



The Spice Route During the Palembang Sultanate Based on Archaeological and Ethnographic Data

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Abstract. Spices have become the main commodity of the archipelago in the international trade scene. Chinese news sources provide information about spice commodities in the trading period from the 6th-19th centuries AD. Initially, spices were used for religious rituals and medicinal purposes. This function changed during the Song Dynasty (906-1260 AD). Spice commodities mentioned include nutmeg, cloves, resin, gum jerenang, agarwood, lime, and frankincense. One of the producers of spices is South Sumatra. Historical sources from the Palembang Sultanate period (17th-19th centuries AD) mention pepper as the region's main commodity. Pepper was produced in the hinterland through cultivation and distributed through large rivers that flowed into the Musi River. Before the sultanate period, evidence of the existence of spice commodities in this area was known from foreign news sources, including Chinese, Persian, Arabic and Portuguese news sources. The results of archaeological research provide evidence that spice commodities are different from foreign news sources, which mention that in South Sumatra spice commodities are resin, candlenut and keluak. In addition to information about the types of spices traded, foreign news sources do not provide information about the location of production and how to distribute them. Therefore, this research aims to find out the location of production and how to distribute it. The research method used is descriptive analytical using historical archaeological and ethnographic approaches.

Keywords: Distribution, Spices, Musi Watershed, South Sumatra.

1 Introduction

The history of spices has spanned time and place in world civilization since 1-1550 AD. During those 1550 years, Europeans had been familiar with spices from Maluku

since 500 AD. These spices were obtained and marketed by Arab traders who had already discovered the East and were able to enter European markets. The Arab monopoly ended after the Portuguese entered India, then Malacca, and finally the world center for cloves and nutmeg, namely Maluku³. After Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511 (16th century), the spice trade became a monopoly of European countries and led to colonial capitalism. There is a wealth of research on spices for the 16th-19th centuries AD based on historical evidence^{1,2,3}.

Since the beginning of the Common Era, the Spice Route has connected India and China. It is recorded that Javanese sailors landed in China in the 2nd century CE. Chinese sources reveal that in the early AD, a sailor from Guangzhou named Nan-Yueh brought cloves from Maluku to China for the first time². Ships from the archipelago were used by monks from China to study Buddhism in Suvarnadvipa or Srivijaya and in India. The great kingdoms of Srivijaya, Hindu Mataram, Singasari, and Majapahit made the spice trade the main route of interaction connecting the archipelago with Southeast Asia, China, South Asia, West Asia, and even East Africa⁵. Archaeological evidence shows that Sriwijaya once had its capital in Palembang⁶. In addition to the sites in Palembang, other sites from the same period were also found in the Musi River Basin. During the sultanate era, this area was known as “Batanghari Sembilan”⁷.



Fig. 1 A Map of the Musi River Basin (Source: palembang.tribunnews.com)

The nine rivers are the Kikim River, which joins the Musi River; the Kelinci River joins the Beliti River, which flows into the Musi River. In addition, the Lakitan River flows into the Rawas River, which then flows into the Musi River. The Lematang River flows into the Enim River, which then flows into the Musi River. The Ogan and Komering Rivers flow into the Musi River in the city of Palembang. Archaeological sites from prehistoric to colonial times have been found along these rivers.

These rivers are a means of transportation from Palembang to inland areas rich in various forest products. Historical sources indicate that the Musi River area produces rice, cotton, wax, gambier, gold, and pepper. The Lematang river basin produces

pepper, rice, and cotton; the Ogan River produces rice, pepper, and rattan; the Komering and Banyuasin rivers produce pepper and rice⁸. Historical data from the sultanate period shows that pepper was a commodity found in several rivers. This pepper commodity is also mentioned as a crop cultivated by the community at the command of the sultan⁴. The distribution pattern of the Musi River allowed for transportation and communication from the downstream areas to the inland areas, one of which became a spice trade route.

Various articles related to spices in the South Sumatra region are based on historical sources. Historical sources mention several rivers as the origin of certain types of spices, but do not specifically mention their locations. In addition, the spice trade routes between one river and another are also never mentioned. Of the nine rivers that flow into the Musi River, not all of them produce spices. There are several rivers that have archaeological remains from prehistoric to colonial times, but historical sources do not mention these rivers as the origin of spices. Furthermore, historical sources also do not mention the distribution process of these spices along the Musi River Basin in South Sumatra Province during the Hindu-Buddhist influence (5th-16th centuries AD) or before the Islamic-colonial influence. Based on these issues, this study aims to identify the spice-producing regions and their transportation routes.

