptation as a mechanism of survival; and fourth, a notable balance of centrifugal politics and centripetal economics". He argues that these factors set these cities apart from the great Indian and Chinese cities that are either centres of polities or centres of commerce, often not open to the world and not ready to assimilate changes for their survivals.

The important characteristics of these states, and cities, were their amorphous areas of

control and establishment (Manguin, 2002) and their impermanence (O'Connor, 1983, Colombijn, 2003). Manguin (1991b) in his exegesis of ancient Malay texts emphasised the notion that the Sultan / King was the religious but also the physical centre of state, without mentioning the specific location or extent of his dominion.

Khoo (1977) explained that in the Malay world the state was not a territory but an institution of the Sultan / King. The city went where the rulers were. Winstedt (1934) stated that since the cities were mainly composed of buildings made of thatch and bamboos, they were easy to move. Both time and water have washed away the abandoned settlements of these state's centres built with perishable materials. Along the river of Brunei's capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, Kampong Ayer is the last remaining example of these 'centres of polities'. Over the course of 1300 years, the locations of the villages and the religious and political centres of the state were established in different locations on the same fluvial system (Hughes-Hallett, 1940, Nicholl, 1983). This river ecosystem, deep marshland, swamp, forested hills, and generous fishing grounds are constant along the mile of its course, which allows an undifferentiated location of settlement when the need for relocation occurred. Kampong Ayer is in fact a collection of villages, each of different function: traders, nobility, fishermen, thatch harvester, etc... The location and activities the villages could change over the time (Brown, 1970, Ibrahim, 1971).

The following section will formulate a framework for the analysis of the reason of settlement, evolution of the social structure of the VSEACC and its relationship to the urban

¹ Bronson's article is the first work to interrogate the forms and reasons for settlement of early Southeast Asian coastal cities.

² O'Connor developed his theory in opposition of the work of economists, in this context, a definition of the city by an economist is proposed as an introduction of this section.

environment with reference to O'Connor's (1983) theory of indigenous Urbanism.

Theory of Southeast Asian indigenous Urbanism

In this part I define and test the definition O'Connor's Theory of Southeast Asian indigenous Urbanism. First I describe his definition of the Southeast Asia city, second, I describe the items that are important in it, and third, I explain the different sequences he determined in the structure and evolution of the indigenous urbanism. In the last part of this section I offer a revised definition to explain the urban form of Kampong Ayer. This will lead to the final part of this article where it will be used as a framework for the analysis of Brunei's Capital.

O'Connor's definition of the city

A definition of the city could be made accordingly to Weber: "Economically defined the city is settlement of inhabitants of which live primarily off trade and commerce rather than agriculture" (1966; p.66)². Certainly the Southeast Asia city is the perfect example of that definition as suggested in the previous section. However, O'Connor claims that it is not the market or the population density that makes the Southeast Asian city but "it is indigenous historically conditioned symbols that I call Community and Hierarchy"(1983; p.11). Thus his major point is that "Together as

idioms³ and institution, community and hierarchy shape the city's meaning and give meaning to urban life"(1983; p.5).

O'Connor proposes a definition of the Southeast Asian city:

1- How is the city organised? Community and hierarchy are both predominant idioms of social relations and the institutional core of the city.

2- What holds the city together? They share symbols of community and hierarchy create solidarity...

3- How does the city rule the country? People accept that the city is the centre of civilization, the once Indic and now modern way of the world (1983; p.11).

Elements of the city

What is the idiom of community? For our study it is important to recall two specific social aspects of the Southeast Asian world: the bilateral kinship system of social organisation and the mosaic of ethnic groups that occupies a land very sparsely populated. Bilateral kinship means that multiple choices of ties among large number of possibilities could be made⁴. The composition of groups could evolve very fluidly. This creates fluid boundaries and multiple possibilities between groups. Kinship is a form of community. Ethnic diversity also played a very important role in the creation of the city. O'Connor postulated that it had a repercussion for the appearance and the nature of cities. The VSEACC contains many ethnic groups but also in the economic system the city, it relied on many different ethnic groups for its survival. In the city, ethnic idiom could be considered as operating as idiom of

³ Idiom: "a coherent way of symbolizing what people think, say, and do." O'CONNOR, R. A. 1983. A theory of indigenous Southeast Asian urbanism, Singapore, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. P.5

⁴ This is of course a simplistic definition; refer to Brown for a complete discussion. BROWN, D. E. 1976. Principles of social structure : Southeast Asia, Boulder, Colo., Westview Press.

community because it gathered groups of people that have the same customs. As a conclusion, ethnicity and family idiom created communities that could live next to one another and so are building the indigenous cities.

These previous discussion sets out the elements for O'Connor theoretical discussion on how the Southeast Asian indigenous city appeared, is constituted and has evolved. Following is a presentation of the different sequences of evolution he defined in his theory.

