



# The Relationship Between Orang Laut and Palembang in 17–18 Centuries

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**Abstract.** In Indonesia's maritime history, Palembang holds important legitimacy as the capital of Sriwijaya Kingdom and Palembang Sultanate which is a large maritime kingdom in Sumatra Island region and Malacca Strait. Of course, in achieving this success, it turns out that there is a role for the Orang Laut who contributed to securing Palembang sea area and Malacca Strait. Srivijaya's efforts to integrate the strength of the Orang Laut continued into the next period. This study tries to examine the relationship between Orang Laut and Palembang. What was the background and dynamics that occurred in the relationship. This study uses historical methods (heuristics, verification, interpretation, and historiography) with an anthropological approach. The objectives show that the structure of the relationship between Orang Laut and Palembang was formed from time to time as an outcome of mutually beneficial and patron-client relationships that existed until the colonial period. However, after Palembang Sultanate, relationship between Orang Laut and Palembang began to strain due to Orang Laut was labelled as pirates by the Dutch. In the end, the relationship ended when Palembang was fully controlled by the Dutch.

**Keywords:** Orang Laut · Palembang · Pirate

## 1 Introduction

Since prehistoric times, the sea has been an important part of the history of human life. Especially for humans who inhabit archipelagic areas and make the sea as an important part of their daily basis. In the midst of the largest archipelago in the world, history continues to be formed, dominated, and interspersed with events that occur on the sea [1]. Like the archipelago, which later became the unitary state of Republic Indonesia, it is a stretch of territory that cannot be separated from the maritime context. Moreover, historically Indonesia was once controlled by two large emporiums (Kedatuan Sriwijaya and the Majapahit Kingdom) which were able to control trade networks in the sea areas of Southeast Asia, making the archipelago one of important maritime areas in the Southeast Asia region [2].

In the outline, the territory of Indonesia is a combination of islands connected by sea and ocean. Indonesia is one of the largest maritime/nautical countries with a total

area of 16,671 which inhabited and uninhabited islands [3]. The total area of Indonesia's territory is around .81 million km<sup>2</sup> consisting of 3.25 million km<sup>2</sup> of ocean and 2.55 million km<sup>2</sup> as the Exclusive Economic Zone. While the land area is only about 2.01 million km<sup>2</sup> [4]. With such a wide landscape, of course, the sea becomes the main link between one region to another. This condition allows the formation of community settlements and transforms them into maritime cities that establish commercial relations with traders from various regions and nations [5].

The Indonesian archipelago is in a very strategic position so that it becomes a shipping and world trade route that connects the western region (Arab, Indonesia, Africa, and Europe) with the east (China, Japan, the Philippines, and the islands of Southeast Asia) through the Malacca Strait. For centuries, the maritime power in the Malay Archipelago has been illustrated by three indicators, namely the ability to manage trading ports, guard shipping traffic from pirates, and establish patron-client relationships with Orang Laut [6]. This route is referred to as the sea "Silk Road" which is long shipping traffic from the Mediterranean (Mediterranean), Indian Ocean, South China Sea, and Pacific Ocean [2]. Until the 16th century, the Strait of Malacca was thought to be the only sea route known to traders to get to the center of the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, the Malacca Strait is the endpoint for the east monsoon that blows between January-April which brings traders from East to West, while the West monsoon which blows between July-November brings traders from west to East. While waiting for the next voyage, the traders took advantage of the time by exchanging commodities with fellow traders and local residents around the Malacca Strait [7].

The territory of Indonesia is also known as a producer of various commodities that are very salable in the global market. Spices grown in the archipelago are very interesting and attract the attention of nations in the world. Pepper (*Piper nigrum*), Nutmeg (*Myristica fragmans*), Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum verum*), Clove (*Syzygium aromaticum*), and Sandalwood (*Santalum album*) was a mainstay spice product of its time [8]. On the island of Sumatra, pepper is the most widely cultivated commodity. According to [9], pepper is the most important commodity of Sumatra Island.

Seeing the strategic position of the archipelago with a trade structure that is very close to the sea space, it is certain that there is a community group that places the sea as its living space, by building maritime culture as the main basis for the characteristics of that group. This is what is known as the Orang Laut community [10]. [11] describes the existence of the Orang Laut to build a network that connects the beaches in the archipelago which is now the foundation of the unity of the Indonesian state. This community is not bound to land space and builds a symbiotic relationship with the sea. According to Lapien Orang Laut, it is the name of the ethnic group that inhabits the waters of East Sumatra and the Malacca Strait with characteristics that are very dependent on the maritime sector [10].

