Urbanism in the Malay World:
The Origin and Evolution of the Idea, Function, and Institution of Pre-colonial Bandar

Melaka

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will examine and scrutinize the characteristics of urban form and culture that constitute, support, develop, and sustain the phenomenon of bandar. The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical importance of bandar in the context of sustainability. The focus of this investigation is the search for meanings of urban settlement based on the relationship of concepts and its places, its institutions and its society of Pre-colonial Melaka that sustain their urbanity

KEYWORDS:
Bandar, urbanism, Pre-Colonial, Melaka, Southeast Asia, urban form, culture, tradition

Studies on urbanism in the Malay Peninsula have been familiar topic for humanities and social sciences. Foremost there are several scholars such as Manguin in Hansen (2000: 409-430), Evers & Korff (2000), Bishop, Phillips, Yeo (2003), Suhaimi (1993), Wheatley (1983), whose works are not only inspiring and encouraging for further investigations, but also show us that there are many things to be investigated and studied carefully. One of them is a study on the origin and evolution of the idea and phenomenon of bandar; until now, such a study remains less explored. This paper argues that as a concept and phenomenon bandar is potentially constructive for the sustainability of future urbanism in Southeast Asia regarding its long-standing experience in multiculturalism and global encounter.

Urbanism in the Malay Peninsula has been historically a process of cultural amalgamation towards a diverse and multicultural society. This phenomenon is demonstrated by its urban culture, which is manifest in various forms and traditions; it is shown by variety of culinary, fashion, music, arts, and architecture. The issues of urbanism in the region were and are mostly about living in the crowd of multiethnic diversity and hub
of international trades. The waterfront vicinities between the Southeast Asia peninsula and Sumatera Island have been an international prominence of trades between Far-Eastern and Near-Eastern countries since the fifth century (Sheriff 2010: 171-190 & Leifer 1978: 6). Archeological evidences show that the ruling groups in many parts of Southeast Asia adopted Hindu Buddhist ideologies, rituals, statecrafts, and economics as shown by many artifacts, inscriptions, and images (Belina & Glover in Glover & Belwood 2004: 68-88).

Trades for exotic spices most likely triggered the spread of Indian civilization to Southeast Asia. The relation of India and the Malay Peninsula between the 4th BC and the 4th AD was probably indispensable from the network of commerce between India and the west. Roman coinages of cooper, silver, and gold were found in many parts of India. In return, even though Southeast Asian products and commodities were mostly raw materials, the demand for exotic and prestigious items from Roman civilization, such as aromatic spices, tortoiseshell, ivory, pearl, silk, dyes, rhinoceros horn, and muslin, was high. Indian trades must have played an important role to fill the gap between the source of raw materials from Southeast Asia and the Roman consumption for luxurious raw materials.

Maritime silk route has been indispensable for the history of the civilization in the Malay Peninsula from the first to the 13th century. Jacq-Hergouale'h’s study (2002) describes intensively the formative periods of civilization in the Malay Peninsula. The study concludes that the city-states in the region have been influenced by Indian civilization. The contribution of Hinduism was obvious that transformed the local dwelling culture from agricultural village to feudal state polity of negara. During the fourth and sixth century, Gupta dynasties in India were in power that brought about the golden age of Hindu Buddhist civilization (Adler & Pouwels 2007: 203); this included the development of bureaucratic society, militarily organized state polity, and market economy based on coinage. The spread of Hindu Buddhist culture and civilization from the South Asia continent to the Malay Peninsula and Indonesian Archipelago was possibly to occur during the Gupta’s reigns.

Hindu Buddhist civilization began to spread in Southeast Asia since the first century with its culmination between the fourth and sixth century. The early Hindu Kingdom was probably Langkasuka of Kedah from circa the third century. The other names of Langkasuka are Lang-ya-shu (Chinese), Langgasyuka (Arabic), and Ilanggasoka (Tangore). Local narrations confirm the existence of those states. However,
archaeological evidences are still in need to substantiate the findings within a historical framework of the region. The other kingdoms were Pan Pan somewhere in Kelantan or Trengganu, and Gangga Nagara from Perak (Verma 2009: 205-8).

Archaeological findings in Perak and Beruas area give us an indication of the existence of Gangga Negara as one of the earliest Hindu kingdoms in the Malay Peninsula. Even though the exact location of the capital city has not been found, Gangga Negara supposed to function as urban centre in inland of the Malay Peninsula. However, the relationship between the negaras and the coastal areas was unclear, though Indian and Chinese traders have visited them to trade the silks, gold, and beads with rice and spices.

