

The Transformation of Urban Structure after the Plantation Establishment in East Sumatera 1863-1942

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Abstract: There were many "traditional port cities" in East Sumatera, such as Tanjung Pura in the Sultanate of Langkat, Labuhan in the Sultanate of Deli, Rantau Panjang in the Sultanate of Serdang, Tanjung Beringin in the Sultanate of Bedagai, Bandar Khalifah in the Sultanate of Padang, Tanjung Balai in the Sultanate of Asahan, and Siak Sri Indrapura in the Sultanate of Siak. The location of the ports generally located on the riverbanks, either large or small. These traditional cities underwent some changes after the plantation establishment, from riverside cities to in the middle of plantations. New cities emerged after the plantation were formed or initiated by the planters and Dutch colonial government in East Sumatera. The purpose of the establishment was to make the cities the administrative center of the government and plantation. This paper discusses how the state of the traditional cities before the plantation establishment and how the new cities emerged after the plantation establishment in East Sumatera.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Malay urban structure in East Sumatra was originally a port or *Bandar* area with a power structure. *Bandar* or traditional ports lied on the riverbanks. However, this structure changed when plantations established in East Sumatra. The economic development of plantations began to occur since the last four decades of the 19th century where many changes ensued in East Sumatra. The expansion had turned the face of East Sumatra from a wilderness into a plantation area, making this area as the most developed areas outside Java, which was later known as *het dollar landsch* (dollar land). These changes were very influential on the pattern of life of local residents; among them was the existence of new cities which originally were only ordinary villages.

The strategically located villages at the crossroads and were close to the train station would later be transformed into new cities. The implications of these changes were also very influential on the port as a center of economic activity, government, and culture of the local people. Port as a traditional city then lost ground due to the construction of roads and railways.

This was due to economic activity shifting from the river to the land which caused the traditional ports were relatively less needed. From the description above, this paper will discuss how the state of traditional Malay urban structures prior to the presence of plantations and the development of land transport and the emergence of new cities that were deliberately formed by the colonial government as the center of the economy and the new government.

2 METHOD

The technique of collecting primary and secondary data are conducted through observation or direct survey to research object and searching supporting data to libraries and institutions that were considered to be the source of data, for example the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia; National Library of Indonesia, North Sumatra Provincial Library and Achives and Tengku Lukman Sinar Library; this stage is

conducted to collect archives, books, publications / magazines and other materials related to transportation and river. The data analysis method applied is the historical and archaeological analysis method that aims to study and explore facts or experiences and developments of the past by trying to draw conclusions and make interpretations of the data from the events. The main data include data in the form of archives, books, reports, and so forth that most of which are still in Dutch. While supporting data obtained from direct visits or field observations by visiting the old cities and new cities that emerged after the plantation establishment in East Sumatera. After the data collection are complete, the next step is to verify the data that have been obtained and then interpret it into a complete writing.

3 TRADITIONAL CITIES BEFORE THE PLANTATION IN EAST SUMATERA

The traditional cities in East Sumatra were generally the *Bandar* or the port within which there was a Malay power structure. The Malay powers that were formed in East Sumatra prior to the Dutch colonial entry were Langkat, Deli, Serdang, Asahan, and several other small kingdoms. One of the busiest traditional cities was Labuhan Deli, as the central government of Sultanate of Deli. It also served as a port city located half a mile downstream from the river mouth (Veth, 1877). The name *Labuhan* (berth) actually closely related to the name of the Labuhan River which was a river to berth and which also happened to be the other name of the Deli River (Ratna, 2006). This kind of structure was identical to the other traditional Malay kingdoms on Sumatra Island. This system was formed due to the power in the strategic areas or the downstream which were the busy places to hold trade business. The traders from upstream who wished to sell their agricultural or forest goods would be charged with excise tax. The traders from the opposite side who wished to purchase the commodities would also be charged with excise tax. These excise taxes helped establishing the power which over time would form the traditional Malay kingdom (Wells, 1993).