In developing their lives, they build relationships with Malay countries (kingdoms/sultanates) around the Malacca Strait which make global trade the basis of their economic structure. One of the areas where their relationship is aimed is Palembang. The relationship between Palembang and the Orang Laut community has existed for a long time. Several studies have stated that since the time of the Sriwijaya Kingdom, the Orang Laut have become important partners in developing the maritime economy and maintaining the security of Sriwijaya's seas [12, 13, 14]. This group has served for

generations to Sriwijaya to maintain security so that traders can freely stop in Sriwijaya. All of these provide benefits in the form of duties and taxes on Sriwijaya. Their mastery of the sea led to them being known as the King of the Ocean lands [15, 16].

During the Kingdom and Sultanate of Palembang, Orang Laut played an important role as “seducers” for international merchant ships to dock at the Port of Palembang. They also maintain the security of the sea lanes, the navy, the sultan’s military forces, the coast guard, and the main producers of sea commodities [7, 17]. Considering Palembang is a center for pepper cultivation it requires a lot of slaves to operate the plantation. Thus, this study tries to explore the relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang. How are their involvement in economic and political structures, as well as the ups and downs of their relationship as rulers of the sea (security) and rulers of land (commodity producer) until the colonial period?

## 2 Research Methods

This study uses historical methods which mean processing, testing, and critically analyzing records and relics which are historical sources [18]. Based on these data and seeds, is then directed through imaginative thoughts to produce historiography. Both historical and historiographical methods are a unit, although historical methods have stages such as data collection (heuristics), verification (source criticism), and interpretation. In compiling this research, the authors conducted a literature review through books, articles, dissertations, and so on which can be obtained from public libraries and online platforms such as JSTOR, Archiven, Delpher, etc. After receiving data from several pieces of literature, the authors verified it by comparing one source with another to obtain the accuracy of the data. After getting valid information, the author interprets the data, compiles it into historical facts, and then writes it down in an accountable historiographical form.

## 3 Orang Laut: Definition, Space and Identity

In Indonesia, the term Orang Laut refers to the communities that inhabit the waters of East Sumatra and the Malacca Strait. Some sources mention the Orang Laut community as Sea Tribe People [19], Sea Nomad, Sea Gypsie, and Nomadic Boat People. [17]. Shoper quoted by Lapien [10] explains that the Orang Laut community is categorized as “Persukuan” which is divided into several tribes and belongs to the Malay authority so that they are called the people of the sea. Ethnographically, the inhabitants of the sea on the coast of the archipelago are divided into three, namely ethnic Sama-Bajo, Orang Laut, and Moken/Moklen Ethnic Sama-Bajo inhabit the northeast coast of Kalimantan, Sulu Islands, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara Islands, and Maluku. Ethnic Orang Laut is usually attached to sea people and coastal communities who inhabit the Malacca Strait the northern and southern parts, downstream and estuaries of the major rivers of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the Riau-Lingga Islands, and a group of islands in the South China Sea, while the Moken and Moklen ethnic groups are identified as people living along the coast and islands off the west coast of Burma and Thailand [7].

The Orang Laut are thought to be the Old Malays (Proto Malays) who came to East Sumatra around 2500–1500 BC [17]. Its spread to the island of Sumatra through

the Malaysian peninsula. Fifteen centuries BC, there was a migration from the Deutro Malays, which caused the shift of the first group to the coastal areas, so that some of them lived in the sea which later became known as the Orang Laut [20].

Lombard mentions that the Orang Laut are strait people ( Celates) who live in the sea as pirates with their base in Bintan. Nevertheless, they declared their loyalty to the Malacca Kingdom, with the task of being rowers. Meanwhile, Baros stated that the Orang Laut for generations lived from the sea in their boats [11]. Their position was formalized by being included in the government system as members of the navy. The Orang Laut recognized the sovereignty of Parameswara (Sang Nila Utama) as the heir to power from Palembang (Sriwijaya) and promised to protect it. Vice versa, Parameswara will maintain its honor by protecting it. Parameswara raised the rank of Orang Laut by appointing its figures to strategic positions, namely admiral and treasurer. In fact, according to Miksic [16], Parameswara managed to enter the Malacca Strait when sailing to the west, because of the help of the Orang Laut. It is clear that the existence of the Orang Laut was inseparable from the Srivijaya era until after, which was a continuation of Srivijaya, namely Parameswara [10].

