

**Timothy P. Barnard. *Multiple Centres of Authority: Society and Environment in Siak and Eastern Sumatra, 1674-1827*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2003. 206 pages.**

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This work by Timothy Barnard exploring Siak's history between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth century provides an important complement to other recent regional studies of precolonial Sumatra.<sup>1</sup> From these studies, a picture is emerging of the internal relationships among many of the island's component societies in the eighteenth century, their upstream-downstream (*ulu-hilir*) contacts, and their ties not only to the sultanates on the Malay peninsula but also to the *orang laut* (sea nomads) of the South China Sea and other coastal trading communities throughout the archipelago.

Barnard's detailed description of Siak's periods of success and turmoil during the eighteenth century contrasts the nature of successful governance there with that in other Malay and Sumatran polities. In examining Siak's place within the Malay world, he emphasizes a number of the factors that differentiate it from "the Malay model." He lays particular stress on the region's geography, the character of its populations, and the personalities of the rulers who, with varying degrees of success, shaped its political development.

With respect to Siak's geography, Barnard describes the diverse character of coastal East Sumatra, where the "dense tropical rainforest slowly shifted into lowland swampy mangrove forest before meeting the cosmopolitan trading world of the Straits." (p. 3) The geographical diversity of this "riverine and coastal trading empire," (p. 2) was matched by the diversity of its population, which incorporated "the *orang asli*, Minangkabau migrants and Malays, as well as Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Buginese, Javanese, and other groups." (p. 32) This mixed or *kacu* region "lent itself to the development of multiple centres of authority not only in the *ulu*, but downstream as well." (p. 83) The societies that made up Siak also felt the impact of multiple forces from outside East Sumatra. Until the emergence of Raja Kecik in the early eighteenth century, Siak's coastal areas were largely under the domination of the sultanates on the Malay peninsula, first Melaka and then Johor, although they were ruled by an elite originating in Sumatra's central highlands. While the hinterland was particularly subject to the authority of Minangkabau leaders, the coastal areas were open to constant attack from the *orang laut* and from raids by the Dutch and, later, British trading companies. In the closing years of the eighteenth century, the *orang laut* were superseded by the Ilanun from the Sulu archipelago.

Barnard shows how the rulers of this mixed society were able to establish a middle autonomous ground between more powerful states on the Malay peninsula and in the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Barbara Andaya, *To Live as Brothers* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); Jane Drakard, *A Malay Frontier* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1990); and idem, *A Kingdom of Words: Language and Power in Sumatra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), as well as Christine Dobbin's earlier *Islamic Revivalism in a Changing Peasant Economy* (London & Malmo: Curzon Press, 1983).

Sumatran interior, using the intruding presence of the Dutch VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, United East Indies Company) to play one off against the other. To gain control of this *kacu* region, a contender for power had to fulfill certain conditions that Barnard sees as contributing to his *daulat* (“the charismatic quality expected of a ruler” [p. 27]). First of all, he had to be acknowledged as a leader by all communities influential in the polity. Second, he had to be able to establish marriage ties with heads of the most powerful groups in the region to forge strong kinship alliances. As the most successful of Siak’s rulers demonstrated, he also had to have “an ability to dispense justice” (p. 130) and in his governance be willing to delegate power to the autonomous centers that constituted his realm. In addition, a successful ruler needed to demonstrate flexibility in his rule and in his use of alliances and marriages to extend his influence.

VOC records demonstrate Dutch exasperation at their inability to comprehend these complex power relationships that were combining to divert the trade of eastern Sumatra from channels they controlled. Barnard’s meticulous examination, however, succeeds in illuminating the intricacies of the fluctuating relationships among the contending princes and their ties with outside forces. He is able to reconstruct and analyze these shifting alliances among the Siak elite by drawing not only on the Dutch historical record, but also on indigenous chronicles, especially the *Hikayat Siak*, a source largely ignored by scholars previously because it was judged to be too reliant on the *Sejarah Melayu*. Although its early sections are copies of the *Sejarah Melayu* and emphasize Siak’s subjugation to Melaka, Barnard uses the *Hikayat*’s second half to reconstruct Siak’s autonomous history. This history began with the murder of the Sultan of Johor in 1699, “which allowed frontier communities along the Siak River the opportunity to form their own governments.” (p. 4) The chronicle emphasizes the methods through which the rulers of the region adapted their governance to conditions in East Sumatra, and explains the influence of Minangkabau cultural elements and institutions on developments in Siak.

