THE PRAHUS OF THE SULU ZONE

By Jim Warren

INTRODUCTION

The Sulu Sultanate lay at a most strategic point for the maritime trade of the nineteenth century. China, the Philippines and Mindanao were situated to the north. Borneo to the southwest, and to the southeast, Sulawesi and the Moluccas. The geopolitical and commercial advantages inherent in the Sultanate's location in this 'Zone' were both enviable and unique. This maritime trading zone was to provide a sociocultural context for inter-societal relations and commerce within the Sultanate and beyond after 1780. By fitting into the patterns of European trade with China in the late eighteenth century, the Sulu Sultanate established itself as a powerful commercial centre. The Sultanate's geographical position in relation to Asian routes of trade and exchange and its abundant natural resources for export to China attracted the attention of the West. The maritime and jungle products to be found within the Sulu Zone and in the area of its trading partners — tripang (sea slug), bird's nest, wax, camphor, and mother of pearl — were new products for redressing the British East India Company's adverse trade balance on the Canton tea market with China. The trade which Sulu established with Bengal, Manila, Macao, and Canton, and later Labuan and Singapore, initiated large-scale importation of weapons, luxury goods, and foodstuffs. Taosug (Sulu) merchants on the coast and their descendants developed an extensive redistributive trade with the Bugis of Samarinda and Berau to the south, which enabled the Sulu Sultanate to consolidate its dominance over the outlying areas of the Zone.

Slave-raiding became fundamental to the Sulu Sultanate as its economy expanded and in the period 1768-1848 contributed significantly towards making Sulu one of the most powerful states in Southeast Asia. As the Sultanate organised its economy around the collection and distribution of marine and jungle produce, there was a greater need for large scale recruitment of manpower in Sulu's economy to do the labour-intensive work of procurement. Slaving activity carried out by the Iuran and Balangingi Samal developed to meet the accentuated demands of external trade. Jolo, the seat of the Sulu Sultanate, became the nerve centre for the co-ordination of long-distance slave raiding. From the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, Southeast Asia felt the full force of the slave raiders of the Sulu Zone. They earned a reputation as daring, fierce marauders who jeopardised the maritime trade routes, subsistence agriculture, and settlement patterns of Southeast Asia, and dominated the capture and transport of slaves to the Sulu Sultanate. The Sulu aristocracy depended for its prosperity on the labour of slaves and sea raiders, who fished for tripang, secured pearls, and manned the fleets. Trade created the material and social con-
ditions for the large-scale recruitment of slaves and the exploitation of dependent communities. At the same time, the labour of captive and tributary peoples provided the raw materials for expanding trade. More than anything else it was this source and application of labour that was to give Sulu its distinctive predatory character in the eyes of Europeans — past and present — as a 'pirate and slave state'.

THE PRAHUS

The trading and raiding activities which forged the Sulu Zone in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were predicated upon specialized craft. Three basic prahu types were associated with Iranun/Samal maritime activities: lanong (joanga), the large, heavily-armed Iranun vessel; garay (panco or penjajap) a raiding ship of lighter construction used by the Balangingi as their principal craft; and salisipan (vinta, baroto, or rakap), a canoe-like vessel with or without outriggers employed as an auxiliary craft for inshore raiding.

Boat-building was an art in the Sulu Zone. The shell of Iranun and Samal vessels was built up from the keel [a hollowed-out log] without nails. Fibre lashings were used to bind clinker planks and ribs together to form the hull. Certain communities specialized in building prahus and shipwrights transmitted their techniques from one generation to the next. Thomas Forrest observed the construction of many lanong at Cotabato along the banks of the Pulangi river in Mindanao:

In that part of the town .... live a few Chinese; but many Magindanao mechanics, vessel builders and merchants: They build their vessels of various dimensions, and employ them in trading from one part of the coast to the other; often in cruising amongst the [Bisayan] Philippine Islands, for slaves and plunder. They cruise also as far as the coast of Java, and the islands of Celebes and Borneo ..... These vessels are always very long for the breath, and very broad for their draft of water.


The Magindanao also constructed vessels on the coast of Sibuguey bay in 1775: "Here (Sibuguey bay) ...... are built many stout ve~"-els, good timber being in great plenty".3

By 1790 the centre of boat-building activity in the Zone had shifted away from Cotabato to the Sulu archipelago. Basilan and nearby islands were especially rich in shipbuilding materials, and the Samal of Maluso became celebrated boat-builders.4 Jolo island itself was well supplied with timber, and Parang was the most noted place on the island for making garay.5 The Samal diaspora of 1848-52 forced many boat-builders to move south and relocate on Tawi-Tawi. The transport of excellent hardwood timber from the forests to the bays for prahu manufacture was easy on this narrow island. Balimbing, Banaran and Bilitan on Tawi-Tawi, and Sibutu island were highly reputed places for making large prahus in the second half of the nineteenth century.6

The extraordinary water-colour sketches of Monle1 done in 1890 of the vessels of the Sulu Zone are based on models built by iraigenous craftsmen that were brought back to Spain by members of scientific and naval expeditions throughout the nineteenth century. The sketches present a wealth of nautical and ethnographic detail concerning the proportions, materials, construction, and type of ships, and crews employed by various ethnic groups that is lacking in the historical literature.