The other early Hindu Buddhist state is found in Kedah area, at the Bujang Valley. Local narrations tell the story of Merong Mahawangsa who was the King of the area known as Kedah today. There is no further information on the capital of the state and its cultural artefacts. Even though Kuala Perlis is one important port in the today state of Kedah, the region is mostly dominated by historic urban settlements in the inland rather than at the waterfront areas. The historic urban centre of Kedah is Alor Setar (established in 1735) whilst Kuala Perlis was never the royal capital of Perlis, but a small village port. The royal capital for the state of Perlis was Arau. Urban centres in in Kedah and Perlis area mostly located in the inland area. This fact indicates the continuity of Hindu Buddhist urbanism that the royal capital is the centre of the cosmic system within the framework of mandala. The adoption of Islam by the state in circa 12th century seemingly did not change the urban life style from agricultural community to commercial waterfront society. In this case, Melaka stood as an example of transitory concept of urbanism from Hindu-Buddhist to Islamic city-state.

The evolution of Melaka from Capital to Municipality has been intensively studied by Sandhu and Wheatley (1983: 495-597). Their work is considerably classical that provides us with a comprehensive interpretation on Melaka as a unique urban centre in Southeast Asia since 1400s. Indeed, bandar Melaka is probably one of the best examples of Southeast waterfront city with multicultural populations. Melaka was probably the first entrepôt of the Southeast Asia. Historical background of the Malacca confirms that this patrimonial city-state was established out of nothing but the meeting point of international trades between East and West.

Melaka city state was not like other typical Hindu-Buddhist negara in Southeast Asia and the
archipelago; it did not have its own livestock production and existing local populations. The geographical location and setting of the port was not a large fertile land for growing rice and a well-established alliance of villages that surrounded its symbolically cosmic centre. Geographically, Melaka is neither a fertile land for agriculture nor a strategic position for sea and land defense. Why was Malacca an important meeting point between East and West that stood out from the rivals such as Pasai, Aru, Banten, and Palembang? One crucial possibility was the Malacca’s connection to and protection from the Chinese Empire under Ming Dynasties as earlier as 1405. Legendary Admiral Cheng Ho (Zheng He) with his massive fleets visited Malacca on regular basis. Until the Portuguese’s conquest in 1511, Malacca was probably the first and an authentic example of an entrepôt state in Southeast Asia; it did not have significant its own commodity and its existing populations (Ricklefs 2001: 23).

As entrepôt urban form and culture of Malacca were undoubtedly multicultural from onset. The urban structure and its fabrics must have been the outcome of cohesions, negotiations, collaborations, and contestations of power. Undoubtedly, bandar is historically the outcome of cohesions, negotiations, collaborations, and contestations of economic and political powers that must have been incorporated with the special institution of syahbandar.

Concerning its urban form, despite the city–state Melaka was not located in inland geographical setting, the traces of mandala system in the state polity were likely apparent with significant adjustments; the Seri Nara Diraja (the ruler) was surrounded by four cardinal dignitaries: syahbandar (port authority), bendahara (prime minister), temenggung (chief of state security), and laksamana (navy commander). The structure of state polity must have been symbolically incorporated in the urban form or in the site plan of city centre. Until recently, the traces of mandala juxtaposition remain inconclusive due to the lack of archaeological finds and historical records of the Pre-colonial city of Melaka (Compare Manguin in Hansen 2000: 410-1).

The waterfront location of Melaka is probably a challenging site for the installment of mandala symbolization. Nevertheless, the location of former royal palace, istana, and port, bandar, were identifiable and recognizable as functional and symbolic positions. Of course, due to the waterfront setting, architectural adjustment for the layout became necessary. Syahbandar and laksamana belong to the water, whilst
temenggung, bendahara and Seri Nara Diaraja stood on the highland position. In order to bring the downstream (low) and upstream (high) position functional, a vital communication road or path should be provided that must have been beyond the existing river. All this is likely recognizable in today site plan of the city. The dualistically spatial system based on upstream and downstream category is nothing new for orientation; most coastal communities in archipelago utilize such orientation for practical reason. The main street of the bandar Melaka could have been the today Jalan Laksamana and Jalan Hang Jebat.

The seat of the ruler of Melaka should have been in the southeastern area of the bridge where the streets mentioned above meet nearby the clock tower. The south river bank area was mostly occupied by the elites and foreigners whilst the north side of the river was the native areas of kampungs. For safety and security reason, it is possible that the Sultanate palace and the pekan were at the hill of the south riverbank across the native settlements. Geographically speaking, the site of the palace was a strategic viewpoint to all parts of the city. The spatial division of pre-colonial Melaka is probably based on a dualistic category of despotic patrimonial state: the ruling class, orang besar or pembesar, and the ruled or commoners, rakyat or hamba sahaya.