Stages of evolution

For O'Connor, in the first stage in Southeast Asia settlement, the society follows Durkheim (1964) division of labour, it is of mechanical organisation, it is composed of similar segments that share the same principles. Sameness makes association possible. At this stage, there is no urban centre, just groups of kinship with fluid composition. Later, in the different cultures of Southeast Asia, came a leader of community. This leader acted also symbolically like a fathered figure. A second layer of hierarchy appeared; there were then two layers of communities. This leader had to attract followers and retain them; followers had the possibility of residence. These processes of attraction became ritual, almost religious. The leader became the centre of small urban group, the centre of a community of community. But such groups could not grow too much, since the choices for the followers were open. This was a very fluid notion of belonging to groups. Also these groups were competing for the same constituents.

The next stage of evolution occurred when the society became even more complex. O'Connor(1983) uses Durkheim's theory to define that the society transformed into organic society: "system of different organs each with special role, and which they are formed of differentiated parts. Each part of the society is so specialized that it cannot be split of and lives alone" (Durkheim, 1964; p.181). Complex societies are tied together by the division of labour. In Southeast Asia, this stage occurred when the Indic principles of social organisation spread. They added another hierarchy level at the top of actual system. This added level has to be related to religion, a link to cosmos to be accepted, to unify competing communities. The new leader, the Raja, brought together groups of community. It created a symbolic centre that also translated into a centre for urbanisation. O'Connor stated that communities did not disappear under the influence of Indianization, but became encompassed in this new system. Islam did not disrupt that order. Islam idiom set the Sultan like the Raja at the top of spiritual and terrestrial world, building also on family values one fundamental value of idiom of community.

The following stage was Colonialism:

It changed Southeast Asian cities profoundly, and yet these changes were set within much deeper continuities. Immigration, pluralism, the primate city and ethnic division of labour were not new to indigenous urbanism. City remained the centre of wealth, power and prestige. As in the past, urban is centred social hierarchy. Idiom of modernity was institutionalized in the educational system and its end product, bureaucracy, it also

⁵ The composition of the villages presented here is a simplification of the reality.

⁶ There are many debates about Brunei history pre European constant contact. We chose to refer to the work of Father Nicholl unless further notification.

became a much wider idiom of hierarchy throughout the society (O'Connor, 1983; p.71).

The last stage was modernism and the road to independence. Here the study needs to interpret O'Connor works in Brunei context. The countries studied in 1983 were searching their path into independence but in Brunei the colonial ruler handed the power back to the monarchy. The elite, the traditional nobility is placed at the top of bureaucracy, not by education as elsewhere, but by community and hierarchy levels. In the modern city, community is recreated: to access a type of work, one has to belong to a community, same village, friends... And the need for differentiated hierarchy levels remains the same. Following O'Connor theory, once again community and hierarchy level has returned to the city, Indic idioms again are ruling its development.

The theory in Brunei Context

How do the idioms of hierarchy and community materialise spatially? If we analyse at Kampong Ayer structure, we know that the villages represent a grouping of different families, or kinship, or groups of people having the same economical occupation (Saint John, 1863). We can identify that the city is centred on the "cosmological" layer of hierarchy represented by the Sultan located in its palace. Kampong Ayer is an aggregation of villages of complex composition that are drawn together as followers of the Sultan that makes the trade possible. Clearly then the spatialisation of the idioms of hierarchy and community can be

identified in the composition of the villages. They are either the product of a 'head man' (powerful trader, high rank Noble etc.) that has gathered his kin and follower's kin or ethnic groups that are settled in groups⁵.

Thus I have outlined O'Connor's theory and established its relevance for the analysis of the structure and condition of evolution of the VSEACC. In the next part I will use it as a framework of the analysis of Brunei's Kampong Ayer.

A short Sketch of Brunei Urban Structure and condition of changes

Many legends of north Borneo relates how Alak Betatar became the legendary founder of Brunei monarchy, Nicholl (1983) estimated the year 692⁶. Saunders (1994) interprets local legend and concluded that a group of people with superior power, almost mystical, had a coherent organisation, and they subjugated the indigenous inhabitant with a combination of power and offering. Previous studies postulate that they were families of high rank escaping the collapse of the indianized Funan empire⁷. For our study this implies: first that from its beginning Brunei's culture included Indic idioms. Secondly, since the direct lineage of Alak Betatar to the current Sultan Hassannal Bolkiah has been established⁸, then every successive site of the polity's centre can be seen as a displacement of an urban centre.

The first Brunei thalassocracy was between 692 to 835, the capital's name was known as

⁷ See SAUNDERS, G. E. 1994. *A history of Brunei*, Kuala Lumpur; New York, Oxford University Press. And BROWN, D. E. 1970. *Brunei: the structure and history of a Bornean Malaya sultanate*, [Brunei], Printed by The Star Press [for] Brunei Museum.