Orang Laut have a way of life that is unique and different from mainland people. They live on boats and canoes in groups and inhabit river gates and mangroves along the East coast of Sumatra. The settlements of Orang Laut are nomadic, so they are constantly moving from one place to another with the aim of hunting and gathering sea products [20]. The general professions usually carried out by the Orang Laut are coastal fishermen, pearl divers, shipbuilders, sea product traders, ship crews, and so on [21].

Areas that are often inhabited by the Orang Laut community are the various islands in the Riau-Lingga archipelago and the islands to the south of the South China Sea. The Orang Laut live in the downstream/estuary area of the Jambi river, located in the intersection area, which is the intersection between two tributaries that are usually traversed if heading to the Batanghari, Jambi, and Sungsang rivers which are located at the mouth of the Musi River, Palembang [7]. The Orang Laut are divided into many tribes. Tribes or groups that spread throughout the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea, including the Mantang Tribe, Mapor Tribe, Baroque Tribe, Galang Tribe, and many more [22].

Orang Laut is certainly an expert in recognizing various "signs of the sea" so that they can sail safely and search for sea products with ease. Although always on the move, the Orang Laut never ventures beyond the islands and surrounding areas which he considers to be his area of operation, whether for burial, knowledge dissemination, sea product collection, or other activities carried out. Understanding the boundaries of the operating area is important to prevent conflicts between the Orang Laut community. The division of operating areas between Orang Laut communities is useful for building a common understanding of the maritime areas they manage. Empty islands (especially hilly and peaked) become an important search for Orang Laut as a place to perform rituals of worship and burial of corpses. Although the Orang Laut spends their time on the water, they do not float their bodies in the sea because they believe that the dead will harm their community at sea if they are not buried on land with a special ceremony [7].

Traditionally, the Orang Laut group is chaired by Batin who is the leader of their group [17]. The inner position is very influential and important in the Orang Laut group. It can mobilize its members to become a fighting force as was done in the Riau-Lingga

sultanate when defending their territory [20]. The Inner's task is to take care of all members of the group to solve problems that occur among group members as well as with other groups [23].

During the Srivijaya Kingdom, the Orang Laut's expertise was used by its rulers to support its hegemony as a maritime kingdom. The Orang Laut are an extension of the Sriwijaya Kingdom to oversee the waters of the east coast of Sumatra, the Riau Islands, the Malacca Strait, and Southern Thailand. After the collapse of Srivijaya, according to the records of Tome Pires, the Orang Laut turned to a new ruler who was a fugitive king from Palembang (Parameswara) who settled in Singapore and contributed to the founding of Malacca [11]. At this time the Orang Laut tribe had an important position in the structure of Malay society. They even received a noble title for their loyalty to the Sultan of Malacca. After Malacca fell to the Portuguese (1511), the glory of the Orang Laut began to degrade due to its relationship with the Sultan of Malacca vanishing. According to [24] when Malacca was taken over by the Portuguese, the Orang Laut nobility titles were no longer valid so they became *lanun/ilanoon* (from Arabic which means pirates or pirates) [24].

#### 4 The Orang Laut in Shadow of the Pirates

The destruction of Malacca made the position of the Orang Laut no longer benefit from the loss of the economic-political structure on the mainland, which had required the support of their strength, as the spearhead in maintaining royal hegemony over the sea. For centuries maritime power in the Malay region has depended on three factors, namely the ability to manage trading ports, maintain the security of shipping traffic, and the patron-client relationship between mainland rulers and the Orang Laut [6]. Therefore, when Malacca fell, the Orang Laut no longer benefited economically and politically in the area that had been under their voyage. As a result, most of them turned into pirates/pirates.

No one knows for sure whether the Orang Laut is all pirates, or the activity is just a criminal act carried out by certain groups of the Orang Laut community. The existence of pirates has been traced in the waters of the Malacca Strait since the time of the Sriwijaya Kingdom. Especially when Srivijaya was destroyed due to being completely conquered by Majapahit (1356–1377), and when Majapahit's condition was weak, so it was unable to monitor its territory, including Palembang. This caused Palembang to enter a new phase, which was to become the center of Chinese pirates under the leadership of Leang Tao-Ming at the end of the 14th century [25].

Continuing when European nations began to rule in the Southeast Asian region, the labeling of pirates against the Orang Laut community was increasingly rampant, especially after the fall of Malacca. Their loyalty to the Malay sultans was seen as a nuisance to colonial power because they often hijacked European merchant ships passing through the Malacca Strait, Karimata Strait, and the South China Sea. Conditions like this disrupted colonial trade flow in Southeast Asia (especially the Dutch in the archipelago) which made them have to be crushed immediately [23].

