

The Global Economy and the Sulu Zone: Connections, Commodities and Culture^{*}

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I Introduction: Problems of Definition

Space

In contemporary ethno-historical studies of Southeast Asia, the “zone” and/or “border” have recently become chosen metaphors for theorizing the historically complex and contradictory ways in which cultural difference and ethnic diversity have been articulated in social relations and in political and economic practice across time. This paper aims to explore global cultural interconnections and interdependencies in the Southeast Asian world of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with particular reference to the Sulu “Zone”.¹ The paper also aims to enhance critical understanding and discussion of historiographical methods and models used in problematizing economic and cultural “border zones” in a changing global-local context. My emphasis is on a “zone” created through the intersections of geography, culture and history centered around the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as China’s and the West’s complicated place within it.

As cross-cultural flows of trade goods, technology, people and information intensified in speed and volume in late eighteenth century Southeast Asia, the localized borders of states and economic regions were becoming ever more porous. Did the world capitalist economy at that time create “borderless worlds”? Or did borders – cultural, national or otherwise prove to be more resistant and tenacious or vulnerable to the European presence and economic expansion? As some borders broke down, others were erected, both between and within nations, states and em-

^{*} This is an updated version of the original article published in *Tōnan Ajia kenkyū* 東南アジア研究 (*Southeast Asian Studies*) 35.2 (1997).

1 Warren 1981; see also Dick 1993, 6. Tagliacozzo 2005, 1-19; Thongchai 1994.

pires. For example, while Sulu desperately wanted to become a part of the East Asian global-regional economy and Britain's "push into Asia", Chinese exclusivism and xenophobia were on the rise in the region. The southern Chinese border was forced open to the west in the 1840s, but new "borders" had already been forged or imposed in the Sulu region and elsewhere in eastern Indonesia because of the China connection and economic conditions in that particular area. While captive labour power from all across Southeast Asia was introduced into the "Zone's" space, comprising the Sultanate's fisheries and tropical forests, the boundaries of its economy, culture, and ecology were increasingly blurred by the rhetoric and practice of global trade, cultural pluralism and western Imperialism.

A "zone", like that of the Sulu Sultanate, was not just a "spatial" site of economic, cross-cultural and symbolic contact. Such a zone was both a meeting ground and arena of potential antagonism and conflict in which peoples geographically and historically separated came into contact with one another and often established ongoing relations; a "zone" where two or more cultures rubbed up against one another due to events going on beyond its geographic borders, where people of different origins and ethnicity came to occupy the "contact" space and/or historical territory, where lower, middle and upper classes touched involving possible conditions of coercion, inequality and conflict. How were such "zones" or "border worlds", geographically and culturally defined, affirmed and contested, and transgressed? What impact did the China tea trade and the world capitalist economy have on both the making, physical and symbolic, and unmaking, of Taosug society and culture and the "Sulu Zone" from the late eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century? The ethno-historically based arguments, evidentiary examples and other presentations in this paper tackle these questions from a variety of theoretical, historical and empirical perspectives based on my earlier research on the world of the Sulu Sultanate. Together they vividly illuminate how contemporary culture and society was determined by "globalization"; the continuous flow of cross-cultural trade and interaction both within and between several large geo-economic "cores" and smaller "zones", involving in this case China, Britain and the Sulu Sultanate and thousands of separate smaller places.



Map 1: Sulu and Celebes Sea

The Sulu Zone constituted a Southeast Asian economic region with a multi-ethnic pre-colonial Malayo-Muslim state, and an ethnically heterogeneous set of societies of diverse political backgrounds and alignments that could be set within a stratified hierarchy of kinship oriented stateless societies', maritime nomadic fishers and forest dwellers.² In terms of the international trade economy, the "Sulu Zone" was not an important economic region until the end of the eighteenth century. In part, the paper will attempt to explain how the "Zone" emerged, acquired a shape and became as it was during the period under consideration. It is equally

2 Warren 2007, xvii-xxii, xxv-xxxvii.

concerned to present the "Sulu Zone" as an example of the way a redistributive economic system operated on the periphery of the global political economy of Asia in its heyday, before it fell under complete domination of the West. The key articulating unit in this seemingly small inconsequential economic network was a strong regional sultanate; in the case of Sulu, set in a political and ecological framework that served to integrate the economic activity and resources of ethnically diverse and often politically divided groups, and, smaller sub-regions, that would supply the larger markets in China and the west with exotic marine and forest commodities.

The Sultanate's entrepôt, at Jolo, integrated supply and distribution of manufactured and exported industrial goods such as textiles, weapons, porcelain and opium emanating from powerful state systems in particular core areas of Europe and China. In terms of economic multifunctionality, the Sulu Zone did not manufacture or export industrial products on any scale.³ However, the "Zone" and all of its sub-regions became part of the world capitalist economy with an international monetary system based on silver and gold; tea, slaves and opium were to play a critically important regional role in a global economic equation involving ever expanding markets, patterns of consumption and events going on beyond its geographic borders. The Sulu Sultanate is an important case study of an island entrepôt state that suddenly grew over several decades from being a secondary principality based on fishing and "piracy", located on the eastern edge of island Southeast Asia, into one of the most powerful and important pre-colonial trading states of the entire Malayo-Muslim "zone" of Southeast Asia (present day Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines), where my earlier research was focused.

Two factors governed the aims of the international trade economy between the west and China, namely, the location of marine and forest products for the Canton market, and, the potential ways to acquire them, using the strategies of cross-cultural trade and access from the seas. Given available nautical technology and the application of naval strength the seas were the natural avenues for western traders and travelers to intrude into the affairs of Southeast Asia, as they were in Northeast Asia.

3 In terms of the geographical concept of "central-place theory" and its implications for hierarchy and multifunctionality see the pioneering historical analysis of Skinner (1964 and 1977).

Three water borne routes led into the heart of the Sulu Zone. The Chinese began with the Sulu sea, an extension southward from their trade entrepôts in the Philippines, but they also navigated across the South China sea through the Palawan passage, while the Bugis mariners sailed north through the Celebes sea into the Zone. In this context, if one ignores traditional political boundaries and views these seas as unifying rather than divisive agents – “great connectors” – strategically extending across the regions key shipping routes, a strong case could be made for regarding the “Zone” as one of the final, albeit, critically important extremities of the world capitalist economy in Eastern Asia.

Among the richest sources of marine and forest products in the Zone were the strand environments and wilderness regions situated just south of the Sulu Archipelago, along the northeast coast of Borneo. The economic processes and historical events bound up with the intensifying flow of trade commodities, people and technology must also take into account the specialist role of the more remote highlanders and insular maritime fishers as they were increasingly drawn into the collecting and processing activities associated with the world capitalist economy and the economic life of the Zone. Unlike other parts of Southeast Asia, the upland tribal economies of Borneo and Mindanao were not tangential to the accelerated commercial activity taking place between the entrepôt at Jolo and the city of Canton, which were all part of an inter-related sub-system of a greater global-regional whole. Nevertheless, in spite of a particularly dense pattern of Bornean riverine settlement that supplied this larger market and seaborne trade with commodities like birds nest, camphor, wax, sago and gold, much of the interior of southern and eastern Borneo and the central dividing range was largely uninhabited, though parts were regarded as Bugis trading grounds and also served as a buffer between themselves and Taosug traders to the north.⁴

Across the landscapes of the Zone cultural-ecological difference and social inequality facilitated trade between tribal uplanders and hunters and gatherers in the innermost recesses of the forest interior, who wanted to avoid conflict. Because the China tea trade centered on Jolo after 1768, Kenyah and Kayan speakers of Borneo’s east coast tropical forests and

4 Warren 1981, 10-11, 76, 84-90. On the advent of large standing maritime populations of seafaring, trading-raiding Bugis peoples throughout the Southeast Asian region see Ammerell 1997, B. Andaya, 1993; L. Andaya, 1975; Pelras, 1996.

the Subanun of Mindanao's southern plateau were increasingly drawn into more extensive trade contacts with Taosug and Bugis along the coastline and in the river mouths. The local economies and lifeways of these vigorous slash and burn agriculturalists were thoroughly commercialized as they sent down the rivers volumes of surplus wax, camphor and birds nest in return for salt, textiles and minor manufactured goods.

Hence, my approach to framing and re-presenting the ethno-history of the Sulu Zone on its own terms from the late eighteenth century, rather than merely as a corollary of the history of western imperial expansion in Eastern Asia, was to tease out the economic, cultural and ecological interconnections embedded in the world capitalist economy with particular reference to the evolution of the "Zone". This broad conceptual schema aimed to enhance understanding of these global systemic links and interactions between geo-political core areas, notably China and Europe, and strategically positioned "zones" with strong trading bases and thin populations like the Sultanates, which encompassed a variety of economic sub-regions and extremely specialized territories.⁵

Center and Periphery

Initially, it was scholars of European social and economic history, especially those associated with the Annales School and its towering leader Fernand Braudel, who aimed to explore the complex system, structure and changes of the modern World Order.⁶ The Annales movement promoted a new kind of problem oriented interdisciplinary history which embraced an account of the whole range of human activities – "total" history. The distinctive innovative concepts and methods of the Annales group were achieved by full collaboration with other disciplines – notably geography, economics, sociology and anthropology.⁷ The conceptual framework and spatial concepts of Braudel's "Mediterranean Europe" and his work on *Material Civilization, Economy and Capitalism*

5 For a comparable example of how economic multifunctionality, hierarchy and "globalisation" functioned in an earlier period using "Southeast Asia" as the unit of reference see Curtin 1984, 128-129; Reid 1988 and 1993.

6 See Burke 1990.

7 Burke 1990, 12-31; Braudel 1980, 25-164; Bloch 1992.

formed part of an increasingly complicated portrait of the origins of European expansion and capitalism.⁸

The absolutely unprecedented level of social and technological power of the West fostered the complex, internal changes which enabled it to emerge as the “core” area or “centre” of the world economic system after the fifteenth century with the growth of capitalism and of commercial agriculture in western Europe. By the nineteenth century, the modern World System was well established as the West took full advantage of the industrial revolution drawing most of the world into the orbit of west European and north American capitalism and colonialism. In contemporary historical studies, semi-periphery and periphery have become conceptual analytic metaphors for theorizing and understanding the complex sometimes, albeit, contradictory parallel processes of integration and transmutation in Asia, Africa and Latin America between “international and parochial systems, universal and local cultures”.⁹ But far less is known about the internal processes of change which accompanied and underlay the interlocking of Southeast Asian economic regions and sets of societies into the world capitalist system as “peripheral”, “satellite” and/or “secondary” states. The development of geographically and culturally distinct economic sub-regions such as the “Sulu Zone”, was part of a global inter-regional process of integration and change with unexpected local implications and insecurities, as western core powers deprived the vast majority of states and societies of the rest of the world of some or all of their autonomy.

The concept of “periphery” which stresses inter-regional relationships, processes and inter-connections, developed relatively recently out of the historiographical formulations and debates of the neo-marxist dependency theorists, particularly Andre Gunder Frank and Paul Baran, and the world system approach of Immanuel Wallerstein.¹⁰ Like them, I was interested in the decisive altering of patterns and contexts of historical action whereby a core or metropolis expropriated economic surplus from its periphery or satellites and appropriated it for its own economic development. This concept of a world system constructed from thou-

8 Braudel 1972; see also Rosenav 1972; Braudel 1979.

9 Comaroff 1992, 24.

10 Baran 1957; Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1974; see also A.G.Hopkins 2002.

sands of separate market transactions and exchange relations forming an integral part of some lock-step pattern of the global capitalist economy meant for most non-western societies that “the same forces that built up the economies and cultures in the advanced lands broke down theirs, and they became ‘underdeveloped’ lands, those with relatively low investment levels”.¹¹ However, there were some economically powerful, peripheral, secondary states based on ascendant wealth and specialization, notably Sulu, that proved an exception to the rule. In order to account for the local-regional dynamic of social arrangements and representations, values and events, and sequence of changes over several generations, I used a “centre periphery” model; a conceptual framework that effectively integrated the histories of Europe, North America and Asia to comprehend the shifting nature of relationships involving internal and international social, economic and political changes both within and between the core, semi-peripheral and peripheral societies of West Europe, China, and the Sulu Zone, respectively.

Careful examination of the inapplicability of certain western terminology and categories – “piracy”, “slavery” and the “state” – enabled me to analyze the economic and political dynamics of a Malayo-Muslim state and how it was transformed by global trade, and the rapid advance of imperialism and modernity. I wanted to resolve an apparent paradox in Southeast Asian history about “piracy” and politics in the Malayo-Muslim world and European imperial policy and expansion in the region; the paradox that the rise of the Sulu Sultanate, increased maritime slave raiding, and, the opening and imminent decline of China at the hands of Europe took place at much the same time, at the end of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, as the introduction of tea in Europe, and the fact that tea was unknown in India or the West, except as an important consumable from China.¹² Europe’s insatiable desire for this commodity by the end of the eighteenth century was to change the face of Asian history and shape the future destinies of both Sulu and China as areas that could ascend to the “core” or descend to the periphery of the world capitalist system. Combining the theories and concepts of Latin American economists and *Annales* historians, I dem-

11 Hodgson 1974, Vol. 3, 203.

12 Hobhouse 1992, 95; see also Sutherland 1995; Kleinen and Ossenweijer 2010, 3-30.

onstrated that the price of development of global trade in Eastern Asia included not only opium smuggling and the partly destruction of China but also intensification of slavery in the Sulu Zone as part of the new division of international labour between “core” and “periphery”. In this context, the genesis of Sulu’s seemingly paradoxical capacity for internal transformation and social reproduction as a “traditional society”, is perhaps, best understood as a series of intersections, encounters or “historical accidents usually due to contact with foreign formations”.¹³ In a very real sense, the history of late eighteenth century Eastern Asia was in fact a history of the continuing integration of the world capitalist system of ever more regions and specialized territories of the world.

The world system came to dominate the Sulu Sultanate and its environs. Chinese demand for exotic commodities, now of great interest to Europeans, encouraged both the establishment and “take off” of sub-regional trade networks and the production of goods. New entrepôts emerged, especially in the area of the Sulu sea and Borneo. The island of Jolo became a major centre for cross-cultural trade in the recent history of Eastern Asia and the Sulu Sultanate flourished. The Taosug were suddenly locked into a vast web of trade and exchange involving the exploitation of the rich tropical resources of the area, with producers, distributors and controllers involved in a complex set of relationships and structural dependency. Within the Zone centres of distribution and exchange developed and, in association with the development of larger inter-regional markets, capital flows and technology transfers international trade increased and the Sultanate established itself as a major entrepôt. The trading networks in the Zone rapidly grew in scale and complexity and the fortunes of everyone involved in exchange and redistribution became linked with the political and economic fortunes of Europe and the China tea trade.