2 Method

The data collection process was carried out using two types of data, namely primary data and secondary data. Primary data is field data obtained through surveys and interviews. Secondary data consists of research reports and literature related to the research theme. The survey recorded geographical and environmental features where archaeological remains were found, as well as ethnographic data.

After the data collection process, analysis is carried out with reference to form, space, and time. Identification of artifacts can be used to determine their function in the past. The spatial units where human communities were active (micro, meso, and macro scales), the environment and resources that were close to them or related to them, can be understood through the function of the artifacts found. Chronological similarities in different spatial units will reveal the relationship between them. The next step is to look at the connections or interactions between all these elements in spatial units of different scales and then map them to identify patterns. This spatial approach will be applied in research on spice routes in the Musi River Basin. In addition to the archaeological approach, historical and ethnographic approaches will also be used. The three approaches are applied to determine the types of spice commodities produced in specific locations, the distribution process of spices, and how they are produced, whether they are cultivated or collected from the forest. This data can also be obtained from ethnographic data.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Pedamaran

The name Pedamaran comes from the word “damar” with the prefix ‘pe’ and suffix “an,” which means a place to collect resin. The Pedamaran hamlet is located on the banks of the Babadan River, which flows into the Komering River. This river is the main means of transportation for bringing trade goods from forestry locations. Trade commodities are transported via the river in the Padamaran area, which is located in a large basin upstream of the Babatan Komering River, which flows into the Komering River in the village of Srinanti. At the headwaters of the Babatan River, there is a very deep basin, which is a vast peat swamp in the Sepucuk area. This peat swamp or lebak area is a traditional gathering place for the local community. This is due to the geographical conditions of Padamaran, where 75% of the area is surrounded by lakes, rivers, and swamps. Padamaran is surrounded by the large Petai swamp. In this large swamp, when the water recedes, large pieces of wood become visible. According to the community, under the swamp there are large pieces of wood that become visible during the dry season when the swamp water recedes. These pieces of wood, which have been submerged for a long time, exude sap. The sap produced from these pieces of wood is referred to by the community as damar. It is unclear what type of sap the community refers to as damar. The damar produced is believed by the community to have been used for household items such as lamp fuel in the Sriwijaya kingdom. The Penesak people, who originated from Komering, used boats to travel to this area to search for damar. They called this area Pedamaran or the place to search for damar.

The Penesak people who searched for resin then established a hamlet where they lived while searching for resin. The resin they obtained was then taken and traded to collectors in the Srinanti area. Collectors in Srinanti would resell the resin to Palembang by boat via the Komering River, which flows into the Ogan River. The Srinanti region was known by the Padamaran community as a commodity market during the sultanate and colonial periods, because it was a meeting place between forest product seekers and buyers. The geographical condition of the Srinanti area, as a meeting point of rivers, made this area a center of trade at that time. There is no information available on the commodity trade chain for resin during the sultanate and earlier periods.



Fig. 2. Babadan River at Pedamaran

Until the 1980s, this traditional transportation route was still used as a trade route for commodities from the Komering region to Palembang using large boats such as barges. The destination of these barges was the port of Sekanak in Palembang, which was the center of commodity trade during the sultanate and colonial periods. Before using large barges, the people of Pedamaran transported their trade commodities to Palembang using kajang boats, which had limited carrying capacity

3.2 Menanga

Minanga is divided into two parts, Minanga Tengah and Minanga Besar, separated by the Minanga River, which flows into the Komering River. The commodities known to the community are candlenuts and areca nuts. Candlenuts are commonly found in the Minanga area. Initially, this plant was a forest plant and grew along the river. Candlenuts were not cultivated by the community. They were collected from the forest and used for family purposes. There is no evidence of candlenut trade in the collective memory of the community. Candlenuts were not consumed because the fruit is hard, making it difficult for the community to use.

Areca nut was the largest trade commodity during the sultanate and colonial periods, transported by jongkong boats to Palembang using sattang. Even today, areca nut is still widely cultivated by the community on their farmland. Areca nut provides an important source of livelihood for the Minanga community. In the early 1900s, pindang became a trade commodity, and the Minanga community opened areca nut plantations on their agricultural land alongside coconut trees. During the Dutch colonial period, areca nut was planted alongside rubber trees. Rubber trees were introduced by the Dutch government at that time. The heyday of areca nut for the Minanga community occurred in the early days of independence, bringing prosperity to the Minanga community. At that time, many families went on the hajj pilgrimage with the proceeds from the areca nut trade. Areca nut is believed to be a plant native to Minanga, characterized by its large fruit compared to the areca nut of today.



Fig. 3. The Areca Nut Tree in Menanga Besar Village.