The Lanong

The lanong (joanga) was made for long cruises and it was this ship which composed the flotillas that raided the Straits Settlements under the leadership of the Iranun of Tempasuk and Reteh. The length averaged 80-90 feet, and the hull breadth 20 feet amidship. A dug-out keel formed the lower hull, with sides constructed of planks. The stern and bow were built up and overhung the keel. The lanong had one large mainsail forward and two tripod sheers that could be raised or lowered on a moment's notice. Much of the interior was occupied by a fighting platform and cabin. The latter served as the nakodah's quarters and a

3. Ibid., p.196.
4. Statement of Mariano Sevilla in Expediente 12, 4 October, 1836, Philippine National Archive, Mindanao/Sulu 1803-1890; Apuntes sobre la Isla de Basilan 1892, Society of Jesus Archives of the Philippine Province, XIV, p.32; Beyer-Holleman collection of original sources in Philippine Customary Law, Vol.1, paper 160, No.1, Livingston, "Constabulary Monograph of the Province of Sulu", p.5.

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powder magazine. The vessel depicted carried 34 oars a side, double-banked, and steered with two rudders. Armament consisted of a strong bulwark at the bow, mounting a long gun (6-24 pounder) as well as several swivel guns. Shields were fixed along the side of the platform, and many lanong carried a boarding bridge. The crew consisted of 150-200 men, with the warrior-sailors occupying the upper platform. A triangular flag of the commander was affixed to the stern. By 1830 the lanong had been replaced by the swifter, lightly armed Balangingi garay.

The Garay

The Balangingi garay was a beautifully built vessel of wood, bamboo, nipa and rattan. The size of the largest garay was 80 feet in length, and the breadth of the beam was 20 feet with a projecting stage of one foot along the sides. The garay, very sharp fore and aft with a great beam, drew only from three to five feet of water. The large beam enabled the vessel to carry an enormous rectangular sail on a tall, collapsible tripod of bamboo and move over reef-studded seas at better than ten knots. The garay was also oar propelled, and thirty to sixty oars were used on the big vessels. The upper tier of rowers sat on the projecting stage. The garay was either open or decked with split cane from stem to stern. The deck of nibong palm was cut into fixed sections so that any part of it could be taken up. For armament a fixed gun was carried in a bulwark at the bow. The crew of the largest garay numbered upward of 100 men and the smallest 25-30 men. Because the garay sailed well, and was light enough to be rowed swiftly, it possessed the manoeuvrability and striking power necessary for inshore raiding in the nineteenth century.

The Salisipan

The salisipan was a long, low, narrow, oar-propelled vessel that was easily hauled ashore. It was open, provided with an oar at the stern for steering, and the crew used either oars or sculls. The salisipan carried one mast with a single square sail. The largest were 30-35 feet long, and were manned from the crew of the garay to which the salisipan belonged. One could be sure that when a salisipan was encountered, a garay was not far off. In calm weather the Balangingi Samal ran along the shore in salisipan or ascended small rivers, relying on their rapidity of movement. This craft proved a dangerous enemy for all coastal peoples of Southeast Asia.
PLATE I—A Joanga (Lanong), an Iranun warship of the late eighteenth century with three banks of oars under full sail. Upward of 100 feet long, these vessels were provided with large bamboo outriggers, both sides were rowed and paddled by more than 190 men. The biggest Iranun slave raids in Southeast Asia were directed against the Philippine archipelago.
At the beginning of the nineteenth century Brunei was within easy range of the Balangingi Samal, and a squadron of Garay hovered about southern Palawan from the middle of March to the end of November to seize Brunei inhabitants and cut off trade to north Borneo. The attacks were an important factor contributing to Brunei's regional decline. The Balangingi were alleged to have a saying that 'It is difficult to catch fish but easy to catch Borneans.'
Plate III — Salisapan.
Plate IV — Lanong.
Plate V — Garay.
The Sulu Zone

SULU SEA

Cagayan de Sulu
Jolo
Balangingi

CELEBES SEA

Bangka

Trading Centre
- Taueg
- Buginese

Land over 500 metres
Land over 1,500 metres

0 75 150 km 300
Slave Raiding in South East Asia
Slave Raiding in the Philippines

* Raid Prone

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PACIFIC OCEAN

SOUTH CHINA SEA