My initial thinking about how the late eighteenth century global economy created a “borderless world” or “zone”, both spatially and historically, in the area of the Sulu and Celebes seas, owes much to the influence of John Smail’s thought, who, in turn, had been strongly indebted to the hemispheric cross-regional historical orientation of Marshall Hodgson. Templates for the “zone” and possible center-periphery mod-

13 Meillassoux 1972, 101.

els were provided by the seminal works of E. R. Leach, Fernand Braudel and Andre Gunder Frank.¹⁴ The inherent advantages of such a theoretical evolutionary-ecological approach for framing and interpretation in an upland agricultural context were already apparent to me in Leach's pioneering work on the political systems of highland Burma. In the Sulu context, however, Southeast Asia was a region in which the sea served as a major means of communication for a wider inter-regional economy in which national boundaries were fluid and by no means fixed.¹⁵ Following in the footsteps of Leach and Braudel, I abandoned the blinkered geographic perspective of earlier historians of the Philippines, Indonesia and Borneo, for a more dynamic definition of the Sulu Sultanate's boundaries. It was based on larger scale processes of social change and a "borderless" history of a global maritime trade network oriented toward China, Europe and North America as part of the same world system. To be released from the conceptual constraints of conventional historical geography, I called this wide ranging web of economic influence and interpersonal relations that centered on the Sulu Sultanate a "Zone".

Time

I now want to speak briefly of a "regional time", having examined the spatial system; the creation of a "zone" delineated both by space and *by time*, whose essence and demarcation came with the spread of commodities, technology, ideas and practices of the world capitalist economy and western Imperialism, as two halves of the same process. The Sulu Zone as a regional "spatial" system and social order, like the economy it represented, was not atemporal. My framing and interpretation of the "zone" as a spatial system rested on the axiom that it was "inherently unstable and generally dynamic".¹⁶ And, that it was thrust on to the global stage at a specific moment or era in "regional time". Leach's remarkable work on state and community structures in highland Burma aimed at tracing the pattern of the shifting balance between two representations of political

14 On the impact of John Smal's ideas about historical writing on Southeast Asia see Sears 1993; Hodgson 1993; Leach 1954; Braudel 1972; Frank 1978, 1998; Tachimoto 1995; for a discussion of the influence of the Annalists on historians of early Southeast Asia see Aung-Thwin 1995, 75-91.

15 Dick 1993, 1.

16 Comaroff 1992, 22.

order and social phenomena over some 150 years. Similarly, for myself, the “Zone” was also “a process in time”¹⁷: a recognition that all ethnic groups and communities were being shaped and re-shaped by the interplay between internal social and cultural forms and ongoing, external courses of action. In a very real sense, the peoples of the “Zone” were in fact “products” of large scale processes of global socio-economic change which had made them what they were and continued to make them what they would become in reaction to the uncontrollable and rapid impact of these forces. The holism of the zone as a “spatial system” was posited, both as a model and a necessary analytic fiction, not given. The invisible connections linking the process of structural change and dynamic movement of local systems and networks of this “Zone” to the wider economic and political world(s) of which it was becoming a part had to be traced and explained in “regional time”.

Braudel and his French colleagues – writing what some called “geohistory” – have emphasized long term patterns rather than “eventism”, devoting considerable attention to social and economic developments. In his work on the Mediterranean world (a cross-regional spatial system), in the later sixteenth century, Braudel argues that historical changes took place at different speeds. He distinguished three speeds and devoted a section of his masterpiece to each.¹⁸ First is the time of “geohistory”; the relations between humans and their environment, “a history whose passage is almost imperceptible”. Braudel in describing the sea basin as a complex ecological mosaic called this “*historie structurale*”. Secondly, the time of “economic systems, states, societies and civilizations”, with its “slow but recognizable rhythms”. Here, he analyzed an extraordinary variety of topics including patterns of migration and trade, town life, crafts, festivals, the lives of peasants and the activities of merchants, and demography. Finally, there was the fast moving time of events and individuals. *The Sulu Zone* focused on the period from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. The basic pattern over this period was one of phenomenal growth for the Sultanate leading to gradual decline but which in turn did not lead to recovery at the beginning of this century. Braudel’s time of “geohistory”, “a history [...] of

17 Leach 1954, 4, 212.

18 Burke 1992, 152; Braudel 1980, 3-5, 25-54.

constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles", was essential for the creation of the regional "space" or "Zone", but it was the second time, "*histoire conjuncturelle*", which was most relevant here, concerned as it is with historical changes to economic, political and social structures.¹⁹ For example, the economic, social and environmental ramifications of Sulu and China's inextricable involvement in a dynamic global economy was an important harbinger of the momentous changes beginning to occur all over Eastern Asia between 1768 and 1848. With explosive speed, West Europeans spread out to trade and colonize various regions and states of Southeast Asia. When Englishmen like Dalrymple, Rennel, Forrest and others first came to Sulu in the 1760s, they recognized that the "Zone" was a potentially inexhaustible source of natural commodities for the China tea trade. They soon learned too that Taosug datus and other leading inhabitants of this region would exchange these products for manufactured industrial goods in return. Eager to extract natural resources from this virtually uncharted area, European merchants extended their international trade network and knowledge of the world to the "Zone", after 1768. The speed of historical change is important here. The reverberations from the shock waves of Braudel's time of "economic systems and states" emanating from events on the southeast coast of China, as a result of the intersections of the world capitalist economy, were felt especially early in the Sulu Archipelago. Britain's efforts to increasingly open up China to foreign trade while trying to negotiate the impossibility of "living with difference" between discrepant empires and cultures in the first half of the nineteenth century, led to a "*histoire conjuncturelle*" by which the "Sulu Zone" came to reveal itself as it was.²⁰ For me this new age or "regional time" was first of all in my mind; I had needed new eyes to see the "Zone" now taking shape so rapidly after 1768 in the area of the Sulu Archipelago.

These central factors of space and time highlighted the methodological difficulties involved in conceptualizing a history of Southeast Asia that stressed internal and international inter-relationships while, at the same time, integrating the global scene with the local one, with particular

19 Burke 1990, 39-42.

20 The exact phrase from Dumont (1957, 21) is "history is the movement by which society reveals itself as what it is".

reference to an economic sub-region like the “Zone”. In the beginning, I faced a serious challenge, since it seemed almost impossible to master all the sources and knowledge required in order to develop a well-documented ethno-historically oriented world system analysis.²¹ Only with a radical shift in my historical and geographical perspective and thinking about that part of the maritime world was it possible to seriously contemplate undertaking this pioneering revisionist task. Both Leach and Hodgson carefully demonstrated in their stimulating books that the initial step was to avoid use of geographical terms and units necessarily defined by the political boundaries of the time and the epistemological assumptions of orientalism and civilizational studies.²² Like the Annales Group, I am fascinated by geography – I have been researching a history of Philippine typhoons for the past fifteen years. However, the making of *The Sulu Zone* was closer to an “ecohistory” than to the Annales School’s “Geohistory”, because a primary concern of the monograph is with the relation between social groups, like the Samal Laut, Iranun, Balangingi Samal and Taosug, and their physical environment. I also placed more emphasis on demography than Braudel did in his classic study of the Mediterranean basin because the “real motor of social change” was population. Slavery and dependent labour were not solely economic institutions which enabled the late eighteenth century expansion of the Sulu state and domination of the regional trade network and/or “Zone”. Slavery and the accomplishment of ethnicity had virtually become the very basis of organized society in the Sultanate.

I also had to focus paradigmatically on identifying the salient threads of the local, inter-regional and global patterns and their inter-connections in order to render the history of the Zone as more than the sum of its parts. The maritime populations that were dependent on the sea for their economic pursuits – trading, raiding, collecting and fishing – remained largely caricatures in the historiography of the region, their origins and development, relationships with each other, their loosely integrated regional economies dominated by the institutions slave raiding and cross-cultural trade, and their adjustments to external forces were largely writ-

21 I used twenty four archives or other repositories, located on three continents, whose manuscripts were used in the preparation of the thesis on which my book is based.

22 Hodgson 1993, 295; see also Wilson and Donnan 1998.

ten about from between “insular blinkers”. To rectify the errors and pre-suppositions of earlier studies, I developed a methodologically self-conscious ethno-history utilizing a global, cultural-ecological perspective where all states and societies could be seen at once and their inter-connectedness to one another within the framework of the world economic system became clear.²³ It is crucial to understanding the more flexible inclusive approach required to write *The Sulu Zone* that it was based on devising a new explicit conceptual framework. A paradigm of sorts – a broad, loose but nonetheless coherent explanation and model about the nature of a Southeast Asian economic region that grew out of connections and relationships with the “modern” world system from the end of the eighteenth century. Apart from offering an overall perspective and understanding of these global-regional inter-relationships, the role of the Zone configuration provided the major principle of framing and organization of the narrative; it was the essential background against which to begin unravelling the main elements in the development of these separate but increasingly related inter-regional and local history’s of society and culture in Eastern Asia.

Redistribution

The works of Wallerstein, Frank, Wolf and Curtin postulate cross-cultural trade and exchange as arguably the most important extrinsic factor in stimulating the development, change and inter-connectedness of societies and cultures around the globe.²⁴ Their view of the modern world as a complex changing macro system must take account of a wide variety of local factors to understand center-periphery relations – the political economy of power, patronage and privilege being the most critical factor – in studying the world capitalist economy as the dominant force in the evolution of the modern world. There is also a common desire in the holistic explanations of these global historians and social theorists to demonstrate how social, political and economic change of core areas and peripheral societies were shaped by their “central value system” and the central institutional system which it legitimated.²⁵ Like

23 Warren 1981, xi-xvi, 252-255.

24 Curtin 1984, 41; Wolf 1982.

25 Burke 1992, 82.

the above advocates of global history and the world system approach, most scholars of the region see the late eighteenth century Southeast Asian world, consisting of several types of central institutional systems or state formations. The American sociologist Edward Shils is perhaps the best known exponent of the “central value system” concept which so profoundly influenced Clifford Geertz in his provocative interpretation of divine kinship in nineteenth century Bali and the theory of the “exemplary centre”.²⁶ This first type of political system was characterized by the sacrality, drama and organized spectacle of the ruling social order – by what Geertz calls the “expressive nature” of this kind of centrality.²⁷

The second type of political system is based on redistribution. Braudel’s work on material life and capitalism in early modern times, Curtin’s formulations about economic change in pre-colonial Africa in the era of the slave trade, and my own study of change over more than a century which focuses on the seafaring populations of a Southeast Asian economic region all owe an intellectual debt to the economic theory and ideas of Karl Polanyi about modes of exchange.²⁸ One important mode was “reciprocity”, another was “redistribution”. It is important to note, too, that in Polanyi’s view both these types of transactions as historical modes of organizing economies were neither mutually exclusive of one another nor the market economy. Polanyi’s system of redistribution depends on social hierarchy and a tributary mode of production and exchange where goods flowed into the “center” of an empire, state or “zone” engendering distinctions of rank, privilege and patronage among tribute takers and flowed out again to the producers of tribute on the “periphery” in the provinces, hinterlands or frontiers. The mobilization of social labour to reproduce the dynamic and social conditions for the proliferation of a political system based on “redistribution” gives rise to military and political competition between contending social groups and segments of society, to control trade with the outside world, and, labour power.²⁹

26 Shils 1975, 2.

27 Geertz 1980, 121-123; Wolters 2008, 57-64, 141-192.

28 Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957; Polanyi 1966; See also Bohannan and Dalton 1965; Curtin 1975, 235.

29 Wolf 1982, 386.

A central institutional system based on a redistributive mode of production and exchange enabled traders like those of eighteenth century Dahomey and the Taosug datus of the Sulu Sultanate to acquire and monopolize both the goods and trade of outsiders – wealth – that built influence and prestige-power. In both these “peripheral” societies redistribution became the dominant pattern of integration and mode of transaction as they were drawn into economic exchange relations of a world market economy and trade with Europeans. Jolo as a “port of trade” was an entrepôt and town where cross-cultural trade had often taken place but the scale of this type of commerce was always comparatively small up until the latter part of the eighteenth century.³⁰ For the Sultan, with his capital located on the seacoast, the entrepôt and “Zone” incorporated a set of cultural-institutional practices typical of centralized states based on “redistribution” for the production and acquisition of goods, on the one hand, and kinship, warfare and other forms of organization and culture on the other.

The south Fukienese people occupying one end of a busy north-south maritime trading route and world – the Amoy network on the South China coast – had maintained direct contact with the Sulu Sultanate and eastern parts of the archipelago since the beginning of the eighteenth century.³¹ For the Taosug this contact provided the initial outlet for their marine and forest produce, especially tripang, pearls and birds nest for the return cargo of the south China junks. More importantly, for the coastal leaders the expanding trade by mid-century made Jolo a key “port of trade” for shipping directly to China. While the scale of this type of commerce was still comparatively small in the first half of the eighteenth century and it remained chiefly in south Chinese hands, Europeans, especially British tea traders, in order to expand their commercial contacts with China, actively encouraged a smuggling trade with Taosug merchants and Bugis traders from 1768 onwards which rapidly built up this small state and its redistributive economy.³² The organization of the economy of the Sulu Sultanate and its “Zone” were increas-

30 On the concept of the “port of trade” see Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957, 38-63, 114-153, 117-187; Curtin 1984, 12-14; Warren 2010, 178-199.

31 See Ng 1983; for the role of China in the economic and political affairs of the Malacca Strait region from the tenth through the fourteenth century see, Heng 2009.

32 Warren 1981, 17-66.

ingly based on the distribution of imported goods and the corresponding centralization of their products for sale and exchange in the global trade network of the region, and, on sea not land power.

These relations between Jolo's emerging inter-regional economy and society and the numerous smaller towns, villages and trade centres scattered throughout the Zone were effectively controlled by the Taosug elite. The commercial activities of even the most far flung communities dotting the margins of the Zone's redistributive economic system were often dominated by Taosug chiefs or their representatives. Local notables emerged as formal political relations with communities involved in inter-regional trade were forged through bonds of kinship and marriage. Slaves collected from the Christian population of the Philippine provinces and eastern Indonesia were also recruited into a meritocratic system of local administration as the trade frontier of the Zone appeared to expand indefinitely.³³ Jolo as a rising "port-polity" could only sustain cross-cultural trade on a large scale for an extended period by exploiting the natural resources and labour power of these peripheral communities. The collection of the products of the archipelago from dominated settlements paid for itself because it enabled the Sultanate to sustain its organized maritime military power until the supply of captive slaves for recruitment into the redistributive economy began to dwindle from about 1848 onwards.