The areca nuts collected by each family are sold to local collectors from the village, and the large collectors sell them to other large collectors at the local level. The large collectors sell the areca nuts directly to Palembang using display boats or jongkong boats. Jongkong boats take a day and a night to reach Palembang, while the return trip from Palembang to Minanga takes four days, as it uses satang (a type of traditional boat).

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For the Minaga community, areca nuts are only used for trade, with only a small portion used for chewing. The area with the most cultivation is along the Komeriing region, with Tanjung Mas being the area with the most areca nut cultivation. Areca nuts are a major trade commodity. Currently, areca nuts are sold at a price of between 8,500/kg in clean condition. and 1,500/kg for those still in their shells. At the local

level, farmers sell their betel nuts to collectors in the villages, and there are many such collectors in each village. Betel nut traders from Palembang come to buy betel nuts from local collectors. It is not yet known where the betel nuts are sold in Palembang.



Fig. 4. The Areca Nut



Fig. 5. The candlenut

Candlenut trees are no longer commonly found in Greater Minanga and Central Minang. Candlenut trees are still commonly found in the Suka Negeri area. Meanwhile, some communities still plant areca nut trees as boundary markers around their duku and durian orchards.

3.3 Tanjungenim

Tanjungenim is located on the banks of the Enim River. Before the arrival of the Dutch in the Tanjung Enim area around the 1870s, the people of Tanjung Enim grew pepper and rice. The arrival of the Dutch brought coffee seeds around the 1870s and the community began to grow coffee. The center of coffee production in this region is in the Nyiru and Bukut areas. The pepper produced by the community was traded to Palembang and Bengkulu through collectors using water transportation (rafts) to Palembang and overland transportation to Bengkulu. During the Palembang Sultanate, a road called jalan kemas was built by the sultan to transport trade goods. Traces of this road can still be seen by the community in areas such as Darmo and Tegal Rejo, where remnants of the kemas road, now known as Joyo Darmo Road, can still be found. Through this kemas road, trade commodities were transported to Palembang using carts. This overland journey was shorter than using river transportation. The kemas road began to be abandoned when the Dutch opened the Lawang Kidul road. The road was built as a result of cooperation between the sultan and the clans located upstream. The road stretched from Talang Pangeran Ogan Ilir to the Nio intersection, where it branched off, with one branch leading down to Ogan Ulu and the other to Semendo.

The plant that has been cultivated by the community since ancient times is durian, while the forest product that is traded is agarwood. However, agarwood trees are now difficult to find, and not many people harvest agarwood anymore. In the early 2000s,

there were still many agarwood harvesters and collectors in the Darmo area. In addition to being sold, agarwood is also used as a writing tool.

The people of Panggung Island still search for resin. Damar trees were planted by their ancestors in community gardens. On Panggung Island, there are still people who sell resin. Areca nut trees are planted as boundary markers and are useful for sale. Areca nuts are generally collected by women. In the hamlet, there are local collectors who sell their harvest to the Tanjung market. Nowadays, there are no longer any collectors of areca nuts and agarwood.

The commodities of betel nut, agarwood, and resin were transported to Palembang via the Enim River, then to the Lematang River, and finally to the Musi River. These commodities were transported by *dedaup* boats, or *kajang* boats as the locals called them. These commodities entered Palembang through the Pulo Kerto and Kertapati areas. Pulo Kerto is located at the mouth of the Lematang River. Pulo Kerto is the entrance to Palembang via the Lematang River. These *dedaup* boats are generally 6 m long and 2 m wide.

Commodities transported via this river to Kerto Island travel along the Komerling River. Here, traders must pay taxes before entering Palembang. In Darmo (the capital of the clan), a toll is imposed, and for the waterway there is a shortcut (*ahan-ahan*) called *pangkalan cuki* (excise), or tax station. The shortcut on the Enim River uses a gate that can be opened and closed. After paying the tax, the river gate is opened so that boats can pass through. In Palembang, at the mouth of the Ogan River, there is also the Kedukan River. To pass through the Kedukan River, a river crossing tax must be paid. All types of commodities that pass through these rivers must pay a percentage-based tax. For example, buffaloes are subject to a 5% tax on their price. However, commodities that are not in large quantities are not subject to trade tax when crossing the sluice gate. Rice and paddy are subject to a crossing tax.

