

The Sulu Zone : Commerce and the Evolution of a Multi-ethnic Polity, 1768-1898

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THE SULU ZONE: COMMERCE AND EVOLUTION OF A MULTI-ETHNIC POLITY, 1768-1898.

by *Jim WARREN*

"It seems to me inaccurate to dispose of such Indonesian States as Palembang, Siak, Achin, or Johore with the qualifications corrupt despotisms, pirate states, and slave states, hotbeds of political danger and decay. Inaccurate, if for no other reason, because despotism, piracy and slavery are historical terms, and history is not written with value judgements. To choose examples from the field of Dutch history, the town of Flushing based its existence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in no small measure on privateering and smuggling, and Middleburg's renowned trading company of 1720 occupied itself with privateering, smuggling to and from Spanish America and slave trade ... The chief point is something else; what was the power — political-maritime-economic — of the harbour principalities."

J.C. Van Leur

Of the many topics in the history of the Indonesian Archipelago, attention should be drawn especially to those which concern Asian social and economic history. Despite the stress Van Leur gave to illuminating the study of Indonesian trade and society four decades ago ⁽¹⁾, few since then have looked beyond the European experience ⁽²⁾. In the northeast-

⁽¹⁾ See J.C. Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society* (The Hague, 1967).

⁽²⁾ Notable exceptions are the significant studies that have been published in the past decade on the Sultanates of Aceh (1607-1636) and Johor (1641-1728) which use a vast array of sources to portray the cosmopolitan urbanism of ruler and merchant in the maritime Malay world of the 17th Century. See, Denys Lombard, *Le Sultanat d'Atjeh au temps d'Iskandar Muda, 1607-1636* (Paris, 1967); and Leonard Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor, 1641-1728* (Kuala Lumpur, 1975).

tern corner of the archipelago historians continue to pursue the 'trade and empire' approach, while the region's separate history remains in Van Leur's words, 'grey and undifferentiated' (3). Significant among the neglected aspects of its history is a reconstruction of the character of commerce and power. To date the expansion of external trade and the growing incidence of slave raiding in the region at the end of the 18th Century have claimed the attention of most historians only when those social forces collided with or were affected by European policy (4). Political and administrative in preference to social and economic, the histories of few western scholars have dealt carefully with the interrelationship of commerce, marauding and servitude in a Southeast Asian harbour realm.

In a recent study I have drawn upon anthropological concepts, particularly the idea of a 'segmentary state', European documents and local accounts to examine the economic vitality of the independent Sulu Sultanate's role as entrepot for European as well as Asian commerce in the China trade from the late 18th to the end of the 19th Century (5). The Sultanate provided an ideal basis for such a study on several grounds. Solid anthropological fieldwork had been done over the course of the last two decades among the Taosug of Jolo, the Balangingi Samal, the Samal Laut, and the Yakan of Basilan in the Sulu Archipelago and Northeast Borneo, and among the Maranao and Subanun of Mindanao (6). Without the ethnographic materials that have been published as a result of this fieldwork, it would have been difficult for me to assess the value of European historical sources and place them in context.

