

Animated Tale of Pirates: Tale of the Unspoken

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Abstract

Historians have been trying to trace back many evidences from Southeast Asia's maritime history to answer the question: how did pirates and piracies shape Southeast Asia's maritime history? Many historical evidences have answered the question of how, but some of them went further to try to answer the question of: why did they become pirates? The main idea from this ongoing research aims to build a content using animated movie to visualize how colonization contributed to the rise of piracy in Southeast Asia—particularly around Celebes Sea region-Indonesia—according to perspectives from three selected historians. The goal of this research paper is to build conclusion from the perspective of three selected historians about piracy phenomenon in Celebes Sea region through the frame of colonization. The research was conducted by studying literatures about historical data given from three selected historians. Non-participant observation on Celebes Sea region is also conducted to get local story insights from the original place. The result is an interpretation situation based on perspectives from selected historians and local story insights, which will be used as the basic content for the ongoing animated film project.

Keywords: pirates, Celebes Sea, colonialism, 19th century

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Image 1. Map of Indonesia region and Celebes Sea (circled).

Introduction

With 62% of maritime spaces, Indonesia is often referred as the world's largest archipelagic country. Waters connect 17,500 islands of Indonesia, span from Sabang to Merauke, to the extent of around 5,100 kilometers, with 60 millions from 258 millions of populations are living on coastal area (Explore Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d). Major populations who live on the coastal area of Indonesia are categorized as subsistence, and most likely are isolated from other community as well. This happens due to primary developments in Indonesia are usually centered on the main islands, leaving thousand of small islands and maritime spaces and cultures neglected for years (Octavia, 2016).

Orang Laut is one of a tribe that categorized as subsistence community in Indonesia. The Orang Laut tribe consists of many different ethnics who have the same style of living—using small ships for housing as well as vehicle. They usually live in the outermost of the coastal area, and can also be found on some parts of the water region of the small islands around Indonesia. Back in the colonial era in Indonesia, Orang Laut had been suspected to be involved with piracy that often happened around Celebes Sea region around 19th century (Lapian, 2009). Regarding this, some historians have searched for any evidences of connection between Orang Laut and pirates to explain the phenomenon of piracy around Celebes Sea region.

Pirates are viewed as criminals in most civilization. They rob ships, kidnap or even kill the ship crew. In many popular stories, they are positioned as villain as well, who put others as victim. Interesting point of view came from three historians who gave a different perspective; they connected piracy phenomenon in Southeast Asia—

particularly in Celebes Sea region with colonization that dominated this area for centuries.

Nowadays, after previously been neglected for years by the former governments, maritime issues has been brought up to the surface by Indonesian's recent government. This opens the possibility to build a visual content about Indonesian maritime history—especially regarding piracy phenomenon. The main idea from this ongoing research is to build a content using animated movie to visualize how colonization contributed to the rise of piracy in Southeast Asia—particularly around Celebes Sea region-Indonesia—according to perspectives from three selected historians. The goal of this research paper is to build conclusion from the perspective of three selected historians about piracy phenomenon in Celebes Sea region through the frame of colonization. The research was conducted by studying literatures about historical data given from three selected historians. Non-participant observation on Celebes Sea region is also conducted to get local story insights from the original place.

The Three Perspectives

Lapian, Tarling and Wright are three historians who studied about how colonialism affected the socio-culture of people of Southeast Asia, including the piracy phenomenon in this area. Lapian (2009) sees 'Bajak Laut' (translated as 'Pirates', in English) as part of the local maritime powers that balances the power of 'Raja Laut' (king of the sea) in Celebes Sea region. Tarling (1963) argues that 'pirate' is a label that given intentionally by colonizers to local maritime powers whose activities is thought similar with piracy. The third historian, Wright (1975) concludes that pirate phenomenon in Celebes Sea region happened as an impact from the deterioration of the local maritime powers due to colonization.