As any urban centre Melaka should have been provided with a permanent market (pekan) and others places for public gathering. In today Malacca, such places are not easy to be found. However, the open area in front of the Stadthuys was a potential place for the pre-colonial market. The area was supported by a hub of streets from different directions; the site is strategically located for the meeting place of exchanges and trades between the natives and the foreigners. The importance of the market is not only for trades and exchanges, but also to enhance the sociocultural livability of the city and the waterfront characteristics. In order to achieve this, the design of public realms in the inner city needs to develop and improve the pedestrian environment and public transit.

In the past, the liveability of Melaka was supported by the waterfront oriented lifestyle by sea and river. During the sultanate period, the sustainability of bandar and its economic activities as an entrepot was indispensable of the Chinese protection under the Ming dynasty as well as bilateral cooperation with the Sultanate of Pasai in Aceh. Even though the Islamic city and state of Melaka was well known as a Southeast Asian cosmopolitan centre in the 16th century, we barely find on the whole picture of urban life during the
Sultanate reigns.

Undoubtedly, political crises and power struggles took place during the period between 1390 and 1511. The city of Melaka was like any other city state in Southeast Asia that was not free from ethnic tensions and political upheavals. All this was obviously demonstrated by the reigns of them, from Sultan Iskandar Shah (ca 1390 – 1424), Megat Iskandar Shah (1414 -1424), Muhammad Shah (1424 – 1444), Hindu Buddhist king Parameswara Dewa Shah (1445 – 1446), Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1446 – 56), Manshur Shah (1456 -1477) to Sultan Mahmud Shah (1477 - 1511) (Ricklefs 2001:23). The other possible location of the Sultanate palace was the site on the hill where the Portuguese built their church: St Paul (Pieris 2009: 41).

As the capital city state, Melaka was well known for their heritage of urbanism in terms of statecraft. The architectural heritage of Sultanate institutions of pre-colonial Melaka state must have been significant for urban form of the bandar during the period of time between 1390 and 1511. The possible traces and signs of urban form during those periods were the local concepts of state and urban institutions such as istana raja/sultan, and various jabatan jabatan (offices): bendahara, temenggung, syahbandar, laksamana, various places: bandar, pasar/pekan, kampung, medan, and promenade. The concentration of power in the period between 1390 and 1511 attracted the concentration of the Malay settlement at the downstream of Melaka River. The Malay populations were needed for running day-to-day state bureaucracy and for strengthening the Malacca Royal army (tentera darat) and navy (tentera laut). Indeed, royal families and relatives who were mostly ethnically Malay occupied most state offices (jabatan/jawatan negara). It is still unclear where the garrison areas were for Sultanate army and navy?

The Malay populations lived in various kampungs and settlement surrounding royal palace, istana. The elites lived on the hill whereas the commoners occupied the lowlands. As a state organization, Melaka’s area would have been supported by three land use zone of institutions which consisted of areas for pentadbiran (state offices), mahkamah (royal courts and halls), and kampungs (residential). Almost all royal institutions disappeared after the fall of Bandar Melaka from the Malay Sultanate to the Portuguese colonial rule in 1511. This fact gives us the possibility that the architecturally disappeared institutions were functionally replaced by similar ones with different names; they have probably similar functions or meanings. Albeit the sites, relics and artifacts of Royal Melaka institutions have been replaced, displaced, transformed, and modified by other forms,
styles, and appearances, the idea and spirit of urbanism as the phenomenon of live-work-play in proximity and diversity for being urbane never die.

The presence of Chinese merchants in Melaka was not only by the nature of trade, but also by bilateral agreement between the Malay Sultanate and the Chinese Emperor under Ming dynasties. Accordingly, Chinese populations were free of tax to live and work in the city. One important contribution of Chinese community in Melaka to urbanism was the presence of their shophouses. Of course, as an architectural unit of urban form, the Chinese shophouse had evolved through times. The form is remarkably an architectural response to urban proximity with a mixed-use system of shop and house, as well as with a compact and strong design for street edge and urban block. Regarding its low-rise structure, the shophouse architecture potentially creates and enhances a streetscape of urban form with human scale and repetitive rhythm. All this is optimally successful with the support of building codes and urban ordinances for consistency in terms of the use of style, form, structure, and building material.

Historically, the form of shophouse in Melaka was indispensably functional in terms of the unity of shop and house. In doing so, shophouses are home and workplace that support the liveability of urbanism at street-level activities. The reason of this fact is quite simple for safe, effective, and efficient urban retails and services. How did the early version of shophouses in Melaka look like? The question leads us into the possible adaptation of the Malay house form with their local materials and construction. The Malay and the Chinese residential architecture in the 15th century likely shared something in common concerning wooden structure and gable roof form. However, the Chinese counterpart did not likely build their building raised on stilts, as found in the Malay house form. Instead, the Chinese shophouse designed their buildings with a ground floor higher than the site.