The ascendancy of the Taosug merchants on the northeast coast of Borneo was in part at the expense of rival trading interests, especially pioneering Bugis from towns further south along the Mahakam river pushing north towards the edge of the Zone. Ethnic integration into the inter-regional procurement trade was no less remarkable than the extent and complexity of the system itself. Maritime nomadic fishermen and trained slaves specialized in harvesting the seas and reefs surrounding numerous islets and atolls. The Islamised orang sungai were mobilized to procure camphor, wax and rattan, while coastal and riverine dwelling groups seasonally collected birds nest of uncommon value for Taosug. Effective authority at the southern extremity of the Zone was limited. The Buginese did not allow the Taosug to gain full political control on the southern rivers. Nevertheless, despite Taosug-Bugis conflict and trade

33 Warren 1981, 223.

rivalry there developed a lively local traffic between contested areas as well as with Sulu's redistributive economy centered on Jolo.

This late eighteenth century intrusion of the world capitalist economy was not resisted by the Taosug who made their society relatively open to outside influences and social change, but, largely on their terms. The coastal traders were mostly aristocrats who recognized the advantage in accepting and "borrowing" foreign technology, new ideas, luxury imports and trade goods. The impact of this maritime expansion and growing influence of the outside world on Taosug political organization was significant. The rapid increase in trade goods and revenues, and the control and dissemination of improved firearms to mobile marauding communities residing in the Zone, encouraged the development of a more coercive bureaucratically organized economy and state.³⁴

What the Europeans and Chinese sought at Jolo and from the fisheries and forests of the Zone was, above all, tripang, pearls and birds nest. Between 1768 and 1848 hundreds of vessels visited Jolo, almost all of them trading in either one or two seasons. Tripang was obtained, at first, in return for cloth, clothing, iron and other metals; soon after for gunpowder, musket and cannon. The Taosug traders were mostly coastal datus or "chiefs" who mobilized their factions and contacts throughout the Zone to deliver the products, and whose power and wealth grew together with the development of the trade. One must note here, however, that this rapid trade expansion did not entirely dovetail with pre-existing Sulu circuits of exchange, as their basic structure was altered somewhat by global-regional trade, Islam and the way slavery could be used to bring in more commodities. Of particular importance for Sulu were guns and gunpowder and other imported manufactures, textiles and also opium which contributed to the Sultanate's centralizing coercive power and integration of the economy with other social institutions. Taosug merchants or chiefs on the coast and their descendants developed an extensive redistributive trade in which they wrested the function of the collection and distribution of commodities for the China tea trade from traditional competitors – the Sultanates of Brunei and Cotabato. This inter-regional commerce – involving trade with the Bugis of Samarinda to the south, with Manila to the north, and with Singapore to the

34 See Lieberman 1995, 797; Warren 2002.

west – formed a complex set of inter-relationships, entangled commodities and transactions through which the Sultanate was able to consolidate its dominance over the outlying areas of the Zone along the northeast Borneo and western Mindanao coasts.

However, the relationship between trade, power and culture – the meaning of force – was wholly different in the Sulu world of the 1760s that Dalrymple encountered than that depicted in Marryt's stunning portrait of an 1840s "Malay Chief" of Jolo whose wealth and power was by then based on the careful regulation of global-local trade (ill.). It is clear that particular goods traded to a Taosug datu in 1768, goods that carried prestige as well as consumption value, were catalyst for a wholly different set of possible political and social interactions from those traded to Taosug merchants in the 1840s. In the 1760s, for example, never far from the surface was the intent of gaining alliance and wealth by redistributing merchandise such as opium for purposes of politics and prestige. Opium in the 1760s had not yet been adapted into a Taosug system of practice and belief, it had no ritual or ceremonial role. Opium traded to a Taosug leader at the peak of the redistributive network of the 1840s was a different matter. In less than two generations, partly due to the interdependent ecological balance of the Zone, the China tea trade and the world economy had become a road to riches and power for the strategically located Taosug; both aristocrats and merchants could make an exceptional living. Yet, ironically to many of these wealthy Taosug, opium was now less a business than an addiction – a sinister friend and a new way of life. The trade in opium by then had wreaked a devastating social transformation almost as significant for understanding the meaning of force, and, reframing the idea of culture itself and heterodox practices, as the technological and social innovations introduced by improved firearms.

By 1800 redistribution had become the organizing pattern of the regional economy of the Sulu Sultanate. Indirectly, it was a demand for tea that could not be satisfied that animated European interest in Sulu's commodities and its sudden rise to regional primacy. During the eighteenth century tea replaced ale as the national beverage in England and was especially popular among the artisan and labouring classes. China was almost the sole supplier of aromatic tea to England. The British were quick to recognize the potential of participation in the long standing Sino-Sulu trade as a means of redressing the one-way flow of silver from

India to China. Marine and jungle products, highly valued in China, were needed to stem it. Sulu's ascendancy towards the end of the eighteenth century developed out of global economic inter-connections and inter-dependencies of the world capitalist economy between British India, Southeast Asia and China. Commercial and tributary activity became linked with long distance maritime slave raiding and incorporation of captured peoples in a redistributive system which made Jolo a principal entrepôt for large scale delivery of natural commodities for the China tea trade.

II Problems of Explanation: Trade and Commodities

I now want to shift the emphasis from models and concepts to the entangled objects themselves – commodities – that were physically present, whenever two or more cultures and economies with their respective institutions and underlying organizations edged up against one another, in this “borderless world” or Zone that the late eighteenth century world capitalist economy created. The inter-connectedness of these commodities: tea, opium, textiles and firearms, on the one hand, and, on the other, tripang, birds nest and pearls, illuminates how the structure and function of money, markets, and cross cultural trade, and a repertoire of practices in contemporary life were determined by their continuous negotiation within this “borderless world”.

Critical regional transitions began in the late eighteenth century with Britain's involvement in the intra-Asian trade. British merchants in the search for wealth bartered arms, textiles, opium and specie for an enormous variety of local commodities to balance the economic drain of their China trade. As British power increased in the late eighteenth century, trading settlements and outposts along the coasts of Southeast Asia developed rapidly, and along with places like Penang and Balambangan came the unfolding of the China trade and the search for profitable commodities.³⁵ This quest for tripang, birds nest, pearls and other desirable commodities was to have a profound impact upon the various peoples of the Zone and their way of life and much of the rest of the eastern archipelago, constituting one of the most dramatic and fascinating epi-

35 Warren 1977, 73-93.

sodes in the history of China's tea trade and the world capitalist economy.

By 1700, tea had become, along with coffee and cocoa, one of the "great non-alcoholic drinks" for all those Europeans with a sound grasp of epidemiological principles and fear of water borne diseases and pestilence. Within a century, the English, rightly reluctant to go beyond the bounds of epidemiological common sense, were each consuming 2.1/2 pounds of tea and 17 pounds of sugar.³⁶ The right lessons and examples from history about global economic-cultural inter-connections and inter-dependencies tend to explain patterns and events which have been formally glossed over. For example, sugar "demanded" slaves and the Atlantic slave trade. Similarly, tea, inextricably bound to sugar as product and fate, would also inadvertently "demand" slaves in the Sulu Zone and the advent of Iranunan and Balangingi slave raiding (ill. Joanga). Since the British primarily wanted sea cucumber, sharks fin, pearls and birds nest for the trade in China tea, the issue of the nature of productive relations in Sulu or slavery suddenly became primary; the demand for local commodities in return for imports affected the allocation of labour power and the demand for people throughout the Zone. In this globalizing context, tea was more than simply the major commodity in the development of trade between China and Britain, it was also a plant that was instrumental in the rise and transformation of the Sulu Sultanate as a regional power, permanently influencing the economic organization and integration of the Zone.

Nor did the impact of the insatiable demand for the commodity tea end there with the stunning systemic development of trade, power and demography in the Sulu Zone, which changed the regional face and history of insular Southeast Asia. The East India Company which had established a near global sector monopoly in China tea was restricted for the proper conduct of business to a small enclave at Canton. By 1820, it is estimated that probably 30 million pounds of the Company tea was consumed in Britain alone.³⁷ What was the cost of this mildly addictive non-alcoholic beverage, drunk throughout the British Isles and re-exported all over the world, to London trading houses? In 1801, at retail, tea cost

36 Hobhouse 1992, 115.

37 Hobhouse 1992, 96.

importers about two million pounds in China. Or, as Hobhouse puts it “an extraordinary sum of money (equivalent to about a billion dollars a year in today’s value)”³⁸ had to be found annually by the factors and super-cargos who traded in Canton. China at this time furnishes us with a fascinating and instructive account of a civilization seemingly self-sufficient in technology, minerals, textiles and most other necessities of life. A necessary commodity, all this China tea arriving in Europe had to be paid for in specie. Dermigny describes the flow of silver to Canton and the East as a “chronic haemorrhage”.³⁹ Despite the English selling on average 27 million pounds of raw Indian cotton and textiles between 1785 and 1833, they still could not obtain enough capital to purchase all the tea Europe demanded.⁴⁰ After 1768, however, a partial financial answer had been found by British traders handling a variety of local commodities collected from the forests and fisheries of the Sulu Zone. But the definitive devastating answer and financial prayer to the amount of silver flowing into China was an ultra-addictive drug from India – opium. The exchange of opium for tea accelerated the disintegration of China at the very same time that it contributed to Sulu’s ascendancy. However, this commodity ultimately also sowed discontent among an increasing number of addicted Taosug coastal chiefs which culminated in a manifest loss of will on the part of key individuals in the “chiefly” class as the Spanish swept out of the Visayas into the Mindanao-Sulu region with steamboat gunships, after 1848. No longer complete masters of either themselves or the seas, these datus now willingly collaborated with their arch political rivals and enemies – the Spanish – against the so-called “pirates” and “ruthless people” – the Samal Balangingi – in order to retain control over “redistribution” in the Zone.⁴¹

My emphasis here, as we follow various entangled objects with their readily defined characteristics of “modern” and singular “magicalities and enchantments”,⁴² from Europe and India to the Sulu Zone and China

38 Hobhouse 1992, 115.

39 Dermigny 1964, vol. 1, 724.

40 Wolf 1982, 257.

41 Warren 1981, 104-125; See also Cojuangco 1993.

42 Comaroff 1992, 6; see also Appadurai 1999, 3-63; the commodity chain methodology is related to approaches variously called commodity systems, commodity circuits,

and back, is on the complicated role commodities of the world capitalist economy played in creating and breaking down the “borders” of cultures across Eastern Asia-cultures, usually regarded as non-capitalist and “traditional”. Ample evidence of the expanding stock of commodities, especially textiles and clothing, signifying progress and modernity, that also were part of the traffic of the tea – silver – opium syndrome, can be found in the British East India Company and Spanish trade data for the Sulu Sultanate, and arranged in series over time.⁴³

The importance of the hand loom weaving industry in the regional economy of the Zone has been understated in various historical studies. The significance of the “industry” in Basilan and Mindanao was evident in its role in providing a basis for local reciprocity and exchange, a source of trade and export revenue on an intra-regional basis, and more crucially, a form of entrenched commodity production. While the art of weaving was well developed among interior tribes of the Zone this was not the case among coastal people and traders at the end of the eighteenth century. Both the Chinese and Europeans quickly learned that the Tao-sug were highly skilled in working metal, leather and wood. But since they lacked textiles, these soon became a staple commodity of the inter-regional trade. Cotton cloth from China, India and America were imported in many forms: primarily in bolts, and finished into sarongs, skirts, shawls, jackets, trousers, pants, handkerchiefs and ribbons. This imported cotton cloth was often better for ordinary clothing than indigenous-made cloth because it was lightweight, easier to sew, fashionable, and washable. Textiles, particularly Indian cottons, rapidly became one of the most important trade commodities.⁴⁴ Hand loom manufactured textiles became insignificant by the 1840s in the redistributive economy of the Zone as commercial materials replaced the local woven cloth. Here again, to understand the relative decline and/or absence of this traditional local handicraft industry in the life of the Zone we must focus attention on interdependent inter-regional developments affecting the China tea trade on a global-wide basis. Commercial textiles as commodities changed traditional productive processes such as hand loom weaving,

commodity networks, value chains, production networks, and often which have the word “global” attached.

43 Warren 1981, 259-263, 265-280.

44 Warren 1981, 49-50.

altered peoples sense of fashion, domesticated their bodies, and fostered a deep seated material dependency that bound local consumers in the Zone to the interventions of an expanding world capitalist economy, as flows of “modern” objects intensified in speed and volume. Ironically, neither the contemporary “modern” society that was being forged within the Zone nor the Taosug *datus* themselves were the complete masters of its fate. This history of commodities crossing and transforming regional boundaries must also concern itself especially with the politics of value: the phenomena of the power and meaning ascribed to these objects by both harbingers of these cross-cultural trade encounters, the heads of British tea firms and importing houses, and, the protagonists on the spot, the “hongs” of Canton and the peoples of the Zone, caught up in this hemispheric drama.

Finally, the acquisition of “powerful” new commodities, most particularly evident in the form of advanced gunpowder weapons led to quite dramatic changes in the possibilities for future predatory development and decline in the case of the Sulu Sultanate and its rival neighbours after 1768. To meet the increased demands for labour power in the Sulu Zone between 1768 and 1848, Taosug *datus* equipped Iranum and Samal slave raiding vessels and also provided credit advances in powder and ball, cannon, muskets, opium and additional crew. The spread of the European arms trade in conjunction with the China tea trade and its centralization and regulation by the Taosug was particularly critical, since the political careers of these “chiefs” on the coast as skillful traders and, ultimately, the very survival of the state depended on their monopolizing the purchase of European war stores. The *datus* economic role as redistributors of these commodities – arms, powder and lead – was vitally essential to the maintenance of their political hegemony in the Zone, and for understanding the inseparable link between a trade commodity and the meaning of force in a world in transition.

Exotica: Tripang and Birds Next

The emphasis thus far has been on commodities, the constitution of culture and the economic, social, fiscal and environmental ramifications of linking China’s and Sulu’s traditional economics to the global market. I now want to take two commodities found in the zone – tripang and birds nest – to give an even better idea of how Chinese desire, or greed for these products, changed the face of the ecological history of the Zone and

shaped the destinies of hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asians, at a time of radical global economic transformation. In order to understand how these commodities altered the course of cross-cultural trade and historical events, it is necessary momentarily to switch the location of interdependent economic sites; we must leave behind the boardrooms of London's tea importers and China's urban coastal enclaves, for an encounter with the banquet halls of the Emperor of China, and the fisheries and forests of the Sulu Zone.