The destruction of Malacca was a disaster for the Orang Laut, they seemed to have lost their mother, and this resulted in the increasing prevalence of piracy in the waters of

the east coast of Sumatra to the South China Sea. European ships became easy targets for looters, who had no ties to either side. The situation entering the 17th century began to change in power, with the Portuguese being pushed out of the Straits of Malacca to be replaced by the Dutch (VOC) and the British. The existence of these two peoples gradually became a thorn for the kingdoms in Java and Sumatra, causing conflict between them. These conditions, encourage more widespread sea robbery [26].

The rampant piracy caused European settlers to tighten security at sea, thus causing the pirates to have more limited areas of operation. In the era of the 1750s, based on the VOC report, it was stated that the Orang Laut became a scourge in shipping in the Malacca Strait, so shipping and trade were disrupted. Untuk itu, langkah yang diambil oleh Belanda adalah mendatangkan armada laut dari negerinya pada tahun 1784. Kehadiran Angkatan laut tersebut mampu meredam perompak Bugis di Selat Malaka [27, 28].

The problem of unsettling piracy in the Malacca Strait has not yet been resolved, a new problem arose, namely the roaming of pirates from the Sulu Archipelago known as Lanun (Ilanun, Elanong). They wandered from their homeland on the 18th century Mangindano Island, exploring the islands of Sulu, Sulawesi, Kalimantan and Sumatra, and other islands in search of life by piracy. They set up a base in Riau, the east coast of Sumatra, built a fort on the south of the island, as well as plundered it. The rampant looting in the area could not be separated from the weakness of the VOC fleet, and the declining power of the Malay sultan (Johor).

In 1780 Sultan Mahmud of Johor sent an envoy to meet the leadership of Lanun in North Kalimantan, to help him expel the Dutch from Riau (this proves that there is a "bond" of interest between local rulers and pirates. Not infrequently the kings/sultans helped to finance the attack operations carried out by the pirates with shared results). The request was accepted and a large and strong fleet set out to attack the Netherlands. The attack was successful so Lanun's strength was even greater in 1787 with a roaming area covering western waters and islands in the South China Sea. In the early 19th century there was an attempt by the Portuguese to pressure the Malay ruler, Sultan Abdul Rahman Sah, through a treaty, to curb pirates, but the effort was unsuccessful [7, 20, 26, 28, 29].

In the 19th century, conditions did not change much, and the strength of the pirates remained difficult to weaken. In 1831 the combined forces of British and United States warships attacked the Aceh coast, which had always been disturbed by Acehnese pirates. Unfortunately, the major offensive was not able to defuse the situation, and the piracy continued when American and British ships left the area [28]. Seven years later the Dutch did the same thing, namely attacking and destroying the power of the pirates in the waters of Belitung. It seems that the attack this time had a significant impact, as the chaos in the area subsided [2].

## **5 The Dynamics of the Relationship Orang Laut and Palembang**

The relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang has existed for a long time, namely in the Srivijaya Kingdom. The ability of the Orang Laut in the maritime sector was used by the Srivijaya rulers to strengthen their power as a maritime kingdom in the Southeast Asian region. In addition to having the task of supervising the Sriwijaya

territorial area on the east coast of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the Orang Laut also acted as tax collectors for ships sailing in the Srivijaya region. This shows the great dependence of the Srivijaya rulers on the abilities of the Orang Laut. After Srivijaya collapsed, the relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang continued as they devoted themselves completely to the fugitive king Parameswara to establish the new kingdoms of Tumasik and Malacca. Tome Pires said that thirty Orang Laut who were on Bertam Island found Malacca and invited Parameswara to stay there. Thanks to this discovery, Parameswara gave the title of nobility to the Orang Laut who had played an important role in establishing his power [30].

The relationship between the Orang Laut and the successor rulers of Srivijaya was very closely intertwined until the collapse of the Malacca Kingdom. The destruction of Malacca was bad news for the Orang Laut, so their position became indeterminate, and returned to the sea. How do they relate to their “parent”, Palembang? It seems that this relationship has had its ups and downs according to the changing times. Defeat after defeat suffered by the Malay rulers after the Malacca kingdom, led the Orang Laut to look for new patrons along the waters on the east coast of Sumatra (South Sumatra), namely controlling the waters around the islands of Bangka and Belitung. Bangka Island has been under the control of Palembang since the early 17th century. This relationship was strengthened by the marriage between the first Sultan of Palembang and the daughter of the ruler of Bangka [31]. Thus, all the waters of Bangka and Belitung were under the supremacy of the Palembang Sultanate.