Raja Kecik (or Kecil) (1699-1746) was the figure most responsible for merging the east coast societies into the loosely structured Siak sultanate, and he and his descendents dominated Siak’s history throughout the eighteenth century. Raja Kecik was also an important figure in the traditional histories of other societies bordering the Melaka Strait, as well as of upland Minangkabau communities.<sup>2</sup> His prestige derived initially from the union within himself of the region’s two dominant cultures, for though of Minangkabau ancestry he also claimed to be the son of the murdered Sultan Mahmud of Johor, conceived on the night of the sultan’s death. This inherited charisma was enhanced by the *daulat* he built up in his wanderings among the sea-based communities of the South China Sea. Having thus accrued authority, he demonstrated flexibility in his governance and a willingness to devolve power to other local centers. Governing through “consensus and charisma” (p. 136), his rule spread not only to the Siak hinterland but also to its maritime outlets and the *orang laut* communities in the South China Sea, stretching as far as the Sulu archipelago and the west coast of Borneo. Raja Kecik seemed to embody the qualities of Oliver Wolters’s “man of prowess.”

<sup>2</sup> For Raja Kecik’s fame in other parts of Sumatra, see, for example, Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words*, pp. 184, 197-200 and Andaya, *To Live as Brothers*, pp. 25, 207.

Raja Kecik was the only one of Siak's sultans during the period covered in this study who was able to govern the diverse region as its sole ruler. From the time that his abilities began to fail in the late 1730s, the loose unity he had achieved fractured into rival loyalties. Although the founder of the Siak dynasty combined within himself the dual nature of the polity, his successors were forced to divide power. This was true of both the sons and grandsons of Raja Kecik. In both generations, the authority of one of the rulers was largely centered on the mainland of East Sumatra, while the other, generally described as a pirate by the Dutch, was a "king of the sea" with his influence among the *orang laut* and his base usually on an island in the South China Sea, such as Siantan, or in one of East Sumatra's trading ports. During the 1760s and 1770s, Raja Ismail came closest to duplicating Raja Kecik's achievements, although he too had to share power with his cousin, Raja Muhammad Ali, to whom he granted the title of *yamtuan muda* (junior sovereign). By attracting the allegiance of the *orang laut*, a "king of the sea" such as Raja Ismail enjoyed higher prestige than a land-based ruler, for the influence of these sea nomads was potent throughout the Malay world. (p. 131)

Barnard spends much of the book refuting the Dutch characterization of the situation in Siak as one of chaos. Rather, he contends, the "multiple centres of authority" accorded well with the diverse character of the region. However, the decentralized nature of authority in Siak meant that it lacked a solid center of government able to mobilize its forces in reaction to the threats and attractions of the outside powers. Individual ports along the coast were increasingly able to assert their independence from the Siak sultans and establish their own direct trading ties with the European powers that came to monopolize the means of coercion. The rise of British naval power during the Napoleonic wars and the expansion of Singapore and Penang as trading entrepôts led to a change in regional trading patterns in the early nineteenth century as a growing volume of trade was diverted from Siak-controlled ports and sea lanes to the British-dominated centers. The role of the sultans declined, there was dissension and conflict among the elite, and by the time the Dutch imposed their sovereignty in 1858, little remained of Siak's former glory.

In this book Barnard has provided an intricate and fascinating picture of the shifting power relations that enabled a powerful but decentralized polity to emerge and prosper in and around the Melaka Strait in the immediate precolonial period. He also throws new light on the cross-border networks, both land- and sea-based, that thrived in the eighteenth century, many of which continued to exert a significant influence on inter-state relationships in more recent Southeast Asian history.