⁸ The official version of the family tree is challenged by scholars. See SAUNDERS (1994)

⁹ Thalassocracy is a dominion over the seas, as in exploration, trade, or colonization.

Shrivajia in Arabic texts and its approximate location was in the mouth of the Lawas river near Brunei's bay. The settlement had a great influence in the region but was of small size (Nicholl, 1983). Brunei's power faded to the rise of the Majapahit Empire but raised again when the latter was about to collapse. The second era of prosperity lasted between 1000 and 1350, its capital, known as Po'Li in the Chinese archives, was located in the Brunei's bay on the mouth of the main river.

The structure of the city can be accounted in the next period of expansion and prosperity that spanned from 1405 to 1650. Brunei adopted Islam as a religion, the capital moved in many places to finally settle in Kampong Ayer around 1660 (Brown, 1970). Magellan's chronicler Pigafetta (2007) made a succinct description of Brunei's capital in 1525. There were 25,000 people, on both side of the river. The king was Moor and further upstream a larger settlement was lead by a pagan king. The part of the city that was on land had a wall that protected the Sultan's palace and the families of the noble. The city on the water, the 'Venice of the East' was built on stilts and had four wards on which traders were conducting business. When Harrison (1956) conducted Kota Batu's archaeological excavation, he discovered the remains of a wall protecting a settlement on the hills that date from that period.

This analysis shows that the pattern of settlement corresponds by O'Connor's theory. A capital with a polity centre set on the hills with clear settings of Indianized civilisation, the Mandalay¹⁰ organisation of the King on upper position.

The adoption of Islam did not change the cosmological configuration until the capital

moved to Kampong Ayer, when the palace was established on the water and cosmological elements were not used. In the village structure, as stated by Nicholl (1983), the structure of the empire and the culture would not have change from the time which they will be accounted in the 18th century. As previously stated, there were wards held by traders, and certain wards were crafts producer. Reid (1980) described how villages in the 16th century in Southeast Asia were organized around a Head Man with his family and protector of slaves and other families. This configuration certainly applies to our study. A continual pattern of cultural absorption and movement of capital can be observed, but always the idioms of community and hierarchy remained at the centre of urban form and evolution.

Between 1660 to 1910, a long period of decline occurred. In 1904, McArthur saved the monarchy ordering the remains of the empire to become a residency of the British Empire. In 1911, the census counted less than 10,000 souls in a little more than 900 houses in Kampong Ayer (Great Britain. Colonial and Brunei, 1910). For a century now, the successive authority, (the residency then the restored monarchy), pushed for the abandonment of the water settlement. The Istana¹¹ moved onto land in 1910 then moved again in 1980 in the outskirts of the city. The population really started to leave the settlement in the early 1980's. Surveys from 1930, 1955, 1982 reveal the process of transformation of the urban form. The villages grow within their boundaries, in a clustered manner. Informants¹² detail how and where new houses will be built: the new construction will accommodate the offspring of a kin and will be located in direct connection

¹⁰ For a definition of the Mandalay concept of settlement see WHEATLEY, P. 1971. *The pivot of the four quarters; a preliminary enquiry into the origins and character of the ancient Chinese city*, Chicago, Aldine Pub. Co. and WIDODO, J. 2004. *The boat and the city : Chinese diaspora and the architecture of Southeast Asian coastal cities*, Singapore, Chinese Heritage Centre : Marshall Cavendish Academic.

with the head of the kinship. The authorisation will be granted by the head of the village. Once again, idiom of community and hierarchy were controlling the growth of the urban development.

This sketch of Brunei history shows that during the 1300 years, the villages were the spatial materialisation of the community idioms and two levels of hierarchy, the third level being the Sultan located in the istana.

This establishes that O'Connor theory can be used as a framework of analysis of the VSEACC in the urban field.

Conclusion

In the first part of this article I have established the specificity of the Southeast Asian city. In

the second part I have presented O'Connor theory of indigenous Urbanism and argued in the third part that it could be used to understand the structure and the evolution of the VSEACC.

The finding of this paper is that the VSEACC is an amorphous dynamic urbanism. Its spatial materialisation is a compound of social structures encapsulated in levels of hierarchy that are in continual transformation at regular intervals of time. Physical transformations are due to continual absorption and then hybridation of new political and social structure.

Authorities that presides over the destiny of Kampong Ayer should consider the vernacular pattern of development of the VSEACC. They should consider innovative rules that would preserve the extraordinarily creativity of each community that is at the centre of the creation of their own living environment.

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¹¹Istana : Sultan's palace.

¹²This information was obtained by interviews during a research trip in Brunei.

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