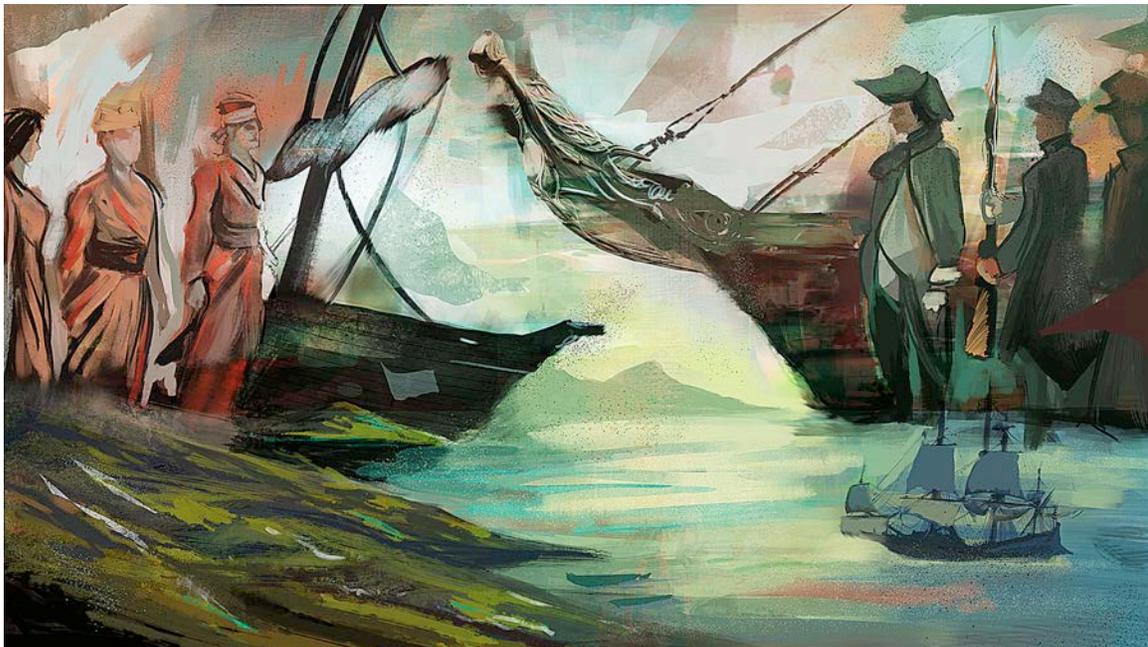


Image 2. Visual concept of colonization versus local maritime powers

Bajak Laut and Orang Laut shared the same style of living, even though they are different in the terms of attitude. They spend most of their activities around waters and are skilled sailormen. Through studying the colonial archives, Lopian (2009) found out the existence of some Orang Laut had been an annoyance for colonizers. Colonial archives recorded many assault incidents on colonial vessels around Celebes Sea region—water region that happened to be the Orang Laut's territory for centuries.

Lopian also added, there were no significant changes from the Orang Laut's lifestyle for centuries. They always stay near water region or floating on waters with their relatively small ships. Due to the size of the ship, it seems impossible for them to carry things more than their basic needs. Their lifestyle is very much similar to the earlier stage of human civilization; where the main activity is to suffice basic needs. The only difference is that Orang Laut mostly doing their activity on water region, with ship functioning as their home as well as vehicle.

As they presume the water region as theirs, the Orang Laut treat the water region as a hunting ground. They operated under traditional law called "adat tawan karang" (customary law of find)—an unwritten law that regulates the activity of hunting and gathering food. This law also provided them an authority to exploit (and assault) what is stored in their claimed water territory; be it fish, other animals, treasure, ship or vessels, even humans as casualty of a sinking ship. From their perspective, assaulting in the hunting ground counts as legal, especially if the object is considered as preys. In the perspective of colonizers, the attack of their vessels; usually following by robbery, kidnapping and killing; is categorized as piracy, and the attackers are categorized as pirates.

Instead of trying to understand the socio-culture of their colony, the colonizers opposed the local powers by categorizing them as piracy (Tarling, 1963). Opposing the local power and put them into the position of criminals were considered the winning way since the colonizers had more access to technology and to the outside world. Fighting the pirates-criminals enabled colonizers to position themselves as hero by putting the opponent into category of villain.