In the waters of Bangka Belitung, there is a famous sea tribe called the Sekak Tribe. As rulers of the sea, they are tasked with guiding ships that pass through the famous muddy waters of Bangka Belitung. The existence of this tribe on the two islands is attributed to the troops sent by the Sultan of Johor to subdue the pirates there in the early 17th century. After success, some of the troops chose to remain in Bangka-Belitung. This group is the ancestor of the Sekak tribe. If it is associated with Palembang’s control over Bangka since the early 17th century, it means that the presence of the Sekak tribe in Bangka is also under the auspices of Palembang. Thus, the obedience of the Sekak tribe was devoted to the rulers of Palembang [2].

During the reign of Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin I (1757), his relationship with the Orang Laut Sekak was harmonious. The sultan bestowed tribal chiefs with honorary titles and fulfilled other needs. The reward is a guarantee of maritime security, especially the Bangka tin trade route and the annual tribute offering (sea cucumbers, slaves, seaweed, and iron). However, the comfort felt by the rulers of Palembang, was not in line with the VOC who actually felt uncomfortable because of interference from the pirates. For this reason, the Dutch contract in 1763 included a demand that the Sultan take firm action against piracy in Palembang waters. This clause was the first time the Dutch had done so in a contract, considering that they had been very disturbed by the actions of pirates [7]. From this data, it can be seen that the Sultan of Palembang had a special relationship with the Orang Laut Sekak, but did not pay attention to the security of Dutch ships, so the Dutch carried out coercion.

The harmonious relationship between Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin did not continue in the next period, namely the reign of Sultan Muhammad Bahauddin (1776–1804). As it is known that entering the middle of the 18th century the VOC began to decline. This

condition was used by pirates to improve their operations in the sea and the Bangka strait, of course, this was very detrimental to the VOC so they repeatedly protested against Sultan Bahauddin, and demanded that the Sultan eradicate the pirates. The Sultan responded positively to the request, but his efforts have not yielded satisfactory results. This condition was exacerbated by the occurrence of wars between the rulers of Lingga and Riau who were assisted by pirates and the VOC. With full strength, the pirates attacked Bangka, so Bangka suffered a lot of losses. Bangka also suffered a lot of losses, because the tin mining results were looted by pirates, which caused exports to be hampered and even stopped [29, 32, 33].

The Orang Laut who have turned completely into pirates, expand their loot by capturing people to serve as slaves. This was supported by the increasing Dutch need for slaves, who would be employed to assist the growing number of employees. In addition, the Dutch also needed slaves to fulfill their own needs. The chaos grew, and the Sultan was unable to do much because he was dealing with the Dutch and the disobedience of the Orang Laut [7]. Thus, the condition of the Palembang Sultanate at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries. The obedience of the Orang Laut was just a memory because there was no longer a “patron” they could rely on, and the retreat of the Dutch fleet, so that it was unable to control the “waters” of Palembang, making it seem like a no-man’s-land area.

The famous pirate from Palembang in the early 19th century was Raden Jafar. Its area of operation covers the waters of the Bangka Strait and the East Coast of Sumatra. He made posts or headquarters located in Bangka and Belitung. The looted commodities include tin, pepper, and rice. At least, the Dutch need a large force to crush this pirate group [29]. In addition, there is also a pirate group based on Belitung Island. This group is led by a Panglima Raja whose area of operation covers the Belitung sea area [2].

## 6 Conclusion

The relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang is not easy to explain clearly. But that does not mean that the position of the Orang Laut is not too important in the journey of the Srivijaya and Malacca kingdoms. The Orang Laut are considered to be very instrumental in enforcing the legitimacy of this maritime empire in the seas around Southeast Asia. Therefore, the relationship thrives quickly in line with the rapid development of Srivijaya and Malacca in the context of a certain year. When Malacca fell to the Portuguese, the position of the Orang Laut began to be threatened because of the loss of fortune. When European nations began to dominate Southeast Asia, the Orang Laut began to be labeled as pirates who often harassed European trading ships in the Malacca Strait. The Europeans began to urge some Malay kingdoms to quell the pirates who disturbed the shipping lanes. This policy made the relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang strained. The ups and downs of the relationship between the Orang Laut and Palembang occurred because the labeling of pirates on the orang laut was unavoidable so inevitably some Malay kingdoms had to follow European orders along with the agreements they made.

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