One of the references used to identify traditional Malay cities in East Sumatra was a report from Anderson (1823). In the report, there were depictions or descriptions of every region he visited

including Deli, Serdang, Batubara, Asahan and Bilah. Based on the descriptions, the structures of the power center of the Malay Kingdom or the traditional city of the Malay Kingdom were the royal palaces, *bandar* or ports and densely populated settlements (Anderson, 1840). In his report, some of the areas he visited had been categorized as traditional cities or *Bandar* such as Labuhan in Deli, Tanjung Pura and Pangkalan Bubun in Langkat, Rantau Panjang in Serdang, Kampung Boga in Batubara, Kampung Balei (Tanjung Balai) in Asahan, and some *kampong* (villages) in southern Asahan which all had power centers as well as *Bandar* or traditional ports (Anseb, 1938).

4 THE EMERGENCE OF CITIES AFTER THE PLANTATIONS

The first pioneer of plantation business in East Sumatra was J. Nienhuys. His arrival to Deli after hearing the story of the good quality and the large profits of tobacco plants on the East Coast of Sumatra. This information was obtained through a Surabaya-born Arab named Sayid Abdullah Ibn Umar Bilsagih (Said, 1977). During his first visit to Sumatra, Nienhuys proved it by himself that everything Sayid Abdullah had said about Deli tobacco was true even though the amounts were too small to be commodities. With the help of Sayid Abdullah who gained the trust of the Sultan of Deli, J. Nienhuys finally managed to get a land concession to open a tobacco plantation in Deli. The concession area for the first tobacco plantation was located on the banks of the Deli River, which were about 4,000 *bouw*. This concession was granted for 20 years. During the first 5 years, he was exempt from tax but was required to pay 200 guilders per year after (Kian, 1977).

Tobacco business initially failed and suffered substantial losses, but Nienhuys insisted that Deli land would bring huge profits, bigger than the losses that he had been incurred. Its failure in implementing the wholesale system and the insistence of Van der Arend forced him to open experimental plantation in the 75 ha of land he rented in Tanjung Sepassai. He desperately needed a lot of manpower for this experiment to work on the vast land. The refusal of indigenous peasants forced him to hire some of the *Haji Jawa* and their followers from Penang Island. From this experimental plantation, Nienhuys successfully

produced 25 bales of tobacco worth f 0.48 per pound. His persistence was proved when the tobacco were exported to Rotterdam and later gained high appreciation.

After the contract with *Haji Jawa* ended unsatisfactorily, Nienhuys later brought Chinese coolies from Penang Island and 88 Chinese coolies directly from China near the planting season of 1865. At the end of 1865, they managed to produce 189 bales of good quality tobacco worth f. 2.51 per pound in spite of the fact that they did not have any knowledge about tobacco planting. In 1868, the production cost reached 30,000 guilders but he could make 67,000 guilders. The following year he paid 36,400 guilders and made 87,200 guilders. Nienhuys had proven that tobacco produced in Deli was a very profitable product in the European trading market and made Deli the world's best cigar ingredient (S).

In order to run a larger business, more capital is needed. Therefore, in 1869, Nienhuys founded Deli Maatschappij, the first limited liability company operating in the Dutch East Indies. Furthermore, he established Senembah Maatschappij in 1871 and by the end of 1873, there had been 15 *onderneming*, 13 in Deli and 1 each in Langkat and Serdang. Arendsburg Tabak Mij. and Deli Batavia Maatschappij were later built in 1875 and 1877 respectively. This number continued to grow, until it reached 86 *onderneming* in 1884; 44 in Deli, 20 in Langkat, 9 in Serdang, and 3 in Padang Bedagai. The expansion of *onderneming* in some areas certainly took up a large area and spread out in some areas in East Sumatra. This was due to the fact that there were many investors making investments in the plantation business which caused an impact on economic improvement marked by the establishment of new cities (Volker, 1918).