Food has always been a major aspect of Chinese culture. In terms of ideals and forms of cultural expression, variety of foods, rituals and institutions few people except, perhaps, the French derive as much pleasure from eating at their dinner table, as the Chinese.⁴⁵ During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) a first class imperial banquet served by the emperor or empress would offer 34 varieties of meat, fish and fruit, a second class banquet 31 varieties, and a third class banquet 26.⁴⁶ Many types of exotic foods or commodities from the South Sea Islands are mentioned as standard fare of Chinese Imperial cuisine by the mid-eighteenth century. Particular cooking styles and special foods such as sea cucumber and birds nest seem to have made a considerable impact on the tastes, variety of dishes and extravagance of Manchu court life, by then.⁴⁷ Lai in a brief work illustrates the effects of texture and other factors, notably visual harmony on the Chinese palate, and thereafter furnishes us with an instructive history of how the Chinese went to great lengths to prepare certain dishes more for decorative or medicinal purposes rather than consumption. He demonstrates from the accounts of literary persons, food connoisseurs and critics of the time how the burgeoning demand for a number of these exotic commodities can be explained by the term "*bu*", foods rich in high quality protein, which were also said to possess the essence of the sheer vitality of life, or aphrodisiac powers.⁴⁸

The burgeoning trade in "exotica" for Chinese cuisine and medicine led the Sulu Sultanate to begin to specialize in the production and collec-

45 See Lai 1984; Chang 1977; for an important discussion of consumption, taste and social change see, Warde 1997, 7–21.

46 Lai 1984, 42.

47 Lai 1984, 6.

48 Lai 1984, 11.

tion of particular commodities in exchange for other commodities from Europe and China, especially textiles, opium and firearms. However, a factor of particularly striking importance here is how the Chinese table became a critical meeting point of the paradoxical dilemmas and contradictions generated by global market transactions, especially the intense demand for China tea in the farthest extremities of Western Europe. To pay for the tea, tripang or sea cucumber, super-abundant throughout the Zone, began to flow in huge quantities towards South China.⁴⁹ Tripang or *beche de mer* (literally “sea slug”) is a tasteless substance. The dried or pre-soaked body of this edible holothurian, cooked in a rich chicken stock was generally valued for its texture as a food and as an aphrodisiac. This increase in the production of sea cucumber due to new eating habits and styles of Chinese cooking had direct repercussions throughout the Zone, where it highlighted the importance of the labour power of maritime nomadic fishers and slaves in the local regional economy and further altered the balance of power between sedentary coastal trading populations and these maritime nomadic “masters” of the seas.



Fig 1: The Samal Bajau Laut, the maritime nomadic fishers of the Sulu Zone, who performed an invaluable role in the economy of the Sulu Zone as gatherers of sea produce.

49 For another important contribution to the maritime and commercial history of the region centering on the tripang trade see MacKnight 1976 and Sopher 1965, 71-72, 123-127, 147-155, 239-243.

The collection of tripang for the China tea trade demanded the exceptional diving skills of Samal boat dwellers. Certain Taosug communities linked to the Sultan and his kindred claimed the services of these local “specialists” solely for the procurement of tripang and pearls. Dotting the gulfs, bays and reefs of the Sulu and Celebes seas were fleets of sailing vessels from Jolo and elsewhere which each year sailed to collect cargoes of tripang throughout the zone for the kitchens and banquet halls of Qing China. Diving trips, involving hundreds of small craft and lasting several months at a time, were organized and led by these coastal Taosug *datus*. The collecting and processing of sea cucumber was exceptionally labour intensive. For most of the maritime populations of the Sulu Zone tripanging was a major activity of the global-local economy. But demand for labour in the tripang fisheries outstripped supply as China harvested mountains due to the rapid expansion of the tea trade in the early to mid nineteenth century. Direct archival evidence, and, my own observations and experience of living in a Samal Laut coastal village on the margin of the former Zone in the 1960s, enabled me to estimate the overall number of people involved in the tripang industry and their annual output at small establishments around the Zone. I suggested that the Taosug with their retainers and slaves normally collected around 10,000 piculs of tripang in any one season in the first half of the nineteenth century. This conservative estimate tends to support the conclusion that the collection of a *picul* of tripang required the average annual labour of two able bodied men. This means that in the first half of the nineteenth century an estimated 68,000 men laboured *each year* in the Zone’s tripang fisheries alone, to provide this popular Chinese exotica that was standard banquet fare and appeared on so many menus, sometimes braised with geese’s feet or abalone.⁵⁰

One can hardly discuss Qing cuisine without mentioning birds nest. This exotic food seems to have come into favour slightly earlier than tripang. If the labour intensive economy of the Sulu Zone relied on the sea as an abundant source of tripang for the world capitalist economy, the wilderness of Borneo was its second mainstay. It was principally from this environment that the Sultanate was supplied with specialties for the China trade. Birds nest, collected primarily from limestone caves

50 Lai 1984, 31.

were obtained in abundance by thousands of local specialists and slaves who initiated expansion of settlement and harvested the riches of the forests of east Borneo for their Sulu overlords. Birds nest is formed from the white saliva secreted from the mouths of tiny golden shrikes, a bird which abounds in east Borneo, to bind its nest to the walls of caves.⁵¹ The nests were usually attached to the sides and roof in incredible quantities, and in seemingly inaccessible spots. These caves and shelters were often part of limestone cliffs over hundreds of feet high; for example, the mammoth Gomantan caves situated in the vicinity of the Kinabatangan river some two days journey from Sandakan Bay were part of a sheer cliff complex 900 feet high! The entrance to the largest limestone cave was over 100 feet wide by 250 feet high, and the roof sloped upwards 110 feet more, forming a magnificent natural cathedral some 360 feet in height. Soaring high above in the ceilings recesses were hundreds of thousands of golden shrikes.⁵² The Taosug *datus* attempted to exercise direct authority over the collection of nests from particular cave sites. The nest gatherers in their thousands erected semi-permanent light stages, scaffolding and ladders of bamboo and cane everywhere, with which they pursued their hazardous occupation in the heart of the tropical forests of the Zone. Birds nest collecting in east Borneo lasted from February to June at which time Sulu *prabus* returned to Jolo in the midst of the inter-regional trading season. The nests were harvested as soon as they had dried, either still full of feathers, or free of them. Traditionally, the nests from east Borneo sites were divided among the “cave owners”, who collected them at great risk, the Taosug river lord, and the Sultan at the apex of the system of redistribution.

As noted earlier, throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the main competitors of the Taosug in the birds nest trade were the Bugis on the Mahakam, and their successors on the Berau river. Even after the Taosug seized control of the major rivers at the southern extremity of the Zone, Bugis traders and their predatory “dayak” allies competed as fiercely with the Taosug over this commodity as their Samarinda based predecessors had done several decades earlier.⁵³ The

51 Lai 1984, 30.

52 Warren 1981, 82.

53 Warren 1981, 84-93.

demand for this exotic food for the Chinese table led to a comparatively high incidence of violence and warfare, performed by the same competing groups that organized and did the collecting. The evolution of the China tea trade also had a great deal to do with rapid commodity depletion and environmental degradation on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Both the reefs and forests of the Sulu Zone were “open access” sites, where natural commodities such as tripang and birds nest were there for the taking. The Taosug and their rivals tended to over-collect, failing to conserve for the future in the face of global-local competition and market demand. Unexpected fortunes and lack of environmental sustainability were a contemporary phenomena along with the theft and raiding of such sites. Faced with a range of changing global economic demands, and, Chinese food and eating habits, the Taosug and Bugis destroyed parts of the natural world of the Zone and abused its environment in exchange for other commodities – textiles, opium and war stores. In 1812, Hunt described the seasonal efforts of Taosug “visitors” to exploit the birds nest caves of the Kinabatangan and its numerous tributaries:

It is the practice of the industrious datus and chiefs to proceed to this place with all their slaves for the season; in which case they are sure to make great profits; formerly the birds’ nests caves in this district were considered royalties, and the produce immense, at the present time they are plundered ad libitum and the quantity decreases every year.⁵⁴

Here, once again, we can trace the laser-like local-regional impact created by the intersections of the China tea trade in the world capitalist economy; the dramatic shock of Imperial China’s cuisine on the fauna and people of the Zone, the associated violence, environmental degradation and other problems caused by the need to feed increasing numbers of affluent Chinese with extravagant tastes, and the changing pattern of labour power use with an inexorable growth of slavery and slave raiding. The unprecedented demand for these two entangled commodities – exotic natural foods – demonstrates the deep-seated range of problems the Sulu Zone faced and underlined the importance of the interdependent nature of the world-capitalist economy with both the environment and society of the Zone.

54 Hunt 1967, 54.

III Trade and Society: Two Worlds

I now want to analyze the relation between cores and zones or centers and peripheries in cultural rather than economic and political terms. I want to detail the impact of these entangled commodities upon the relationship between material culture and everyday life in the Zone. The boundaries between aspects of both Chinese and western culture and Malayo-Muslim culture, practice and belief were permeable in the late eighteenth century Zone. Indeed, Jolo was the site of repeated complex cultural exchanges linked to the China tea trade that highlighted the ways cultural difference and diversity were increasingly blurred. For example, in the Sulu Zone of the early nineteenth century, high fashion on the Chinese model was predominant among datus in the capital, Jolo, and in key trading centres. On the margins of the Zone, on the other hand, what prevailed was the Pasisir culture of Malayo-Muslim mariners, merged together with facets of a “modernity” created by new commodities that signified global cultural interconnections and interdependencies, linking the Zone directly to the world capitalist economy. From trade documents, journals and illustrations left by traders and travelers we can learn more about how certain commodities bridged two worlds and in the process changed people’s cultural attitudes and practices towards daily life. However, we must exercise extreme caution in the use of these source materials based on the privilege of partial perspective.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, such sources can still provide singular insight to help establish the continuity of cultural similarities and differences with respect to the principles and practice of everyday life. The social-cultural traits and material culture of the Taosug and Samal were part of the constitution of a trading “zone” that was rapidly changing both its form and content as it encountered the “modern world”. A careful reading of such documents can reveal the level of economic integration achieved by Sulu and its Bornean dependencies in the wider global-regional network, the magnitude of change in material culture and lifeways that occurred after 1768, and possible reasons for shifts in consumption patterns over time.

The move from wearing sarongs to Chinese silk jackets and pants by Taosug datus, from local prints to Indian cottons by their Samal retain-

⁵⁵ Sears 1993, 21.

ers, signifies the “cultural texture” of an age, according to Samuel.⁵⁶ The Comaroffs note in their discussion of the “history” of a commodity and its impact on social and cultural life, that from the analysis of the career of valued everyday goods, we can comprehend the evolution of complex social processes and individual intention and action.⁵⁷ Ideas about fashion, work, property, value, class and authority all changed and were changed by the relation between particular commodities and “Zone” life.

New commodities, material objects such as silk jackets, colourful handkerchiefs, cotton shorts, cutlery, porcelain, opium and guns, all came into widespread use at this time and, arguably, as instruments of “modernity” or civilization began to inaugurate local changes in the history of material culture and the history of social behaviour at the beginning of the nineteenth century. For example, the history of the cultural interconnections between the China tea trade, textiles as a commodity and the history of the body in the Sulu Zone both as sites and objects of intercultural and symbolic contact is not supposed to be a new discovery. It is worth reminding ourselves that Dalrymple, Forrest and Hunt’s pages on this particular aspect of cultural influence and the more general domain of the representation of the body and its political, historical and social consequences in the Zone were written between the 1760s and early 1800s.⁵⁸ The lack of any other garment except a coarse cotton loin-cloth was characteristic of the maritime populations of the Zone before the advent of the China tea trade, and some fishers frequently went naked. As late eighteenth century China increasingly opened up to foreign trade and investment, the long term historical experience documented here takes on renewed importance in the history of the material culture of the Zone. It is of particular interest because shifts in the material repertoires for the clothing, representation and management of the body constitute important moments in the history of “cultural” fashion, global-trade, and phenomenology of the human body.

By 1812 the dress of a person in the Zone no longer was determined necessarily by their status. The poorest were still said to have gone about

56 Samuel 1989; for a detailed discussion of the dynamic interplay between investment in the maritime luxury goods trade and the evolution of Philippine Maritime trading chieftans, see Junker 2000.

57 Comaroff 1992, 14; Kopytoff 1999, 64-99.

58 Dalrymple 1808; Forrest 1779.

naked, some wore grass skirts, but it was far more common for an ordinary person or slave to have at least a Chinese jacket or sarong in coarse white cotton cloth. In 1834, Samal villagers at Siassi were described as being almost in a state of nudity, except for a nankin (cotton) skirt or a pair of loose trousers of the same fabric, cut off at the knees. The children were naked. Hunt had observed two decades earlier that coarse white and brown cotton cloth “was in universal wear among all classes”. Some banyaga or slaves in the capital, however, managed to make their clothes out of imported silk and satin. At Jolo it was difficult for Europeans to distinguish banyaga from Taosug because of this radical change in fashion behaviour linked to new material objects, such as the handkerchief:

As a head dress, most of the Sulo men prefer the Publicat red handkerchief: a few only the fine Javanese handkerchief ... the middling classes and slaves are however partial to handkerchiefs of the most lively and shewy colours of the French and American patterns ... they also wear the China *baju*, full sleeves without buttons, either of rich gauzes, silk and sattens of all colours from China, or Europe and coast Chintzes of the largest and liveliest patterns; and some wear Manilla grass cloth. The lowest slave, in this respect, vies with the *datu* in splendour of apparel [...].⁵⁹

Most *banyaga* could expect to have their clothing provided by their masters:

Through the influence of this woman I was bought the same day by her husband Unkud for a lilla the weight of one picul. Immediately I received from my new master a pair of trousers, a Chinese *baju*, a sarong and a handkerchief.⁶⁰

Some people, like the coastal *datu* depicted in Marryt’s travel account, were clearly even more tied to several worlds. His costume is a flamboyant mixture: Chinese in style but also made up of material objects from Europe and the Malayo-Muslim world. Here fashion, as a statement, was an extrapolation of globalizing social, political and economic forces. Social patterns for the production, normalization and manipulation of fashion were of central interest to my attempts to understand ways that the Taosug and other “cultures” of the Zone produced specific forms of subjectivity and social organization.

59 Hunt 1967, 39.

60 Pieters 1858, 310.



Fig. 2: A "Malay Chief", Taosug datu, of Jolo whose wealth and power was based on the careful regulation of external trade. He is dressed in high fashion – a headcloth of American or Bengal manufacture, a brightly colored Chinese silk jacket, embossed and filigreed with gold thread, satin pants, and several splendid Kris – a reflection of his economic status and social prestige. This beautiful illustration was done in the early 1840s.

For other more ordinary people these worlds were likely to meet in their families and things they made and used in their everyday life. For example, as I witnessed in 1967, a samal laut mother may have made a cradle strap for her new born child from a bolt of unravelled brown cotton cloth and sewed a pattern on it by hand with a new trade needle. The *Taoutan*, boat cradle, would have been made with Chinese and European materials. Here too, material objects have been fashioned together locally to bear witness to the flow of commodities and information between two or more worlds and across the generations. Acquisitive hardworking people around the Zone transformed aspects of their way of life with

these commodities that played a key role in Chinese and European efforts to dominate Sulu's intra-regional networks of trade and exchange. Cheap mass produced earthenware of every conceivable shape and size (cups, saucers, kettles, bowls, platters, dishes and basins) and exquisite porcelain along with metal utensils captured the markets and imagination of the Zone.

