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Community Cultures in Creating the Place-Bound Identity in Musi *Riparian*, Palembang

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Abstract

The proximity to water bodies has a great influence in shaping an urban built environment. Water cultures such as flood management, fishery, daily water supply, and water transportation are closely related to the establishment of settlements. This study aims to prove that in creating the place-bound identity, the physical structure are to be supported by activities of the community, especially in the Musi *Riparian* settlements. This study covers the Almunawar Arab community which has created a strong identity of the place. Islamic culture and physical condition of *riparian* environment has contributed to the unique character of this settlement. Data on physical environment is collected by field observation and in depth-interviews with community leaders are used to identify the cultural contribution of the community.

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1. Introduction

The history of the Musi River *riparian* settlements began in the era of the Palembang Sultanate in the 16th century. The Sultan allocated the settlement for foreign traders along the Musi riverbank. In the beginning, bamboo or wooden houses were floating in the river. As time went by, the sultan allowed foreign traders to move closer to the mainland. They constructed wooden stilt houses along the Musi riverbank. In the *riparian* settlements, besides foreign traders, also lived indigenous people who worked as fishermen. Both communities are dependent to the

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water bodies. They used the river as a source for water supply, goods, and food transport and trade. The closeness to water activities made those people maintaining the sustainability of the river (Santun, 2010).

The modern infrastructure of land transportation has changed the living pattern of this community. The sustainability of the river's ecosystem was thus ignored. The high mobility of land transportation marginalized the *riparian* areas. The riparian settlements are then occupied by migrants and poor people, which have no close relationship with the river. The Musi *riparian*, from now on, turned into settlements with high density and declining quality of life. The new settlements are built up on the land reclamation, which have, in fact, converted the existing *riparian* ecosystem. This development process has completely transformed the environmental landscape of Palembang and has degraded the identity of settlements in water culture.

Riparian ecosystem and settlement's culture are there to coexist. *Riparian* ecosystem supports the sustainable livelihood and well-being of the society. Experience from many countries in the past century indicates that the lack of awareness and weaknesses in identifying, valuing and preserving cultural values of *riparian* settlements will cause a loss of values of traditional culture. The *riparian* ecosystem integrates ecological, economic, and social life of the people. The loss of the *riparian* environment will cause a loss of water culture too. And the loss of the environment will result to the unsustainable livelihood of the people. On the other hand, the awareness of preserving the identity of *riparian* settlement requires an approach of urban development that emphasizes the ecological, economic, and social sustainability (Ramsar Culture Working Group, 2008).

The method used in this study is detailed observation that is combined with interviews with community leaders. This paper aims to show the impact of public activities that have created the identity of a place. The focus of this study is to provide evidence that *riparian* settlements need to be supported by daily activities in water culture in that it can rebuild the place-bound identity of *riparian* settlement.

2. Place bound identity and social activities

Place-bound identity is a complex concept about place. Its connotations vary widely and may be expressed in concrete or abstract ways. Creating places and recreating places remain central human needs and activities that are always developmental. By nature, human beings are bound by a place. All human activities take place within the context of physical and cultural places. They also involve other aspects beyond physical place such as human values and intention. Place-bound identity constitutes an integration of society, culture, and nature (Holmes, Patterson, & Stalling, 2003).

Architecture provides the main feature of the constructed environment. Architecture is part of an environment that is created and built by human beings. Buildings and other structures show cultural and social values that have created places. Architecture constructs landscapes and buildings that produce and reproduce human values and history. Architecture provides stories and histories about the human condition that can be read from its physical structure (Ingraham, 1998).

The connotative character of the environment (e.g. a special building) is not only seen in the urban structure itself, is a result of social interaction among inhabitants dealing with that structure. Symbols of a place-bound identity are mediations that are organized at the level of social interaction itself. Symbols are used as tools to facilitate everyday life by helping to organize and direct action symbols (Mueller & Schade, 2012). This means that anything concerns with the image of a place occur in the identity of the group. In order to understand a place-bound identity as a "sense of place", it is necessary to think about how space/place is constituted. In this interpretation, what gives a place its specificity is not long internalized history, but the construction of particular social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus (Kalandides, 2011).

Finally, a place identity is defined as a personal identity that is distinct to the physical environment, and that is influenced by beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals, behavioral tendencies and skills. An individual may see a place as part of the self and simultaneously as a resource for satisfying goals or explicitly felt behaviors. A place can create a strong emotional attachment. Place identity does not only include a physical setting or environment, but also a social element. The physical settings are backdrops for social and cultural existence. In the riparian context, land and riparian management policy will fail if they do not recognize the community's existence. Thus, the attention to riparian settlements should concern the anxiety and fragility of community culture that are bound to the place. This can create a sense of ownership in process and sustainability. (Burley, Jenkins, Laska, & Davis, 2007)