The colonial government built new cities for the administrative centers of government, economic activity, and the buffer zones or centers of periphery (the *onderneming* in the hinterland). The colonial cities were usually built on crossroads of roads, railways, and rivers. Medan, for instance, originated from the construction of Deli Maatschappij office in 1880 on the banks of the Deli River near the railway station and the highway leading to Belawan. Starting from here, Medan later developed into a major city in the Residency of East Sumatra. With similar patterns, other colonial cities were built, such as Binjai, Tebing Tinggi, Kisaran, Pematang Siantar and Rantau Prapat, in addition to other small

cities like Lubuk Pakam, Sungai Rampah, Pancur Batu, Bangun Purba, and so on.

The emergence of colonial cities in strategic places, largely due to the construction of roads and railways, had great implications for the existence of traditional port cities. The cutting of the old channels with rivers as the main mode of transport resulted in the changes of trade routes. If prior to the construction of roads and railways river became the main alternative where all economic activities were conducted, then afterwards its role was largely taken over by land transport. In fact, the source of income of the traditional rulers was their hegemony over the river. As a result, economic profits were dwindling and the roles of traditional rulers were waning. Along with this, some traditional cities suffered setbacks; some even moved their power centers close to newly built colonial cities. Sultanate of Deli, for instance, Labuhan in the downstream of Deli River to the more upstream area of Medan Putri, moved alongside the newly developed Medan in 1887. Afterwards, Labuhan then lost ground (Sinar, 1986).

Sultanate of Serdang also had to move his palace from Rantau Panjang in the downstream of the Ular River, not to Lubuk Pakam but to Galuh Perbaungan, a more upstream place in 1886 (Syarifuddin, 2003). Along with this, the abandoned Rantau Panjang also suffered a setback. Later, King of Padang also had to move its power center from Bandar Khalifah in the downstream to the upstream of Padang River at Bandar Sakti, Tebing Tinggi, where the administrative center of Padang Bedagai *onder-afdeling* took place. The King of Bedagai had to move his governance office to Firdaus, Sungai Rampah, about 6 km to the upstream of Tanjung Beringin in the late 1920s, although the palace remained at the downstream of Tanjung Beringin. The development of Tanjung Beringin port city was then like "not going anywhere" (Edi Sumarno, 2006).

5 CONCLUSIONS

From the descriptions above, it can be concluded that the construction of roads and railways in East Sumatra as a part of the expansion of the plantation economy, greatly affected the existence of "traditional port cities" in East Sumatra. The impacts might be different, but it was still due to the construction of land transports. The "port cities"

suffered setbacks in the places where land transports were built and followed by the establishment of new colonial cities. This pattern occurred on Labuhan as the "traditional port city" of Sultanate of Deli, Rantau Panjang as the "traditional port city" of Sultanate of Serdang, Tanjung Beringin as the "traditional port city" of Kingdom of Bedagai, and Bandar Khalifah as the "traditional port city" of the Kingdom of Padang. On the other hand, in places where the development of land transports was relatively small or even none at all, the rivers remained as the main mode of transport, for instance in Southern Asahan *afdeling* and all Bengkalis *afdeling*. In this case, the traditional port cities continued to survive. This pattern occurred to the traditional port city of Labuhan Bilik in Labuhan Batu *onder-afdeling* and Bagan Siapi-api, Pekanbaru, Siak Sri Indrapura, and Bengkalis in Bengkalis *afdeling*. A different pattern occurred in Tanjung Balai and Tanjung Pura. These traditional port cities survived despite the fact that land transports had already reached both places. Tanjung Balai kept being maintained by the Sultanate of Asahan as its central government as it turned out solely due to the fact that it was also the central government of Asahan *afdeling*. As for Tanjung Pura, it kept being maintained by the Sultanate of Langkat for he objected to move it to Binjai. This reluctance was most likely on account of Binjai was not located on the same river as Tanjung Pura.

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