Architecturally speaking, the presence of Chinese group in the 15th century on likely contributed the formative urban block and urban character of Melaka city with low-rise high-density settlement. Even though the use of building materials in the 15th century was predominantly wooden and bamboo construction, early urban block of Melaka could have been defined and developed by the sites occupied by the Chinese row shophouses. In contrast to the Malay kampungs with loosely units of living house, the Chinese settlements in Melaka built a compact row block of shophouses; prior to the arrival of European people, they were not built
with a brick layered bearing wall structure. The brick layered building could have been the influence of Dutch brick townhouse between the 17th and 18th century.

Moreover, the Chinese and Indian community in Melaka enhanced the city with unique Chinese Buddhist temples and shrines such as Cheng Hoon Teng temple and the Kampung Keling mosque. Like the Chinese, the Pre-colonial Indian, Persian, and Arab populations in Melaka worked and lived from the port economic activities of four Melaka syahbandars. They were mostly traders and businessmen who traveled for trading for spices and silks. Their relation to Malay Melaka communities was not simply for business but also involved in sociocultural relationship with the native. They introduced Islam and Middle Eastern culture to the native people on the coastal areas of the archipelago that included literature and poetry. The Arabs and Persians introduced and enriched the Native urban settlement with new concepts such as madrasah, mukim, and pasar. Even though pekan and pasar are identical, the last is derived from the concept of Persian bazar, meaning a permanent place for exchanges. Pasar is slightly different from pekan because it operates on daily basis, not on weekly basis. Architecturally speaking, the presence of Muslim in Melaka was represented by variety of mosque architecture.

There must have been several Islamic buildings during the reigns of Malacca sultanates. However, there were few artifacts surviving until today. Local narratives told us that there were mosques in almost Malay kampungs in Melaka such as the Kampung Hulu mosque. Another important Islamic heritage in Malaka is the Kampung Keling mosque at Jalan Tukang Mas. Although the original was built with wooden construction on the same location, there is no further information when was the original mosque built? The today building was not the replacement of the original due to its demolishing building materials; the new mosque was established on the location in 1748 (Tajuddin 2000: 71).

Despite its perishable buildings, the embracement of Islam by most Malay populations contributed to the building of the sense of community in a territorial area of kampung. Islamic rituals and institutions such as surau, mosque, and madrasah strengthened and enhanced the existing customs and traditions with more intensive gatherings and collaborations that potentially built a strong community in Pre-colonial Melaka. All this was demonstrated with the fact that each kampung had its own mosque. In other words, the kampung settlements in Pre-colonial Melaka were parts of municipality or city-state of Malacca. In Islamic statecraft, it
must have been the law to determine people living and working in the state with specific political status either as citizen, mukim or foreigner, warga asing. In other words, the sense of urbanism in bandar Melaka was not only established with its architectural urban fabric, its monuments and places, but also with the political status of its populations. All this was useful for the taxation and functional qualification for state occupations.

Melaka under the Malay sultanates was probably not that perfect as what is told in local narratives such as Sejarah Melayu. However, pre-colonial Melaka city state in the period between 15th and 17th century was not without competition with other city states such as Pasai, Palembang, Banten, Tuban, and Ayuthaya. Maintaining good relationship with neighbouring city-states was likely the key for the sustainability of bandar in terms of economy and society. Interracial marriage was a common solution in dealing with multiculturalism in the pre-colonial city-states in Southeast Asia. Pasai and Melaka was not only in peaceful relationship based on political and military treaty, but was bound with intermarriage between both sultanate families and relatives.

The problem urbanism is, in matter of fact, not that simple. The diversity of ethnicity challenged urbanism in pre-colonial Malacca with various issues concerning hegemony and social justice. The despotic patrimonial state like the Malay Malacca in the 15th – 17th century was probably not a sustainable polity system for urbanism today. However, its sociocultural heritage is one important asset for urban local characteristics and features in Southeast Asia.

The idea of bandar in pre-colonial Malay world was a characteristic urban settlement at the waterfront setting. The concept was established and developed with the influence of Indian, Persian, and Arab civilization. At the beginning, the concept of bandar was about a city state settlement with a port. The most important structure of bandar lies most likely in the existence of a well-established state organization that consisted of kerajaan (raja, bendahara, temenggung, laksamana, and syahbandar) that was able to manage and secure trades and exchanges in sustainable way. In the case of Melaka, the sustainability of the entrepot status depended obviously on the protection of the super power of Chinese Empire under Ming dynasties. The fall of Melaka to the Portuguese emperor showed us how prone the entrepot was; it was not because only the lack of hinterland support for human and natural resources, but also the nature of bandar that was geopolitically reliant on international power relationship. Nevertheless, until now bandar remains unique; it is a phenomenon of waterfront urbanism in Southeast Asia that is sustainably capable for the cultural
acculturation of various traditions, customs, and languages. Bandar potentially builds and develops innovative ideas and things because of the diversity of its society and the syncretic local tradition.

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