Chinese potters had not only mastered singular glazing techniques but they proved more efficient in mass producing crockery on a hitherto unprecedented scale than their regional competitors or the Europeans themselves. The junks from Southeast China dominated the transport of these new material objects that were fast becoming essential to the maintenance of the pace of life in the Zone.⁶¹ Cooking methods and utensils changed in the late eighteenth century. Fish that was formerly roasted on an open fire, or salted, was now boiled in iron or copper kettles and served with aromatic spices and rice in ornate earthenware basins and dishes.

I have already discussed the sinister impact of opium as a trade commodity on the decisions and behaviour of key individuals and small groups of coastal datu that critically influenced the social development of the Zone during the 1840s and 50s. Here we must see the history of opium in Asia, as not simply a matter of a plant, an ephemeral material object, forging a global-political economy based on capitalism and addiction, but also as literally planting seeds of local change and destruction.⁶² One can only be stunned by the sudden ubiquity of opium in the history of Sulu. It seems that the drug touched many aspects of everyday life in the Zone as well as relentlessly altering the course of European and Chinese history. Apart from mapping out the rise and fall of the opium trade and measuring its magnitude in Sulu, one should also be able to document its impact on the social and cultural processes of the Zone, as the drug partially reshaped its political economy. A comprehensive view of opium, in the entangled history of the China tea trade and the Zone, needs to include the Asian mainland but specifically treat Sulu, where it

61 For a list of the ceramic and earthenware that comprised the cargoes of Amoy junks circa 1776 and 1814 see Appendix B in Warren 1981, 259-260.

62 For a discussion of the impact of opium in an urban colonial context among labourers and prostitutes see Warren 1986, 240-249; Warren 1993, 42, 46, 154, 293, 366-367; see also Trocki 1990; Rush 1990.

was traded and consumed, in order to understand the various manifestations and shifts between the representation and meaning of culture and power, on the one hand, and, on the other, the history of a commodity and the history of the body.

Let me close this discussion about the history of the China tea trade, material culture, and cultural change by tracing the journey, albeit, briefly, of two commodities – a pearl and a steel knife – between the worlds of Europe and the Sulu Zone. The journey of the pearl began in the late 1700s; at the bottom of a reef, an expert samal diver collected it for shipment back to Europe. The pearl was exchanged for a steel knife manufactured in Sheffield by a master smith. The Sulu pearl was sent back to London as a priceless commodity of the China trade to be crafted into a ring or necklace that became a symbol of royal authority and the European class system. The Sheffield knife brought by the English trader to Jolo did not at once change the Taosug and Samal's life as opium had done. Instead, this steel bladed weapon as a tool improved their artisan skills and fighting methods, as wood carvers, boat builders, and warriors. Things alien to their way of life and of little or no practical value were rarely exchanged or bought. The light weight dependable knife represented the highest quality merchandise Sheffield technology could produce. There was prestige involved in owning such a tool and its use became habit forming. However, the trade knife now served different needs than either the manufacturer or trader could have envisaged. The knife now became a Samal, not European, weapon on long distance maritime slave raids; one of many new material objects that was responsible for the expansion of Taosug power and culture throughout the region. In this context, the Sheffield knife became both a strikingly ironic symbol of the material ties between two worlds, and, the market driven forces of the world-capitalist economy.

IV Society: Trade and Slave Raiding

A cacophony of new sounds, sights, objects and tastes, along with an accelerated, materially oriented life in the Sulu Zone created a new demand for slaves, by the early nineteenth century. The labour power demand was derived, based primarily on a European demand for tea,

which Chinese peasants cultivated in the mountains of Fujian.⁶³ Hence, at the same time, there was also this interdependent parallel rising demand for slaves to work in the fisheries and forests of the Sulu Zone. The demands of Europeans and Chinese for exotic commodities like sea cucumber and birds nest increased slaving activity among certain groups in the Zone, who were lords of the sea and skillful warriors (ill.). To obtain more guns and ammunition, metal tools, textiles and opium for the Taosug, these maritime marauders had to obtain more and more slaves to collect and process particular commodities to sell to the China tea traders. Thus, there was a rising demand for tea in Europe and a concomitant increase in regional-wide slave raiding in Southeast Asia. Taosug datus partially repatterned the life of particular maritime groups to meet the soaring European and Chinese demand, and to gain direct access to western technology and Chinese trade goods.

The efforts of ambitious datus to participate in this burgeoning world-capitalist economy, with its extraordinary profits and markers of differential status and prestige, forced the demand for additional labour up and swelled the flow of global-regional trade. The need for a reliable source of labour power was met by the Iranun and Samal Balangingi, the slave raiders of the Sulu Zone. Indeed, the rapid growth of slave raiding was to keep pace with Sulu's global trade by providing the essential requisite for the continued growth of commodity collection and processing in the Zone – labour power. One extraordinary feature of the interconnections between Sulu slave raiding and the advent of the world-capitalist economy was its rapid movement across the entire region as one Southeast Asian coastal population after another was hunted down. From the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, Southeast Asia felt the full force of the slave raiders of the Sulu Zone. Their harsh exploits were carried out on a large scale; manning well-organized fleets of large, swift *prahus*, they navigated along the west coast of Borneo and crossed the South China Sea to the Straits of Malacca and the Bay of Bengal. In the south, their raiding vessels thrust through the Makassar Strait and fanned out over the Indonesian world. They crossed the Banda sea to New Guinea, made raids along the coasts of Java, and circumnavigated Borneo.

63 See Gardella 1994.



Fig. 3: An “Iranun” sea-warrior attired in the distinctive thick cotton quilted red vest, and armed with a long spear and kampilan, a long heavy “lanoon sword” ornamented with human hair

In pursuit of captives, Iranun and Balangingi terrorized the Philippine archipelago. They preyed on the poorly defended lowland coastal villages and towns of southern Luzon and the Visayan Islands. They even sailed and rowed their warships into Manila Bay, their annual cruises reaching the northern extremity of Luzon and beyond. They earned a reputation as daring, fierce marauders who jeopardized the maritime trade routes of Southeast Asia and dominated the capture and transport of slaves to the Sulu Sultanate.⁶⁴ Captive people, from across Southeast Asia in their tens of thousands, seized by these sea raiders were put to

64 Warren 1981, 147-211; Warren 2002.

work in the Zone's fisheries, in the Sultan's birds' nest caves, or in the cultivation of rice and transport of goods to markets in the local redistributive network. Thus the Sulu state created and reproduced the material and social conditions for the recruitment and exploitation of slaves in the Zone. More than anything else it was this source and use of labour power that was to give Sulu its distinctive predatory character in the eyes of Europeans in the nineteenth century as a "pirate and slave state". Southeast China's tea trade and the global capitalist economy changed the pattern of maritime warfare and economic and social relationships among certain Zone populations, increasing its intensity and scope across the region. It led to widespread decimation and displacement of entire populations throughout the Christian Philippines and much of the rest of Southeast Asia.

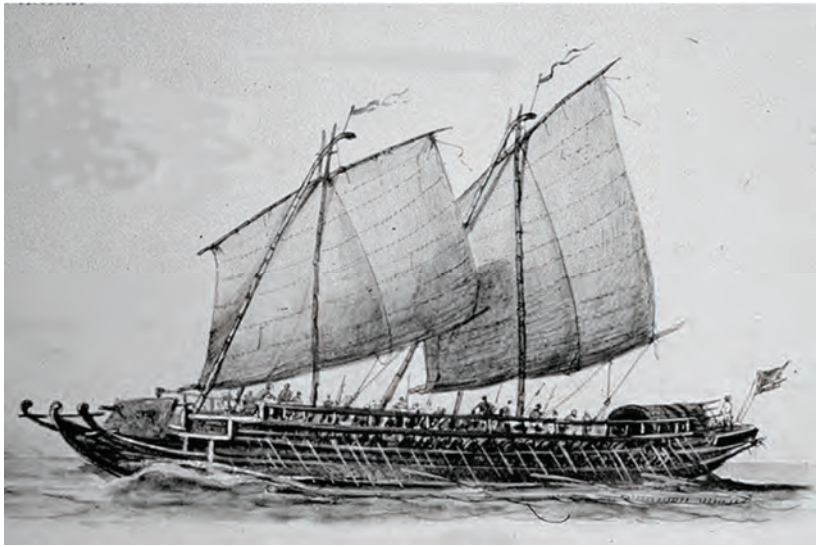


Fig. 4: A Joanga, an Iranun warship of the late 18th century with three banks of oars under full sail. Upward of 100 feet long, these vessels were provided with large bamboo outriggers, both sides were rowed and paddled by more than 190 men.

Sulu was primarily an ascendant commercial state, standing at the centre of a widely spread redistributive economy. But it was under Taosug sponsorship and in the service of that interdependent global-regional economy that others raided throughout the Malay world. It is worth emphasizing again the powerful economic forces that were pushing the Taosug aristocracy in the direction of acquiring more and more slaves; in

the first place, their demands for all kinds of products coming in from external trade had to be satisfied – demands that were constantly increasing. These demands were both a consequence and cause of slavery. In order to trade, it was necessary for the Taosug to have something to give in exchange. Hence the collection and redistribution of produce was dominated by those *datus* with the largest number of slaves; that is by the Sultan and certain *datus* on the coast who were most directly involved in Sulu's global trade. Secondly, the more dependent Sulu's economy was on the labour power of slaves, the larger loomed the question of its supply of slaves. The only way for the Taosug to obtain the commodities which formed the basis of their commerce was to secure more slaves, by means of long-distance raiding. In the early nineteenth century the rate of growth of the Sultanate's population had not kept pace with its expanding international trade economy. Since it was the labour of slaves that made possible global-regional trade, slavery rose markedly from this time and became the dominant mode of production. This also explains why Jolo quickly became the principal centre in the Zone for the importation of slaves and the outfitting of marauders.

Thus, the cross-cultural combination of Chinese tea and the latest European firearms as commodities, within the context of expanding inter-regional trade and improved maritime military organization, set the stage for the explosive emergence of key marauding populations in the space of just several decades. Moreover these mobile raiding populations took it upon themselves to "modernize" and acquire foreign technology, especially gunpowder arms, to rapidly strengthen their strike force and social organization, as well as enhance their ship building techniques and nautical skills. Indeed the post 1780 era saw slave raiding more widespread and intense than at any earlier time as the Iranun and Balangingi borrowed both knowledge and technology from European and Chinese traders; Chinese compasses, European mariner's charts and brass telescopes were all widely used to great advantage as "weapons of war" by these sea raiders.

I have noted earlier that the control and possession of firearms by Taosug on the coast profoundly altered ethnic inter-relations, the local-regional balance of power, and accelerated the formation of the "Zone" at the expense of neighbouring polities. The English, to protect their financial interests in China, distributed firearms and gunpowder on a large scale to the coastal chiefs, who controlled the redis-

tributive trade of the Zone. The early acquisition of cannon, gunpowder, flintlock rifles and shot from European China traders in return for exotic commodities led to increased traffic in slaves, warfare, and, at the same time, ever rising levels of arms imports into Sulu after the last quarter of the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ The supply of firearms to the Zone escalated dramatically in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. New England Yankee traders and whalers from the northeastern seaboard of the United States sold arms freely to the Taosug and Samal, giving them a forceful advantage over this particular channel of trade at the expense of coastal rivals and interior tribal groups in the Zone, and much of the rest of Southeast Asia. The datus quickly recognized that large scale possession of western firearms enhanced their prestige and consolidated their position and power in the redistributive economy of the Zone.

The Taosug demanded the highest quality firearms and weapons. To satisfy them, traders and manufacturers searched for better weapons and ways to custom produce them on consignment. English industrial technology in Sheffield, Birmingham and Manchester developed beautiful, dependable Kris, and firearms. Inexpensive British manufactured muzzle loading flintlock rifles and other arms imports led to the reframing of Southeast Asian political boundaries, especially in the area of the Zone and eastern Indonesia. The Taosug could sustain organized maritime military power on a large scale and consolidate control over trade for an extended time because of the strength and discipline derived from the improved guns and industrial technology of Europe; firearms that would threaten the social order and stability of much of Southeast Asia when placed in the capable hands of the Iranun and Balangingi. Huge quantities of lead were shipped into the Sulu Zone in the form of shot, musket balls and unworked blocks. Gunpowder, which had been discovered in China as a propellant and explosive for wartime use and moved to Europe as a weapon of war, was brought in huge quantities to Sulu by European China traders. By the early 1830s, Gamaliel Ward, captain of the brig *Leonidas*, revealed the extent to which the arms trade had been expanded at Jolo since Dalrymple's time in the 1760s. A leading datus firearm's request included:

65 Warren 1981, 48-49.

1,000 25-pound kegs of gunpowder, 6 swivel guns, 6 large cannon preferably brass, 600 muskets, 100 pistols, 4 bags of shot of varying sizes, gun flints, 2 dozen boxes of percussion caps and 8 dozen matchlets.⁶⁶

By 1835, gunpowder and muskets were the principal trade commodities desired by coastal intermediaries. These figures must be considered as only a small estimate of the volume of war stores furnished at Sulu's market – the tip of the iceberg, because large quantities of gunpowder and firearms also reached the Taosug as a consequence of Bugis enterprise.