In Palembang, their trade commodities were controlled by Guguk Kemas, which is why the cart road was called Jalan Kemas. Guguk Kemas controlled trade from upstream to downstream. Guguk Kemas was part of the sultanate's family who controlled trade. Trade in the upstream area was based on the sultan's orders. Trade in the upstream area was based on the sultan's orders, with transactions traded in the sultan's name. This had a significant impact on the prices received by producers, namely farmers. However, there is no clear data on the prices of commodities sold by farmers or forest product collectors. To facilitate their trade, the Kemas built cart roads on the orders of the sultan with the help of clan chiefs, but there is no data showing whether these clan chiefs benefited from their involvement in the construction of the Kemas roads. The trade routes were controlled by the traders in Palembang, who maintained them and ensured their security from attacks by robbers. The traders were able to provide this protection because they had "troops" who could protect merchants along the trade routes. This security was most likely provided by the clan chiefs and the sultanate.

In these trade transactions, local collectors will obtain finished goods such as *songket*, *keris*, and iron goods that cannot be produced in the Enim area.

Agricultural and forestry products in this region are sold not only in Palembang but also in Bengkulu (Mana, Bintuhan, and Muara Bengkulu). The Bengkulu trade route is widely used by people from Basemah, Semendo, and Tanjung Enim. There is no data showing why they choose to bring their commodities to this region. This region is also known for the Banten trade route. Banten traders entered this region via the Krui route, which was established by the Krui people who built a network with the people of Baturaja and Komerling. This trade route is known as the Banten trade route. Banten traders collected trade goods from this region through Ogan and Komerling middlemen, which were then taken to the ports of Selebar and Krui. From the port of Selebar, the goods were then transported to Banten. This trade relationship has existed for a long time (there is no data to support this relationship), but the community is familiar with the traditional route connecting the two regions. This traditional route was built by the Ogan and Komerling people as rulers and traders along the route.

There are three trade mechanisms in this region:

1. Downstream route: using (1) water transportation to Palembang, using dadap boats, taking 5-10 days to reach Palembang, via the Enim, Ogan, and Muara Oran rivers. The commodity sold is rice. (2) using the Kemas road with pedati. It takes 3-5 days to reach Palembang. This route was established by the sultan and clan chiefs. It was controlled by merchants from Palembang, namely merchants from Guguk Kemas, acting on behalf of the sultan. It flourished during the reign of the Palembang Sultanate. The commodity traded was rice.
2. The Bengkulu route. Controlled by merchants from Baturaja and Ogan via Mana' Bintuhan and Muara Bengkulu. The commodity traded was pepper.
3. The Banten route, ending at Selebar Port. This trade route was controlled by merchants from Baturaja and Ogan. The commodities traded on this route were brought to and traded in Banten. This trade route was heavily used before the Palembang Sultanate, when Bengkulu was controlled by the British. The commodity received was pepper.

Rice became a commodity monopolized by the sultanate. Until the early 20th century, coconut mills could still be found in villages in the Tanjung Enim area. During the sultanate era, coconut mills or water wheels that powered rice grinding equipment were commonly found in the Tanjung Enim region. These coconut mills were managed by the clan government, in which case the royal families collected or stored the rice from the community. These royal families bought rice from the community, ground it, and then sold it to the sultanate.

3.4 Bumiayu

The agarwood tree or mekaras wood (local) was once commonly found in the Bumiayu region. It was not cultivated but maintained in community fields. The community only used the bark to make binding tools or ropes for lifting heavy objects, because the bark is strong. According to the community, only the bark of the mkaras tree is valuable,

while the trunk is not suitable for construction because the wood is not strong/hard. In the past, mkaras wood was not sold, but only used for binding tools.

The value of karas or agarwood was only discovered by the community in the 1990s. The community was introduced to melakas as agarwood by collectors who came to the community to look for melakas wood. However, the community did not know how to manage the wood to produce agarwood. The community sold melakas trunks in the form of standing trees, while the processing was done by the buyers. As a result, the community did not know how to process it or its uses. Until now, the mechanism for trading melakas wood is in the form of selling trunks, with the risk of whether or not the trunks contain agarwood. The community also does not have access to market prices. The produce from Bumiayu is transported downstream via the Lematang River using rafts. Currently, the economy of the Bumiayu community depends on rubber production.



Fig. 6. Resin



Fig. 7. Resin Tree

Before rubber was introduced, the people of Bumiayu lived across the Lematang River to grow cotton. Cotton was planted in the lowlands. The entire Lematang area used to grow cotton. Cotton was grown in fields. The cotton was bought by Chinese traders from Palembang who came in large ships to Lematang. They came bringing goods and exchanged them for cotton. The last cotton was planted around the 1950s, and the people of Lematang no longer grow cotton.

The Lematang (Bumiayu) community is unfamiliar with agarwood processing technology. They acquired their agarwood processing techniques by adopting the knowledge brought by traders who purchased agarwood logs. There is no evidence to suggest that during the Sriwijaya and Sultanate periods, the Lematang people produced and processed agarwood.