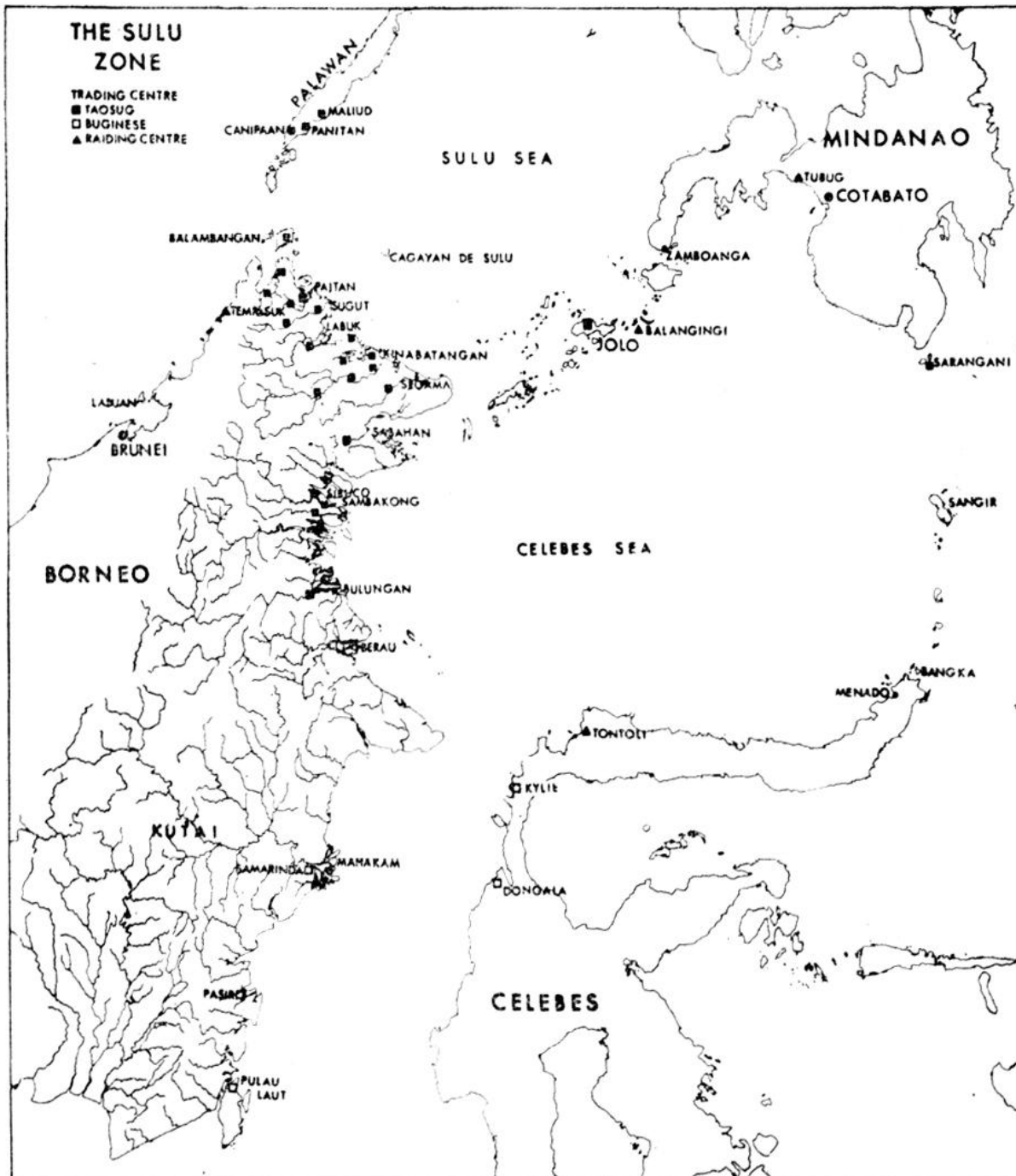
There were ample sources for the study of the commercial-marauding patterns of the Sulu Sultanate in the period 1768-1898, but they were dispersed in several European archives, and in Manila and Jakarta.

(3) Van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society*, p. 153.

(4) See, Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World* (Melbourne; F.W. Cheshire, 1963); Lennox A. Mills, *British Malaya, 1824-1867* (Kuala Lumpur, 1966). pp. 323-324; 328-329; L.R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo* (Hong Kong; Hong Kong University Press, 1970), pp. 5, 39; and Cesar A. Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines* (Quezon City; University of the Philippines Press), Chs. VII, VIII.

(5) See James F. Warren, *Trade, Raid, Slave: The Socio-Economic Patterns of the Sulu Zone, 1770-1898* (unpublished Ph.D thesis, A.N.U., 1975).

(6) Extensive ethnological research has been conducted among the Taosug by Thomas Kiefer; among the Balangingi Samal by William Geoghegan; among the Samal Laut by Harry Nimmo, Clifford Sather and Carol Warren; among the Yakan by Carol Maloney; among the Maranao by David Barradas; and among the Subanun by Charles Frake.



While much of the material in English on the Sulu polity had been exploited (although only from the point of view of European policy and trade in the Indonesian Archipelago), primary source material in Spanish and Dutch archives had been generally neglected. There remained then a need for research into these archival collections to present a coherent picture of Sulu's commercial position from the mid 18th to the late 19th Century.