Demand from China tea traders for exotic commodities, introduction of firearms by them, and intensified slave raiding led to major changes in Samal Laut social organisation and ecological adaptation. Slave raiding, warfare and boat building became increasingly important activities for these traditional fishers as the Taosug became more involved in the China tea trade, and ever more dependent upon it for commodity exchange. The Iranun and Samal Balangingi armed with the latest firearms struck fear into the hearts of coastal and riverine people throughout Southeast Asia; local populace were soon afraid to live along unprotected stretches of the sea-coast or come down to the ocean front from the interior. The regularity of these raiding sweeps for slaves were as predictable as the winds which carried the Iranun and Samal Balangingi boats to their target areas. Customary warnings were issued each year by the Dutch, Spanish and English to coastal towns and small craft on the approach of the "pirate wind" in August, September and October that brought these lords of the eastern seas and fishers of men to the straits of Malacca. Scattered along the coastline of the Philippine Archipelago one is still able to find – sometimes with some difficulty – the remnants of the 100 year long terrifying presence of these raiders – an old stone watchtower, a crumbling church cum garrison, or the remains of a Spanish fort and cemetery; decaying monuments to the export of tripang and birds nest and a host of other commodities and the import of firearms from the Euro/American core and some Chinese goods. The remains of such neglected sites, primarily concentrated along the coasts of Catanduanes, Albay, Leyte and Samar,

66 "Goods for Sooloo Market", Ms Peabody Museum. Figures are lacking for the earlier period, but the value for the gunpowder alone which is in excess of the total worth of Dalrymple's order, shows expansion.

bear silent witness to the advent of sudden affluence in the Zone and deep despair throughout the Philippines.⁶⁷



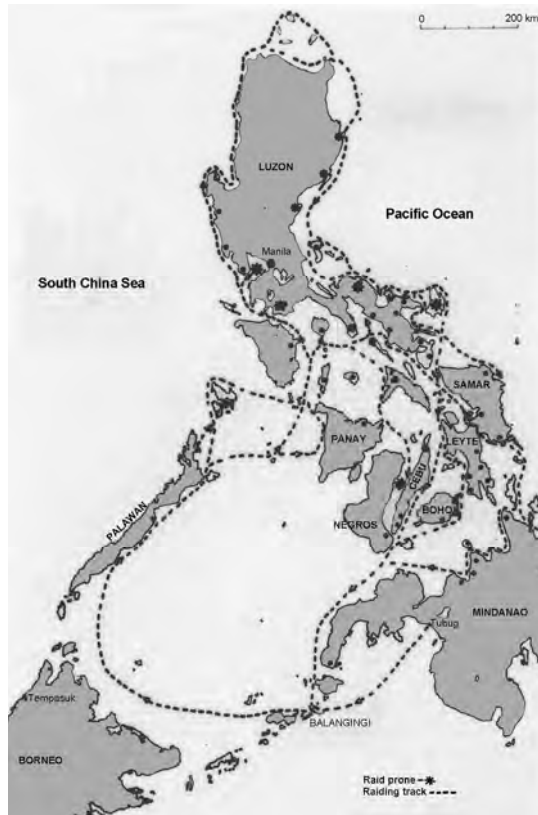
Map 2: Slave Raiding Outside the Philippines in South East Asia

The formation and prosperity of the Sulu Zone, as this account of the interdependent relationship between particular commodities and its economic and cultural history indicates, was based above all else on slaves. It was the role of the Sulu state, within its large trading Zone, to maintain the material and social conditions for the recruitment and exploitation of slaves. Equally important, the political and commercial growth of the Sulu Zone was reflected in the enormous increase in war stores in the Jolo market at the beginning of the nineteenth century – lead, iron, shot, gunpowder and cannon. The Taosug aimed at monopolizing control over the exchange and distribution of these goods which, with slaves, enabled the reproduction of the social formation; the European firearms supplied by global-regional trade enabled coastal dwelling Taosug to advance their commercial interests in the inter-societal network, promote raiding on a large scale and keep the Zone free of unde-

67 Warren 1981, 174-181, 237-245; Warren 2002, 404-405.

sirable intruders and competitors. As Terray emphasizes, it is only in this sense that external trade is a vital element in the overall functioning of the social formation:

[L]ike every distributive mechanism, it created no wealth that was born in the process of production; but it gave a concrete form appropriate to the requirements of reproduction.⁶⁸



Map 3: Slave Raiding in the Philippines, 1768–1868

The Sulu state was geared to continuous acquisition of slaves and slave raiding as a consequence of the intersections between the China tea trade and the world capitalist economy. The problem for the Taosug by the mid 1850s was that this kind of preying on peripheral communities

68 Terray 1974, 335-336.

could not be sustained any longer and the frontier(s) of the Zone expanded indefinitely. When long-distance slave-raiding and warfare declined, the Taosug economic and political system began to slowly disintegrate and even aspects of the social structure began to change, along with the shape and character of the Zone.

Society: Globalisation and Slavery

Slaves were reported by travelers, traders and emissaries to be engaged in every conceivable domestic, agricultural and industrial occupation in the Sulu Zone. As Taosug trade became interlocked with the world capitalist economy, and the economic and political problems posed by the China tea trade and imperialism grew, so did the amount of work which required literacy and strategic knowledge of local regional affairs. Paradoxically, few Taosug aristocrats could either read or write in any of the languages pushing into the Zone and banyaga with education who could serve as scribes, translators, and language tutors were much sought after.⁶⁹ The rate of upward social mobility for banyaga in early nineteenth century Sulu was higher than that in the early nineteenth century Christian Philippines or other parts of colonial Southeast Asia. In Jolo and elsewhere, slaves could have family roles as husband or wife, they could own property, including other slaves, and often filled a variety of political and economic roles – as bureaucrats, interpreters, warriors, and farmers, as concubines and traders – by virtue of which they were entitled to certain rights and privileges accorded to other members of the dominant society.

A banyaga could purchase his freedom in the Sulu Zone. This was frequently the case among those banyaga who had an aptitude for trade. The likelihood of manumission was essentially a function of occupation. Banyaga who provided immediate and indispensable services to their masters, who served in their households or on their trading vessels, had better chances of manumission than those who laboured in the forests or fisheries. Their owners often found it best to allow such slaves to acquire property so as to encourage initiative and establish their loyalty. Certain segments of the maritime-military and local administrative elites in the

69 Warren 1981, 222-228; for an important study of slavery and other forms of unfree labor in the Indian Ocean World see, Campbell 2004.

Zone were recruited from the Christian slave population. Adolescents selected on the basis of their abilities were given a thorough education by their Taosug masters and required to turn Muslim. Conversion to the dominant religion of the zone cut these slaves off from their cultural roots, making them ever more dependent on the Sultan.⁷⁰

“Slavery” in this sense was a means of incorporating people into the social and economic system of the Zone. I have argued elsewhere that “open” systems of slavery, such as the Sulu Sultanates, were those which acquired labour through capture or purchase of slaves, and assimilated them as “insiders” into the dominant group. The most recently acquired slaves were those most clearly demarcated from other dependent groups and the wider society. But within the first generation, those individuals most likely to be incorporated in an “open” system were female slaves, in terms of the relative importance of productive and reproductive activities, adolescents, and children.⁷¹ Banyaga were strategically enrolled in the following of datus for political and economic support, but far more than anything else they were needed to labour in the forests and fisheries to maintain an expansive redistributive economy and the flow of global-regional trade. They were predominately Visayan, Tagalog, Minahassan and Buginese speakers, although almost every major ethnic group of insular Southeast Asia was to be found among their ranks. Some inherited their status. Others were obtained in fulfillment of debt obligations. But all banyaga or their ancestors had been seized by professional slave raiders and retailed in communities throughout the Zone.

While the Sulu Sultanate had for centuries been integrated into the political and economic trade system of China, British expansion in Eastern Asia after the 1760s drew the emerging state into a systemic network of economic traffic on a global scale. The rising demand for southeast Asian slaves reshaped the character of the political economies of Sulu and China, and, as part of the same process, gave birth to the Zone and the advent of highly mobile specialized communities of slavers. Thus the history of the slave trade and the rise of the Iranun and Balangingi must be framed as part of a unitary historical process, which emphasizes the intrusive role played in their sudden development and expansion by the

70 Warren 1981, 228-229.

71 Warren, 1997.

global capitalist economy and singular commodities such as tea, birds nest and firearms. Slave raiding, or what the Spanish, Dutch and British called piracy, was not a manifestation of decay and dependence but rather the result of phenomenal economic growth and strength. It was part of a vital effort to partake in and control a rapidly increasing volume of cross-cultural commerce caused by the arrival of Europeans in the China tea trade in the late eighteenth century. Accusations of cultural decadence and barbarism directed against Sulu by the leading participants in that trade are both ironic and erroneous when approached from the perspective of a unitary historical process. The Sulu Sultanate was able to marshal its resources in the direction of slave raiding when the new circumstances of the China tea trade suddenly made collecting and processing of exotic commodities so profitable in the Zone.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from this discussion of the place of the slave and slave hunting in the economy and society of the Sulu Zone. The first is the decisive importance of the exploitation of slaves in the functioning of the social formation in the Zone:

A social formation cannot be understood except by beginning with an analysis of the relations of production which are at its base.⁷²

Global-regional trade spawned slavery in the Sulu Zone. The enormous increase in external trade which affected state formation and economic integration made it necessary to import captives from outside the Zone to bolster the work force population. As commodities from China, Europe and North America flowed to Jolo, the Taosug aristocrats thrived, and the Iranun and Balangingi, strong, skilled maritime people who were the scourge of Southeast Asia, raiding in 90 foot long prahu, emerged. The sea and tropical forests were the life force of the Sultanate, where tens of thousands of banyaga laboured annually to provide the exotic specialties for the China trade. Secondly, the arrival of captive slaves on a hitherto unprecedented scale for intensive labour or skilled work and their gradual "disappearance" through incorporation into the lower levels of Taosug and Samal society was central to the development and the expansion of Sulu culture and the redistributive system.

By arguing for a broader global economic perspective interesting complex questions are raised about what constitutes our conception of

72 Terray 1974, 340.

“culture”. While thousands of captive people were allocated throughout the Zone each year as slaves in the period under consideration, the borderlines of race, “culture”, and ethnicity were increasingly blurred by the practice of incorporation and pluralism. I maintain in *The Sulu Zone* that the Taosug and Samal not only lived in an increasingly interdependent world but that they lived in an emergent multi-ethnic society, the multi-cultural inhabitants of which came from many parts of Eastern Asia and elsewhere in the world. How are identities – single or multiple – forged? What symbols, rituals and perceptions create a strong sense of collective identity? The traditional assumption of a “culture” as enduring over time despite outward changes in people’s lives and value orientations is both “empirically misleading and deeply essentialist”.⁷³ As the late Roger Keesing noted, there is no part of Eastern Asia where both the production and reproduction of “culture” and cultural meaning can be characterized as unproblematic, without glossing over or disguising radical changes in relation to ethnicity, power and hierarchy that have differentially affected states like Sulu and urban-rural settings like the Zone.⁷⁴ In terms of not exaggerating the boundedness, discreteness and homogeneity of a way of life taking shape in the Zone at the end of the eighteenth century, the power of language, memory and commodities as symbols in the construction of new identities and communities was increasingly recognized, by myself.

Filling a conspicuous gap in the literature this aspect of my ethno-historical research explored the reinventing of ethnicity in light of tightening ties to the global-capitalist economy and the wider world of darul Islam. The question of the conditions under which these new identities were formed, and ethnicity accomplished, creating a semblance of cultural homogeneity throughout the Zone, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century, has aroused considerable subsequent interest. I stressed in *The Sulu Zone* the inextricable relationship between slave raiding, forced migration, “homeland” and identity as being critical factors that led to the emergence of new communities and diasporas.

The expression of “ethnicity” was suddenly recognized to be bound up with the accelerating process of global-regional trade, especially in the

73 Keesing 1991, 46.

74 Keesing 1991, 46.

classical case of the Samal Balangingi. The only historical work which deals with the Balangingi does not consider their ethnic origins.⁷⁵ Avoidance of this question presents a deceptive picture of a static “society” with a homogeneous population. Samal groups in the Sulu archipelago were emergent populations; the success of the Balangingi as slave raiders was due in large measure to their ethnic heterogeneity. Captives’ statements present a picture of Samal populations undergoing constant readjustments until 1848. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was an infusion of ethnically diverse captive people among the Balangingi – mostly through demands for their labour on raiding *prahus* and in the *tripang* and pearl fisheries – that complicated the identity of the Samal populations.

Many of the captives or slaves who were brought to Balangingi turned Samal – borrowing language, religion, and customs. Insufficient data prevents a precise reconstruction of the overall size and origin of Samal populations at that time. What information there is for the nineteenth century has survived in the statements of fugitive captives; these show that the incorporation of foreign elements took place on a large scale, especially the second and third generation. In 1836 it was estimated that only one tenth of the male population were “true” Balangingi Samal; the remainder were *renegados* (renegades), more particularly Visayan and Tagalog or other captives.⁷⁶ The Taosug economy was expanding rapidly enough at this time for Samal populations to absorb larger and larger numbers of captives. An apparently conscious recruitment policy of the *datus* changed the numerical structure and ethnic composition of Samal groupings in less than three generations (1820–48). Barth considers a ten per cent rate of incorporation in a generation drastic.⁷⁷ By those standards, the flexibility of the system was incredible. Village populations in 1836 appear to have risen from just over 300 people with 10–12 raiding *prahus* (*garay*) at Tunkil to more than a thousand people, with 30–40 *prahus*, at Balangingi. In less than a decade, Balangingi’s population roughly quadrupled; in 1845 the village had an estimated 4,000 people and 120–150 large vessels. The overall Samal population devoted to slave

75 Tarling 1963, 146–185.

76 See Warren 1978, 477–490; see also Barth 1969.

77 Barth 1969, 22.

raiding reached an upper limit in 1848, of 10,000 people with 200 raiding *prabus*. The consequences of extraordinary growth was the creation of an “emergent” slave-raiding population within the Sulu Sultanate – the Samal Balangingi.

Central to my approach about demographic expansion and the advent of a vast number of newer societies in the Sulu Zone was the notion that “cultures” are dynamic rather than static. Migratory rhythms and population patterns depended significantly on the dynamics of international trade. A population explosion took place in the first half of the nineteenth century, followed by pioneering expansion and settlement on the margins of the Zone, the exploitation of the wilderness and marine gardens, rising market incentives, and a victory for the Taosug entrepreneurs at the expense of their arch rivals, living from the profit of trade and redistribution. While this model of change is fundamentally economic, ecological and demographic, there is a central place in it for exploring the relationship between these critical factors and the historically specific social and economic contexts in which “culture” is constituted and reinvented across regional dividing lines.

Tens of thousands of people were not only members of an emergent trading zone; they were also members of an expansive multi-ethnic state where two or more cultures regularly existed side by side and, undoubtedly, clashed with one another at times. The Taosug worked hard to protect certain aspects of the overall integrity of their original culture in the face of the demographic explosion and material onslaught but the (im)possibilities of living with difference raged everywhere in the Zone. As they became ever more thoroughly enmeshed in the world capitalist system, banyaga and other socially subordinate populations internalized the differential cultural norms and formative ideals of the coastal elites. Banyaga were encouraged to adopt Islam and marry. Some slaves who thoroughly accepted the dominant culture were permitted to purchase their freedom. Manumission was commonly practiced and freed slaves were merged into the general population, assuming a new ethnicity and status. For banyaga, conversion and marriage were prerequisites to manumission. This expedient reinvention of ethnicity resulting from the interconnected force of circumstance generated by the China tea trade compels us to think about related notions of society and “culture” in

more processual ways.⁷⁸ Historians of the region need to locate the emergence, maintenance and abrogation of populations and the “cultures” they encompass within the framework of a series of historically changing, imperfectly bounded, multiple and branching integrated sets of local, regional and global social and economic alignments. This case based discussion of the concept of Asian “cultures” as problematic, and the crucial factors which gave rise, in one common process, to the accomplishment of ethnicity in the Sulu Zone provides the basic building blocks for future comparative and theoretical analysis.