Fig. 8. Agarwood Tree



Fig. 9. Agarwood

The list of commodities on the Palembang market in 1822 according to Sevenhoven ⁹ consisted of: livestock (buffalo, pigs, goats, and sheep); poultry (ducks, chickens, and laying hens); meat (buffalo, pork, and deer); river fish (gurami, bager, tabakang/tembakang, belida, gabus, lais, and shrimp); dried fish; vegetables (cabbage, radish, celery, spinach, krokot, parsley, spring onion, red pumpkin, white pumpkin, eggplant, young bamboo/rebung, cucumber, bean sprouts, young beans, pete, jengkol, lettuce, long beans, and kucai); fruits (pineapple, mas banana, raja banana, ambon banana, tanduk banana, rejang banana, Palembang banana, kepok banana, batu banana, watermelon, waluh, mango, bacang, kemang, tampoiye, guava, gojivas, duku, durian, soursop, cempedak, orange, orenjeappel, rambutan, ramenas, riddan, menteng fruit, lingking baru, kranji, sarangan, sugar cane, lingking kering, young coconut), herbs/spices (shallots, garlic, tamarind, coconut oil, peanut oil, salt, long pepper, regular

pepper, chili, cumin, young ginger, fennel, coriander seeds, black cumin, fennel seeds, old coconut and old ginger); grains (rice, paddy, Dutch bread, green beans, tofu beans, red beans, and peanuts); miscellaneous (firewood, betel leaves, areca nuts, betel lime, gambir, Lintang tobacco, Musi tobacco, duck eggs, chicken eggs, and brown sugar)⁹.

Forest products marketed in Palembang in 1822 according to Sevenhoven⁹ were elephant tusks (grades 1-3), rhino horns, Kikim resin, Rawa resin, fish bladders, Palembang sugar, loose sugar, Ogan cotton, Musi cotton, lamp cotton, unpeeled coffee beans, common pepper, Babadan rattan, Lalang rattan, Musi rattan, incense (grade 1–grade 5), fragrant resin (grade 1–grade 3), gala resin (grade 1–grade 2), rice, Galar gambir, Rawa gambir, Musi gambir, Jerenang bark, buffalo hide, areca nut, saporantoe, bark, pulasari, oejoeng rahab, tagavi, galam fruit, dried fish, pindang fish, old coconut, wet indigo (tarum), Lintang tobacco, Musi tobacco, lompok, dried areca nuts, kayulaka, and dried fruits.

Historical sources indicate that South Sumatra had many types of spices traded besides pepper, namely areca nut, pulasari, shallots, garlic, tamarind, chili, cumin, young ginger, fennel, coriander seeds, black cumin, fennel seeds, old coconut, and old ginger. Apart from historical sources, archaeological data on spices is limited to resin, candlenut, and keluwak. Resin was found at the Lesungbatu Site (Rawas River Basin)¹⁰, Palembang¹¹, and Air Sugihan¹². Other spices, such as candlenuts and keluwak shells, were found at the Air Sugihan site¹². The scarcity of spice findings at archaeological sites is due to their susceptibility to decay.

All spice commodities in South Sumatra were brought from upstream areas to be marketed in downstream areas, namely Palembang. The capital city of Palembang did not have a public market, because trade was conducted along tributaries and small rivers as infrastructure, while the means of transportation used were small boats. Traders peddle their wares by traveling along the rivers in Palembang (Sevenhoven 1971, 53). At a number of archaeological sites in the Musi River Basin, boat boards and rudders have also been found (Utomo, 1993: Wiyana, 2018).

4 Conclusion

Ethnographic data show that the types of spices traded in the past were areca nuts, candlenuts, and pepper. In addition, there were agarwood and resin. These products were not produced in the areas of the major rivers, which are part of the Batanghari Sembilan, but rather in other rivers, such as the Babadan River and the Enim River. The major rivers that produced commodities were the Lematang River (Bumiayu site), which produced agarwood and resin, and the Komering River, which produced areca nuts and candlenuts in the Menanga area. These rivers were spice routes connecting the upstream and downstream areas. Traditional boats were used as a means of transportation.

Acknowledgments.

This article is the result of research funded by the 2025 Sustainable Culture Program House, Language and Literature Archaeology Research Organization.

Disclosure of Interests.

Retno Purwanti and Amilda are the primary authors of this article; Wahyu Rizky Andhifani and Eko Yulianto are contributors. All authors played a role in the field data collection process, both through interviews and field sampling, as well as documentation. All authors have ensured that there are no conflicts of interest in writing this article.

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