In his dissertation, Lopian explained about how power is distributed in the maritime socio-culture before colonial domination. For centuries, the maritime ecosystem in Celebes Sea region was dominated by local sea powers. They are Raja Laut (king of the sea) as legal power and Bajak Laut as counterbalance of legal power, while the Orang Laut served both powers. Colonial domination did not only interfere the balance of the power, but put down the ecosystem (Wright, 1975) by leaving the local sea powers under two difficult choices; surrender under colonial's domination or fight against colonizers by taking position as illegal power; Bajak Laut (Lopian, 2009). The high number of assaulting case in colonizers' vessels that recorded in colonial archives, give assumption that most local sea power might took position against colonizer rather than living under their domination.

Analysis

The perspectives from these three historians gave a different view in seeing piracy phenomenon that happened around Celebes Sea region in 19th century. Rather than viewing pirates as pure criminals, these perspectives see them more on victim side. They are community who committed to the ancient laws, but then framed differently in a more contemporary civilization. Changes are adapted very slowly in this community, that gives assumption they might isolated themselves from progressing world and chose to live their own way rather than to adapt.



Image 3. Visual concept of Bajak Laut as victim who transform into villain

Nowadays, colonial domination is over in Celebes Sea region, but the Orang Laut still remain with their style of living. Their activities—including fishing and trading—often crossing the border of other countries' water region and cause disputes in between Indonesia and the neighborhood countries. As colonizers tried hard to eliminate piracy around Celebes Sea region during their domination, now piracy and armed robbery against ships in this area is still a big issue. In the period of January – May 2017, RECAAP (2017) recorded 15 actual incidents and 5 attempted incidents that can be categorized as piracy around Southeast Asia's tri-border area—the waters shared by Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia—where Celebes Sea region is part of this area.

Living their way, isolated from bigger civilization doesn't kill the existence of Bajak Laut. Many big changes that happened during colonial domination, post-colonial domination until recent government, the Bajak Laut still stand as an illegal sea power that confront legal governments. They use their power in their own territory at will, choosing their prey and hunt them. Instead of fighting against them by categorizing

Bajak Laut as ‘pirates’—as villain and criminals, colonization moreover helped them to define and clarify their position.

To build visual content from piracy phenomenon in Celebes Sea region, the data conclusion from three historians’ perspectives showed the importance to present Bajak Laut as the center of the story. While other pirates are often portrayed as villain, the Bajak Laut of Celebes Sea region have two sides of appearance of victim as well as villain. They are the victims of the culture construction, while at the same time surviving by transforming into villain.

During observation around Celebes Sea region, we found out a growing local myth of Coelacanth; a species of ancient fish that only live around Celebes Sea region. This kind of fish survived from extinction by living around coral reefs that makes them invisible from the predators and fishermen. Similar with Bajak Laut’s portrayal, the Coelacanth is a living artifact from ancient times in a contemporary ecosystem. Both of them share the same properties; both originally from the same place, and are the artifact from an ancient life; the life that most of us know through stories and tales. Both of them, the Bajak Laut and the Coelacanth survive their own way to get into the contemporary world. The connection opens an opportunity to create tale—a fictitious story that imaginatively recounted to make a meaning of what happened in the past.

Rather than producing documentary content, by putting Coelacanth as the growing local myth, there is a tendency in mixing historical content and fictitious content. Considering the choice of narration and content, presenting them in animation medium seems more suitable rather than live action. The use of animation medium can give certain visual experiences that open possibilities in constructing the meaning of a past condition.

Conclusion

Different from stereotype perspectives that view pirate as pure criminals, the perspectives from three historians offered different way in understanding piracy phenomenon in Southeast Asia, particularly Celebes Sea region-Indonesia. These perspectives portray pirates as victim as well as villain. Together with the finding of Coelacanth as a growing local myth, the portrayal of Bajak Laut of Celebes Sea region is generated as a basic content for an ongoing animated film project.

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