V On Sources and Methodology

The challenge facing the ethno-historian of modern Southeast Asia is to locate the right combination of sources to establish a more comprehensive interpretation of the place of “societal” development in the global economy; a macro system that itself was “developing” but whose social, political and economic structures or segments and alignments did not necessarily follow parallel paths across time. In many respects, these sources, that can create a global political economy framework to provide a view of the world as a complex rapidly changing macro system, while still affirming that the evolution of various parts or “societies” cannot be understood without studying micro-social change within its global-local context, are extremely difficult to locate. This is especially the case when one pushes further back in time, and resurrects more peripheral non-western, pre-industrial networks and states, like the Sulu Sultanate, and attempts to link them to a hemispheric structural view of the whole over several centuries.

A chronic problem facing ethno-historians of Asia, Africa and Latin America is the uneven nature of the source material available for certain people, places and times. How can one provide a well detailed historical reconstruction and measure change if the documents as “instruments of measurement” are scarce, non-existent, or themselves changing?⁷⁹ The effort has to be made to bring to bear as wide a range of evidence as possible, on critically specific points, to emphasize the global interconnec-

78 Wolf 1982, 387.

79 Burke 1992, 38-39.

tions and interdependencies of particular societies and regions, in order to fashion a holistic explanation of their mutual interactions and clashes in a contemporary “borderless world”, created by an evolving world capitalist economy. It was necessary to seek out as much evidence wherever it could be obtained because of the accidental generation and destruction of historical records concerning the ethno-history of the Sulu Zone. I used an extremely varied, in fact eclectic, body of documentation from around the world to resolve the problem of the significance of the China tea trade for the transformation of Taosug society and culture of the late eighteenth century: all forms of evidence – archeological, anthropological and historical.

While the archeology of the Zone is comparatively poor, solid anthropological fieldwork had been done over the course of several decades among the Taosug of Jolo, the Samal Balangingi, the Samal Bajau Laut, and the Yakan of Basilan in the Sulu archipelago and northeast Borneo, and among the Maranao and the Subanun of Mindanao. Without the ethnographic materials that were published as a result of this fieldwork, it would have been difficult for me to assess the value of European historical source materials, especially the diaries and journals of explorers and traders like Dalrymple, Rennell, Forrest and Hunt with some important additions from the Spanish officers of the small neighbouring garrison settlement of Zamboango.⁸⁰ There were ample sources for the study of the commercial marauding patterns of the Sulu Zone in the period 1768–1898, but they were scattered, still unrecognized, in several European archives, and in Manila and Jakarta. While much of the material in English on Sulu had been exploited, primary source material in Spanish and Dutch archives had yet to be systematically investigated. There remained then a need for extensive archival research to present a coherent picture of Sulu’s commercial position in a changing global-regional context from the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth century.

I have drawn upon anthropological concepts, European documents in several languages with excerpts and examples from official reports,

80 Extensive ethnological research had been conducted among the Taosug by Thomas Kiefer; among the Balangingi Samal by William Geoghegan; among the Samal of Cagayan de Sulu and Palawan by Eric Casino; among the Samal Laut by Harry Nimmo, Clifford Sather and Carol Warren; among the Yakan by Carol Molony; among the Maranao by David Barradas; and among the Subanun by Charles Frake.

diaries, letters, journals and newspapers, and local accounts to examine the economic vitality of the Sulu Sultanate, in its role as entrepôt for European and Asian commerce in the China trade from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. Among the most important sources I have used are the manuscripts in the archives of Spain (principally the Archive of the Indies) on trade from Manila to the Sulu Sultanate between 1768 and 1848. When compiled and ordered as a time series, these documents (particularly the *estados* and the *almojarifazgo*⁸¹) suggest the overall level of commercial activity, shifts in market preferences, and the economic interdependence of Canton, Manila and Jolo. The statistical analysis of these official trade “series” were employed to show changes over time in the economic life and broader patterns of the zone’s global-regional commerce. These Spanish sources were tailor made for my need to compile an economic “serial history” (*histoire serielle*), showing the speed, volume and flows of commodities and people created through the regional intersections of the China tea trade, of which the pursuit of the slave trade across Southeast Asia was a sub-system of the broader economic pattern.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the population of Sulu was heterogeneous and changing – socially, economically, and ethnically. This was a direct result of global trade. The populating of the Sulu Zone by captives from the Philippines and various parts of the Malay world and their role in the redistributive economy centred at Jolo cannot be under-estimated. Previous historical studies of the Sultanate depended largely on published colonial records and accounts to understand the economic and social role played by slaves in the economy rather than on records produced by the slaves themselves. Slavery in Sulu was observed through the eyes and preconceptions of European observers and writers who viewed Sulu as the centre of a world fundamentally hostile to their interests – an Islamic world whose activities centred about piracy and slavery.

A unique alternative to this Eurocentric perspective is presented by the scattered statements of fugitive captives from the Sulu Sultanate. Carlo Ginsburg, a gifted Italian historian, whose classic works have chal-

81 The *almojarifazgo* are customs duties that had to be paid for the im- or export of commodities into or from the Spanish kingdom or commodities shipped between different ports.

lenged us to retrieve social worlds that more conventional history does not record, describes particular types of legal-judicial documentation, as “written records of oral speech”.⁸² For instance, according to Ginsburg’s methodology, the written proceedings and statements of the fugitive slaves of the Sulu Zone could be considered comparable in certain respects to the notebooks of an anthropologist who studied a cultural system where violence and slavery were an everyday occurrence; or to put it another way, the Spanish naval officer as anthropologist, performing a type of “fieldwork” in the Zone, centuries ago. All sorts of details of material life and social activities recorded in the official proceedings of these officers were often incidental to the main purpose of gathering naval intelligence on the strength and social organization of the fiercely independent and intractable Sulu slave raiders, their communities, and the nature of material life and market transactions. Hence, the tangential information was not likely to have been distorted. It is precisely because this historical evidence could be used to tease out hidden information embedded in it to recapture the broader patterns, while also building up a picture of the lives of slaves across the Zone and their pivotal role in shaping that environment, that these testimonies proved so invaluable. Sifting through the broad body of official statements of the *cautivos fugados* generated by Spanish and Dutch naval officers and merchant traders between 1836 and 1862, documents most historians considered to have been among the archival “curiosities” of a pirate principality and “clash of civilizations”, it proved possible to construct a history from below; a stunningly different type of social history based on documents of seemingly little consequence.

What the direct testimony of the fugitive captives contained was “life”: a freshness and wealth of small scale detail that could be used to explore the mental and material world of several generations of slaves; an exceptionally rich source, containing singularly invaluable textured accounts around which to base on a cultural level case studies and a collective biography. I made extensive use of this neglected source of Southeast Asian social history to reconstruct the social organization of Sulu slave raiding, slave life in the Zone and to make slave voices speak.⁸³ The trade

82 Ginsburg 1989, 156.

83 Warren 1981, 299-315; Warren 2007, 215-251.

data and the statements of the fugitive slaves complement one another, and together enable us to resolve many fundamental questions about the magnitude of the Sulu Zone's global-regional trade, its flourishing slave population, and how these changed over time as a consequence of the impact of the China tea trade and the world capitalist economy.

The scarcity of particular types of sources to study the ethno-history of the maritime people of Southeast Asia has encouraged the growth of new interdisciplinary historical techniques and methods. To discover the links between the experience of coastal Taosug *datus*, slave raiders and slaves and the larger events in their lives, I have depended on different branches of social enquiry. Ethno-history and micro-history have been critical in showing how empirical research can be shaped and changed. This methodological approach to the ethno-history of the Sulu Zone and slavery has necessarily combined the broader concerns of economic and social transformation with tracing the experiences of these men and women's lives. By expanding both the spatial and temporal reach of analysis it was possible to provide an account of the typical career pattern of a coastal chief or Visayan slave and how they lived the "big changes" in the Zone at the turn of the nineteenth century. An obvious result of this approach has been to clarify the process of moving the boundaries in historical methodology and thought, as the questions asked about the history of the Sulu Zone in my volume changed, and new expectations of the craft were imposed.

This search for a way to link individuals and events to larger, impersonal systems is tenable at the intersections bridging the "narrative space of ethnography",⁸⁴ the use of quantitative methods for the prosopographer, and the study in depth of the small scale. In this way, I adapted the methods of social anthropology and historical computing to "do" ethnography in the archives, in order to understand the "otherness" of a previous era and place, or as the French social historian, Robert Darnton, phrased it, to do "history in the ethnographic grain".⁸⁵ This inquisitive and provocative methodology linking history and anthropology calls upon us to join culturally configured actions, nuances and contradictions

84 Marcus 1986, 190.

85 Darnton 1985, 3.

in society and history to individuals and events by a variety of historiographical means. I isolated one critical approach – prosopography.

My key problem in focusing on the collective identity of particular social groups – slaves and samal marauders – was to choose a sample which represented the total regional and social population(s) of the Zone. Spanish naval officers, specialists in “contemporary Sulu affairs”, interrogated the fugitive slave informants, and more than a century and a half later, I used the methods of content analysis and analyzed these interviews statistically to create a multi-sourced and integrated data base as a prosopographer. The difficulties that attended an analysis of the social and ethnic complexity of the historical situations of the slaves and the Taosug and Samal Balangingi and the contradictions inherent in their lives – the exact combination of motives, pressures, values and feelings – perhaps, could only be depicted through a prosopography: a collective biography, resting on a scaffolding of empirically integrated fragments of life histories. This technique compelled me to pay close attention to the disparate experiences, values and motives of a relatively small group of slaves (180+) in diverse contexts and sequences of actions, in order to piece together in a convincing manner the pattern and meaning of their lives for the majority of slaves throughout the Sulu Zone. The social relationships between Taosug datus and slaves were shaped by the China tea trade, imperialism and the rapid growth of the world capitalist economy. In this context, the “collective biography” I constructed from statements made by the slaves who escaped, were rescued, or were ransomed, at one and the same time defined the slave “community”, explored its history, and presented with sensitivity and human interest the great variety of life experiences and fate of some of its women and men. By adopting these ethno-historical methods it was possible to show not merely what the “faceless masses”, little people who often have left few documentary traces of their lives or careers, thought, but why they thought it, and acted, accordingly.

In my examination of historical perspective in the Sulu Zone a primary concern was “angle of vision” or how one views a particular event, phenomena or individual(s).⁸⁶ What is the consequence for the conventional practice of history of looking at events and actions from other

86 Sears 1993, 6-7, 298.

subject positions, that of slaves, for example? I immediately became aware of the potential offered by the testimony of the fugitive slaves for exploring new subject positions and perspectives on the past of the Sulu Sultanate. My approach to historical perspective in *The Sulu Zone* would shift the focus in the debate about state formation and trade away from the western challenge to the indigenous local-regional response to that challenge, establishing slaves as primary historical actors. From the beginning of my book I announced my intention to see history “from the other side”, and not cast my narrative in conventional moulds.⁸⁷ From the angle of vision of this alternative analytic perspective to “top person’s history” one can better understand what might be termed “experience”. This is most apparent in the riveting portrait of the slave’s “collective biography”.⁸⁸ One thing this methodological approach has taught me about “experience” is that the ethno-historian should try, whenever possible, to read the lives of “little people” positively, instead of reducing them to mythic-tragic categories like “the oppressed” or “the down-trodden”. Once the a-priori mythology of hierarchical inversion was removed, the lines of experience and power within the society and culture of the zone appeared more complicated and interesting. *The Sulu Zone* shows traces of this lesson by looking at the slaves and slave raider’s lives in terms of the potential embodied in the fullness of their experience, that is of their history of success and failure, and, the optimism, albeit boundless at times, of these men and women contending with a world that was changing in China, a new one being born in the Zone, and cultural values that no longer functioned among drug addicted Tao-sug overlords and their families. The role and life experiences of samal marauders and slaves in the face of changing fortunes as portrayed in my work, has an inherent historical significance for helping to establish and consolidate a reworking of Sulu’s history, and, equally important, in the context of present day Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia, for redefining the notion of what is historical.

The approach I wished to pursue combined close attention to a specific period with a desire to understand how and why economic and social transformation occurred, and, to place the trader, slave raider and

87 Warren 1981, xi-xii.

88 Sharpe 1991, 25; Warren 1981, 237-251.

slave in context and circumstance. In time, I confined myself to that of late eighteenth – and nineteenth – century global-capitalism. Within this framework I wanted to also situate my enquiry “in as local a setting as possible” in order to reach the marginal and out of the way places of the zone, to map its dimensions, to explore the big towns concerned with the lives of thousands and the social life of tiny atolls, to understand how the society of the zone of which the slaves were a critical part worked, to describe on a minute scale what had not yet been described in the manner of the ethnographer or “microhistorian”.⁸⁹ Firth used the term “micro-sociology” in 1938 to describe such an approach,

[...] much of the anthropologist’s work [and I would add historians of maritime Southeast Asia in this case] has lain hitherto in what may be called micro-sociology – the study of small groups or small units in larger groups; of how relationships operate on a small scale, in personal terms.⁹⁰

From a unity of collective experience of individual slaves flesh-and-bone characters emerge, events take shape over time paralleling their lives, and in doing so the narrative crosses the boundaries between slavery and freedom, life and work, kinship and culture, trade and war, politics and place in Malayo-Muslim maritime state. Micro-social analysis which hinges on building up layer upon layer of fully reliable detail enabled me to provide an account of the process of conducting slave raids across the seas of southeast Asia, and an ethnographic image of what actually happened to people seized by the raiders in a particular time and place; we learn about what slaves routinely ate, how they dressed, the range of occupations and the experience of women and families, and of that flicker of a dream for some of escape, and letting days work into weeks and weeks into years with loneliness, sickness, old age and death following them – the evidence of one’s eyes and heart that cannot be disregarded. Terms such as “history from below” and “history of the inarticulate” have been used by historians to describe this approach to history writing. The structure of experience is discernible, but the ethno-historian must search for it in the zones past through the lens of the microscope. Historiographically, the danger lurks in relying solely on the telescope, the traditional method of macro-systemic historical enquiry,

89 Samuel 1981, 414.

90 Freedman 1979, 388; Samuel 1981, 413.

to discover, record and analyze the “inner history” of this maritime cosmos. To be traditionally minded meant that important elements in the cosmos of culture of maritime traders, marauders and slaves, that had remained remote, blurred or hidden from history, would be passed over or missed completely.

To write about an institution, “culture”, workplace and life as lived, the ethno-historian must devote attention to the concrete and specific, using the techniques of micro-social analysis to see the past before him with new eyes. By reducing the scale of observation, microhistorical research revealed startling critical factors previously unobserved. Scanning the slave’s universe at point blank range allowed me to explore a whole variety of contexts and key turning points in their lives. This technique provided a microscopic view, a window onto the world of the slave’s history and society in the Zone, and a rich source of detailed material to map out the economic setting, urban-rural terrain, the specific character of slave raiding, and an acute sense of the complexity and variety of the slave’s experience. In this way, I could move from what we can call “microscopic examples” to the interpretation of the macro-“culture” of the Zone with its global-regional economic interconnections and interdependencies in the contemporary world of the late eighteenth century. The historiographical implications of this approach, dealing with the experience of a slave community at a particular moment in time, as if under a microscope, was

[...] to enlarge upon the ways in which one’s forbears have made a difference in history.⁹¹

To create such a history is to understand a totality of social and economic relations, and the historian must range widely to match new questions to new knowledge.