Among the more important sources I have used are the manuscripts in the archives of Spain (principally Seville) on trade from Manila to the Sulu Sultanate between 1786 and 1848. When compiled and ordered as a time series these documents (particularly the *estados* and *almojarifazgo*) suggest the overall level of commercial activity, shifts in market preferences, and the economic interdependence of Manila and Jolo in the period (7). This data goes far towards rounding out the detailed evidence which Van Leur saw to be lacking for maritime powers in the Indonesian Archipelago. Another interesting source I have drawn upon is the statements of fugitive captives of the Sulu Sultanate which throw very considerable light on the internal processes — the ethnic and social transformations — in the Sulu trading zone during the 19th Century (8).

The Sulu Zone

The Sulu Archipelago bridged two worlds and lay at a most strategic point for the maritime trade of the 19th Century. China, the Philippines and Mindanao were situated to the North, Borneo to the Southwest, and to the Southeast, the Celebes and Moluccas. The Sulu chain of islands separated the autonomous Muslim, maritime world of Eastern Indonesia in the 18th and 19th Centuries from the Philippine Archipelago to the North, agrarian, christianized and administered by Spanish colonial authorities from Manila. The crystallization of Jolo, the capital of the Sulu Sultanate, at the end of the 18th Century as the focal point of a broad system of trade, and centre for the marketing of slaves, outfitting of marauders and defiance of Spanish incursion, was in large measure

(7) See Appendix 5, 'The Manila-Jolo Trade, 1786-1830' in Warren, *The Sulu Zone*, pp. 424-438.

(8) See Appendix 18, 'The Statements of the Fugitive Captives of the Sulu Sultanate, 1836-1864', in Warren, *The Sulu Zone*, pp. 461-482; Two Years (1968-1969) living in a Samal Laut community on the Northeast coast of Borneo, an area once part of the periphery of the Sulu Sultanate, has provided me with a perspective from its edge and an attachment for this maritime world which was the initial impetus for the study.

attributable to its geographical location astride the arterial trade routes near the centre of the Eastern Malaysian seas.

Fundamental to understanding Sulu's political and commercial ascendancy after 1768 is the necessity of interpreting the Sultanate's historical experience within a wider regional framework. To explain social interaction between ethnic groups within the region, I have used the framework of a 'centre-periphery' concept. 'Hinterland' refers not only to the interior of a large land mass such as Mindanao or Borneo but also includes island clusters within the Sulu Archipelago that depended on the port Sultanate at Jolo⁽⁹⁾. This mode of analysis provides a means of interpreting the tensions prevalent in a region where traditional states were defined by varying relationships to the centre rather than fixed geographical frontiers.

I am arguing that in the late 18th and 19th Centuries there existed in the zone comprising the Sulu Archipelago, the Northwest Coast of Borneo, the foreland of Southern Mindanao and the Western Coast of Celebes, a loosely integrated political system that embraced island and coastal populace, maritime, nomadic fishermen and slash and burn agriculturalists of the coastal rim and interior foothills. This network of interpersonal relations which was fluid across time and easily subject to disruption was integrated by the commercial-marauding patterns which came to be focused on Sulu, as the prime redistributive centre for the zone in the late 18th Century.

Commerce and the evolution of a Multi-Ethnic State 1768-1898

Two perspectives have dominated the historiography of the Sulu zone and have tended to obscure the complex but integrated patterns of trade, raiding and slavery. On the one hand the 'decay theory' has presented Muslim marauding as a symptom of the decline of trade and the deterioration of the Malayo-Muslim State⁽¹⁰⁾. On the other, raiding is interpreted within the framework of the 'Moro Wars' as retaliation against Spanish colonialism and religious incursion⁽¹¹⁾. Both theories have underestimated the relationship of slavery and raiding activity to the economy of the Sulu Sultanate.

(9) The idea of a distant assemblage of islands constituting the hinterland of a port town was developed by Spoehr in the context of contemporary culture change in the Pacific. Alexander Spoehr, 'Port Town and Hinterlands in the Pacific Islands,' *American Anthropologist*, LXII (1960), pp. 568-592.

(10) Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World*, pp. 20, 146-185.

(11) Majul, *Muslims in the Philippines*, pp. 107-316.

My hypothesis concentrates on the social forces generated within the Sulu Sultanate by the China trade, a trade which dominated so much of the economic life of Southeast Asia — namely, the advent of organized, long-distance slave raiding and the incorporation of foreign peoples on a large scale into Sulu society. Under the stimulus of the China trade the Sulu Sultanate experienced tremendous economic growth. The period 1768-1898 witnessed a florescence of political and economic life which accompanied the large-scale infusion of captives, European trade goods and arms. During this period when regional trade was firmly in the hands of the Taosug (the dominant ethnic group), Jolo became the common market for the zone at the expense of its erstwhile more powerful neighbours, Cotabato and Brunei.