Clarity, balance and the sifting of historical fragments is required in piecing together scraps of information about events, reactions and influences to shed light on the past of such a group, largely inarticulate and rarely documented as individuals. The effort to recover their story from abstruse sources, the raw material for both history and anthropology, is based on the capacity of a creative imagination to evoke the daily patterns and practices of a “little people”, slaves, and the conviction that

91 Emerson 1980, 67.

carefully accumulated detail or “thick description”, emphasizing both experience and explanation, is the best way to take the true measure of their times. This interpretive technique of layering description was used by myself to compile information on events, intentionality and structural change in the lives of slaves, from their statements in order to “thicken” aspects of the narrative, and to also reach a sector of the Zone’s population whose outlook and experiences had not been adequately represented. The specific advantage claimed for this “braided approach”⁹² to historical writing, which interweaves narration and analysis, is that it offered a means of reconciling a searching interest in the fate of the ordinary people of the Sulu Zone, and, local events, with a global understanding of the “borderless” world of which they were fast becoming an integral part. The historian need not renounce the human element in history in pursuit of structure and process. The simplicity of this combination of historiographical approaches and a new form of narrative technique enabled me to construct a methodology capable of organizing and explaining the world of the Sulu Zone while, at the same time, stripping away the colonial rhetoric from certain parts of the historical record of all its pretentiousness and mythic resonance.

VI Towards a Synthesis

After 1768, the forces of the global capitalist economy and imperialism pushed into the world of Eastern Asia, giving rise to a set of interconnected societies set out in a double context: on the one hand, strong core states, and, on the other, middling or weak peripheral ones, and, their relative position in this world system being either set on the global stage or in a local setting. During the late eighteenth century, a powerful secondary or peripheral state emerged within the Sulu Zone, an extensive economic region encompassing the southern rim of the Sulu sea and the whole of the Celebes basin. My understanding and discussion about global economic-cultural interconnections and interdependencies between the Sulu Zone and the China trade was based on the premise that these intersections were governed by particular economic systems and

92 Burke 1992, 163; On theoretically informed historical analysis and narrative or storytelling see Fischer 1970.

set in a specific chronological era and locality. The Taosug lived in a singular time and time meant change. The Zone was a place where borders were becoming ever more porous, less bounded, less fixed, stimulated in large measure by global-regional flows of commodities, people and ideas; a kind of powerful magnet whose force European and Chinese traders were attracted to because that is where a great deal of the exotica for Chinese cuisine and medicine and other commodities for the Canton market were being collected and processed. The Zone was fast becoming a vitally important Southeast Asian economic region at a periphery of the world system that both reflected and transcended its locality. What then is the importance of the Sulu Zone, as well as the China tea trade's complicated place within its "borderless" history? It has been an argument of my book that we cannot think of societies and cultures in isolation, as self-maintaining, autonomous, enduring systems.⁹³

The rhythm of Chinese history has helped fashion the contours and patterns of Southeast Asia as a region both prior to and after the late eighteenth century European intrusion in the Zone. Unlike some historians, I felt it important not to ignore half of the economic activity of the Zone's international trade, the half initiated, organized and administered by the Taosug and Samal. An ethno-historical strategy sent me back to the trade records and vital statistics to ask what was really going on in this state that had been labeled by various colonial powers as a hot bed of despotism, piracy and slavery. I developed a strong interpretive line in advocating the importance of the Sultanate creating "clusters" in the development of global-local enterprise in the Zone. Porter argues "clusters" create "competitive advantage" by concentrating a state's industries in specialized, closely related areas of commerce, technology and social organization, and location.⁹⁴ Certain sets of economic and cultural practices that built regional competitive advantage were put into play because of the Sultanate's key location astride one of the main north-south China sea routes; notably, the specialized cultural-ecological adaptations of various peoples to the Zone's water borne way of life, and, their mastery of the seas; and, the systematic harvesting on a hitherto unprecedented scale of the unusual concentration of key commodities of the China

93 Wolf 1982, 390.

94 Porter 1990.

trade (sea cucumber, pearls, birds nest) throughout the Zone. In his concept of “competitive advantage”, Porter describes “clusters” as existing in a conceptual “diamond” structure, one which *links* production factors, such as the skilled labour of pearl divers (ill.), the infrastructure necessary to compete in a particular industry, for example, slave raiding, the nature of the domestic demand for the industry’s products or services – slaves, and the presence or absence of suppliers, to the local conditions governing how such industries were created, organized and managed, for example, by the Taosug. In addition, there was the level of domestic or regional competition.

To what extent did the English discovery of tea as one of the great universal non-alcoholic drinks accelerate the decline of China, contribute sharply to the rise of Sulu slave raiding, and create a man-made catastrophe with the widespread trade of opium for tea throughout Eastern Asia? The argument as you now know runs roughly as follows. The end of the eighteenth century was an age of “economic revolution” in the Zone in which labour demands grew larger and larger. To meet the unprecedented needs of the Chinese markets, Taosug rulers had to find more and more labour power. Sulu’s “principle number one” was specialization. It found for the populations of the Zone a few key areas where the Sultanate set out to be the best in the local-regional context, the best in Southeast Asia and then, also, the best in the world. Those areas were highly focused local specializations relating to Taosug social organization of slave raiding as a permanent activity, and their local extractive industries, bringing key people and social groups together to build economic relationships, in order to then facilitate the process by which they carried on the redistributive economy. The slave raiders also in turn helped to enforce the collection of exotic commodities, thus establishing a coercion-extraction cycle which was an intended consequence of competition for resources and power by this go ahead state in the global economic arena.

The mingling of commodities served not only as motors of change but as realized signs, signifying that two or more worlds met as well. This meeting of commodities and peoples highlighted in different ways the interconnectedness of the modern world. These commodities led to a continuous redefinition of belonging to a place as either “here” or “there” and/or as markers of social identity. Lives and cultures blended wherever commodities changed hands in the Zone. The Sultanate’s trade had started along the coast of northeast Borneo when Europeans and Taosug

found that each had key items of global commerce the other wanted. The Sulu and Samal desired European firearms, knives, kettles and textiles. The European's valued the Zone's natural products, especially birds' nest, sea cucumber and pearls. They traded, and both parties thought they were often getting a bargain. But their worlds and lives had been altered in the process, sometimes irrevocably so. After 1768, the consequence of "globalization" accelerated by the world capitalist economy was that areas, from remote maritime villages and tribal long houses in the Zone to entire continents, were "caught up in processes which linked them to events that, though geographically distant, [were] culturally, economically, politically, strategically, and ecologically quite near [and] the distinction between "here" and "there" [broke] down."⁹⁵

The individuals in this economic arena changed one another's lives by means of tens of thousands of transactions conducted over nearly a century, involving artefacts and goods that reflected the people who manufactured them, and the global economic imperatives that bridged two worlds to facilitate trading them. When they traded commodities, Europeans and Chinese exchanged part of the signs and practices of their societies as well, which could turn out to have complex, devastating social consequences in the world of the Zone, as in the case of opium. Increasingly, particular artefacts played a role, albeit a critical one, as a bridge between their respective cultures and worlds. The impact of these unanticipated "marrying" processes could be discerned in a myriad of everyday choices over such things as appropriate language and speech, fashion, interior decoration and the characteristics of food and eating habits. The importance of stratification symbols brought luxuries from Europe and China like Waterford crystal, bone china and porcelain to trading enclaves in the tropical wilderness of the Zone. The Sultan of Sulu and leading datus had their own stores of wine, chocolate, brandy and cigars and served their guests on Chinese porcelain. In terms of what Mann calls a "history of power" many of these commodities and artefacts were outward symbols of hierarchy and social distinctions among the Taosug,

95 Prewitt 1996, 15.

and critically important to the self-maintenance of the trading world of the Zone.⁹⁶

The large scale progressive intake of captive peoples from various parts of Southeast Asia and beyond also reflected Sulu's moving closer to Europe and China, economically and culturally. In the pages of my volume the world has changed through the intersections of the global trade economy centered around the Sulu and Celebes seas, as well as the Sultanate's critical place within it. Here, ordinary Southeast Asian farmers and fishermen are traumatically uprooted and forced to live in a distant economic region. A world comprised of winners responding to new economic opportunities of "globalization" and losers, those forced to live in ways unanticipated before that moment of capture and enslavement. Trade debts in Jolo are paid off by slaves serving Taosug masters in the fisheries and forests of the Zone. The point is that tens of thousands of ordinary Southeast Asians lived among maritime peoples completely removed from those with whom they had been born and grew up. They found themselves abroad in the scape of the Zone, first, because advanced technologies and new social alignments made long distance slave raiding relatively easy and, second, because revolutionary economic historical developments forcefully landed them in an unintended place – the Zone. European traders joined with Taosug *datus* to spark one of the largest population movements in recent Southeast Asian history with hundreds of thousands of individuals sent into slavery across the Zone. By the start of the nineteenth century, slave identities in the Zone were being shaped and changed by the forces of "globalization" as distinctions of race and culture blurred and broke down; thousands of "outsiders" were being incorporated into the lower reaches of a rapidly expanding trading society. Sulu provides an exceptional case study of *how* a collective identity was established, made real, and took on a particular cultural content.⁹⁷

Culture and collective identities embodied many things for those who lived them, such as language, music, dance and custom, as well as literature and philosophy. Learning a language (Taosug, Samal, Malay, Spanish or Chinese) was more than just a means of communication for

96 Mann 1986, 490; on the relationship between production, coercion and consciousness in history see Gellner 1988.

97 Comaroff 1992, 44.

individuals being incorporated, or their masters. It was also a vehicle for learning about different thought processes from their own, enabling them to look at things from wholly different angles and to broaden their cultural vision and life chances in the Zone. Music is yet another example. As a Taosug, some datus were profoundly moved whenever they heard Spanish violin music played by their slaves. This was because the sound of the *viola* was now part of their cultural heritage due to social and economic processes of “modernity” and the construction of new identities. There is no doubt in my mind, whatsoever, that by forcefully embracing such diverse peoples and cultures, the Taosug had the opportunity to enrich the fabric of their own lives and society. At the beginning of the nineteenth century they could count themselves extremely fortunate to be living in a “multicultural” environment. This assumption in turn assumes that the experience of “the fugitive slaves of Sulu”, cannot be separated from direct considerations of cultural practice, social structure and social power in any wider conception of the Zone’s history. Finally, another focus of attention for myself was on the process of interaction between major economic trends and events involving Europe with China on one side and the structure of everyday life in the Zone on the other. How were these individuals and events constituted in diverse social contexts across the Zone, historically and culturally?⁹⁸ The China tea trade from the standpoint of these individuals made the populating of the Zone yellow, black and white rather than just brown. All this ethnic edging up against one another and establishing ongoing relations involving conditions of slavery had been for the sake of a widely consumed mildly addictive commodity which had become a necessity in the European diet and way of life – tea.

For eighty years (1768–1848) the trade of the Zone flourished. Slavery drew more and more groups of people into the process of commodity accumulation. The “culture” and society of the Zone were fluid, with a global-regional trade system, attracting ever new objects and ideas into circuits of commodity exchange, with “borders” that were often contested, redefined and contextually shifting. Then, in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest of Balangingi in 1848 and the exile of the Samal marauders to the far away Cagayan valley in northern Luzon, the redis-

98 Comaroff 1992, 44.

tributive economy reached a threshold. The western grooved cannon and gunpowder, which had attracted the Samal to Jolo as clients and suppliers of slaves, were now operating to drive them apart. There was a further progressive fragmentation of Samal groups because of Spanish incursions and disruption of the Zone's economy. The total collapse of the economic system only came with the concerted effort of Spain to end Sulu's autonomy. By 1878, the demise of the trading-raiding system stripped the Sultanate of any trace of its former importance as a major entrepôt in the global-regional economy in Eastern Asia.

The Sulu Sultanate was an exceptional case for ethno-historical investigation because the history of the Zone demonstrated clearly the links between large economic and cultural systems and social mechanisms and institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other, the making of collective worlds of more localized smaller communities. In short, as Kenneth Prewitt, Head of the Social Science Research Council, puts it:

The global-local notion is not a metaphor invented by social theorists⁹⁹

Rather, it was the lived experience of millions of people in the Zone and on several continents, inextricably bound to one another as product and fate. Part of the challenge for me had been to identify and link broad patterns and variations in interactions of the global economy and macro-historical trends with the autonomous local history of a barely recognized economic region in Southeast Asia. The long term changes that occurred in these patterns and trends, based on economic interconnections and imperatives of the world capitalist economy could only be perceived through their interdependent effects in the environment, on ideas, on events, and social and cultural transformation in the making of the world of the "Zone".

The patterns I revealed throw up some unavoidable conclusions. The first is that the implications of my analysis of the economy, culture and society of the Sulu Zone perhaps, could be applied in a wider framework not only to elucidate the development of states and the elaboration of ethnic diversity in insular Southeast Asia, but also to develop a comparative framework with mainland states and cultures.¹⁰⁰ A second conclusion concerns generalizations that can be

⁹⁹ Prewitt 1996, 16.

¹⁰⁰ See Lieberman 1995.

made about the nature of Southeast Asian history. It is this trans-historical – trans-cultural – trans-disciplinary methodological approach of linking detailed research of a local situation to wider global-regional economic systems and issues, with particular reference to agency or “experience” that underpins my work. Thus, an examination of the structure of life of slaves in the Zone at the micro-social level challenges certain generalizations which have been made about the nature and historical evolution of the Sulu Sultanate. In addition, the long historical period of one hundred and thirty years, 1768–1898, reveals ways in which the global economy, trade commodities, population growth, environmental sustainability, economic transformation, colonial warfare and influence, were all reflected in the “microcosm” of the slave’s experience in the Sulu Zone. Finally, a third inescapable conclusion of *The Sulu Zone* entails something more: my ethno-history not only involved an extension of the content and meaning of “culture” and history, it also implied a revision of that content. What I have suggested in this volume is that in a new history of island Southeast Asia, the “little people” – fishers, “raiders”, divers, traders, pioneers and slaves – both, men and women, should be visibly present, as part of the cultural landscape and environment of a regional-economic “zone”, enmeshed in the hemispheric framework of the larger changing contemporary world of global cultural flows and economic interactions. The fundamental problems in the everyday lives of such maritime peoples – making their livings and losing them, entangled in globalizing events beyond their own local geographic borders and worlds, is the work of future ethno-historians of Asia, east by south.

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I Figures

- 1 Author’s photograph, Dinawan Island, North East Borneo, 1968.
- 2 Marryat 1848.
- 3 Marryat 1848.
- 4 Mouleon 1890.

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