Trade created the zone. In their efforts to obtain *tripang*, birds-nest, wax and camphor for Chinese consumption, Taosug *datus* forged trade pacts with tribal peoples of East Borneo and Bugis traders to the South (see map). Captives and trade commodities were introduced along the rivers by Taosug and their trading partners. Taosug who intermarried with tribal people and lived at the middle reaches of the rivers on Borneo's Northeast coast formed a commercial link between ethnic groups at the periphery and their Taosug kindred at the centre. The unprecedented demands of international trade for marine/jungle produce created the need for large-scale recruitment of labour in Sulu's economy. As the China trade grew so did the demand for manpower to do the labour intensive work of procurement. Driven by their patron's desire for wealth and power, the Iranun and Samal surged out of the Sulu Archipelago in search of slaves. Within two decades their raids encompassed all of island Southeast Asia. Their well-armed *prahus* scoured the coasts of the Indonesian world and sailed Northwards into the Philippines. They combined with other Iranun and Samal speaking group living at satellite stations on the coasts of Borneo, Celebes and Sumatra in the course of these raids. Navigating with the monsoon, their *prahus* returned to Jolo loaded with captives to be exchanged to Taosug for rice, cloth and luxury wants.

By the dawn of the 19th Century slavery and slave raiding were fundamental to the state. The Taosug aristocracy depended for its prosperity on the labour of slaves and sea raiders, who fished for *tripang*, secured pearls and manned the fleets. The Balangingi formed the bulk of the crews of the slave raiders. The infamous reputation Sulu acquired for slave mongering and piracy in the 19th Century is attributable to the activities of the Balangingi, an 'emergent society' increasingly composed of *Indio* (Filipino) captives and their descendants who were brought to the Sulu Archipelago and in many cases assimilated within a single generation to become the predators of their own people.

The raiding system enabled the Sultanate to incorporate vast numbers of people from the Philippines and Eastern Indonesia into the population. Traffic in slaves reached its peak in Sulu in the period 1800-1848, founded on the basis of trade with China and the West ⁽¹²⁾. The process was dynamic. Trade demands kept forcing the Sultanate to incorporate more people, rewarding those *datu*s who provided the most produce and forcing them to acquire more wealth-producing persons if they wanted to stay on top of their rivals. Thus, the volume of produce collected kept rising, forcing up the number of people needed to procure it, and providing *datu*s with the arms necessary to exercise control over the trade net.

The period from 1768-1848 had been one of growth and cohesion for the Sulu Sultanate. It put up stubborn opposition to European Imperialism and proved more than a match for Western powers. This changed after mid-century. With co-operation among European navies and more effective use of steam vessels, the Sulu world began to shrink. The trade of the region began to deteriorate. The *datu*'s main source of wealth was his following. The destruction of Balangingi and Jolo by the Spanish between 1846 and 1852 placed serious constraints on the ability of Taosug to retain control over the Balangingi Samal, their principal source of slaves. The grooved cannon and gunpowder of the West which had first attracted Iranun and Samal to Jolo as clients and suppliers of captives were now operating to drive them apart. There was a progressive fragmentation of Samal groups because of Spanish incursions and disruption of the Taosug economy.

The collapse of the system only came with the concerted effort of Spain to end Sulu's autonomy. In the 1870's the Spanish navy waged a campaign to destroy systematically all *prahu* shipping in the Sulu archipelago and force the Taosug to settle down in villages as agriculturalists. This policy and the immigration of large numbers of straits Chinese to Sulu, in spite of — or perhaps because of — the naval campaign, had disastrous consequences for the Taosug. They were forced to curtail their commercial activities and become dependent on the merchant immigrants with contacts in Singapore. The traditional redistributive role was taken away and the zone disintegrated ⁽¹³⁾.

(12) I have estimated that the number of slaves imported over the period 1770-1870 varied from a low estimate of 201,350 to a high estimate of 302,575. See Warren, *The Sulu Zone*, pp. 344-347.

(13) Vestiges of the traditional pattern of trading and raiding persist to this day. These patterns, now labelled 'smuggling' continue to operate across national boundaries now dividing this once integrated zone.