3. Place-bound identity of the Almunawar Settlement

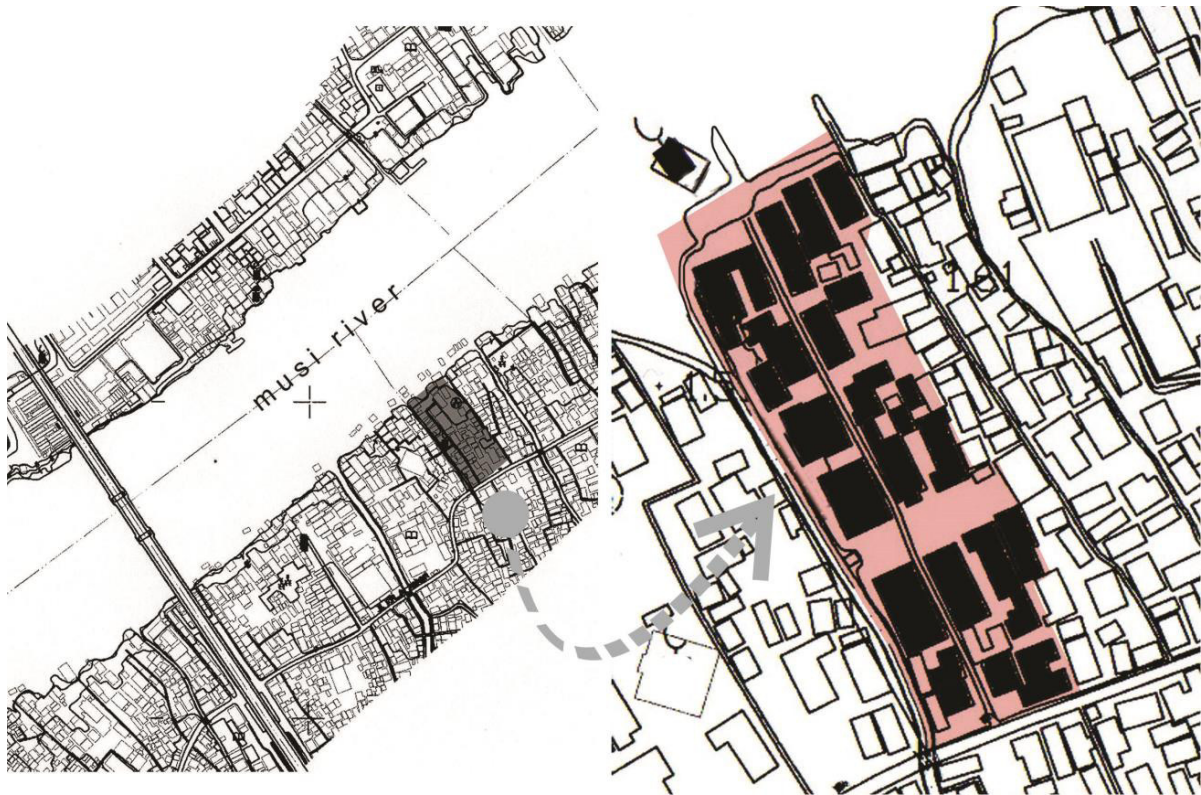


Fig. 1. The Map of Almunawar Settlement.

The Al-Munawar district is one of the historic settlements at the Musi riverside. It is an Arab settlement that still maintains its sense of place as a *riparian* settlement. Arab people are foreign traders that came to Palembang in the Sultanate era. Geographically, the Arab neighborhoods are located at the south bank of the Musi river. Besides Almunawar settlement, there are other Arab settlements, such as Al-Ethiopia, Al-Hadad, Al-Kaff, Baraqbah, Bahsin, Assegaf, and many others. Most of these settlements are built by wealthy Arab merchants in the past. The Arab communities live in an exclusive settlement that consist of large families. They established a kind of family district around the indigenous people settlements. They adopt an exclusive lifestyle that distinguishes them from other communities. They speak in their language, and they have their food. However, similar religion of Islam made them well accepted by the local community. Their profound knowledge about Islam has earned them a special place in the local community (Santun, 2010). Almunawar is the name of an alley with seventeen houses. The inhabitants of this area are from the single lineage of Almunawar clan. In this area, strong engagement among inhabitants creates a unique identity for the place. Sociocultural activities with intense religious rituals are reflected in the daily life of the inhabitants. The pride of being part of the Arab community keeps the inhabitants maintaining the tradition of Arab settlement.

3.1. The built environment

The Almunawar settlement can be divided into three types of architectural style: the riverfront, the center area, and landed area. Buildings on the *riparian* settlement are oriented toward the riverfront. The original houses have its

typical water-based architecture. The architectural style of most houses is 250 years old. They are wooden houses built on stilts and oriented toward the river. The stilts are made from local wood which is strong and durable. Houses are built to stand a harmony with the natural *riparian* environments. Houses have steep roofs and wide eaves to adapt to the tropical climate. The construction of the wooden structure on stilt reflects the response to the regular tide and flood of the Musi river. The community uses the abundant wood available at that time as a resource for building materials.

However, new houses that have been built later changed the orientation of the building toward the land and the street. Buildings located at the center area of the settlement are oriented toward an open square. This changing orientation has set up a different character of settlements in the neighborhood of riparian settlements. The new settlement has an open space as the new spatial orientation. The open square at the center of the settlement area is used as the communal area and center point of surrounding buildings. The open square is often found in front of the house of a historically prominent family. Usually, the open square links a street to the canal stream. The existence of the open space creates a transitional area between riverfront and landed building. The architecture of buildings surrounding the open space underlines the character of a transitional area.

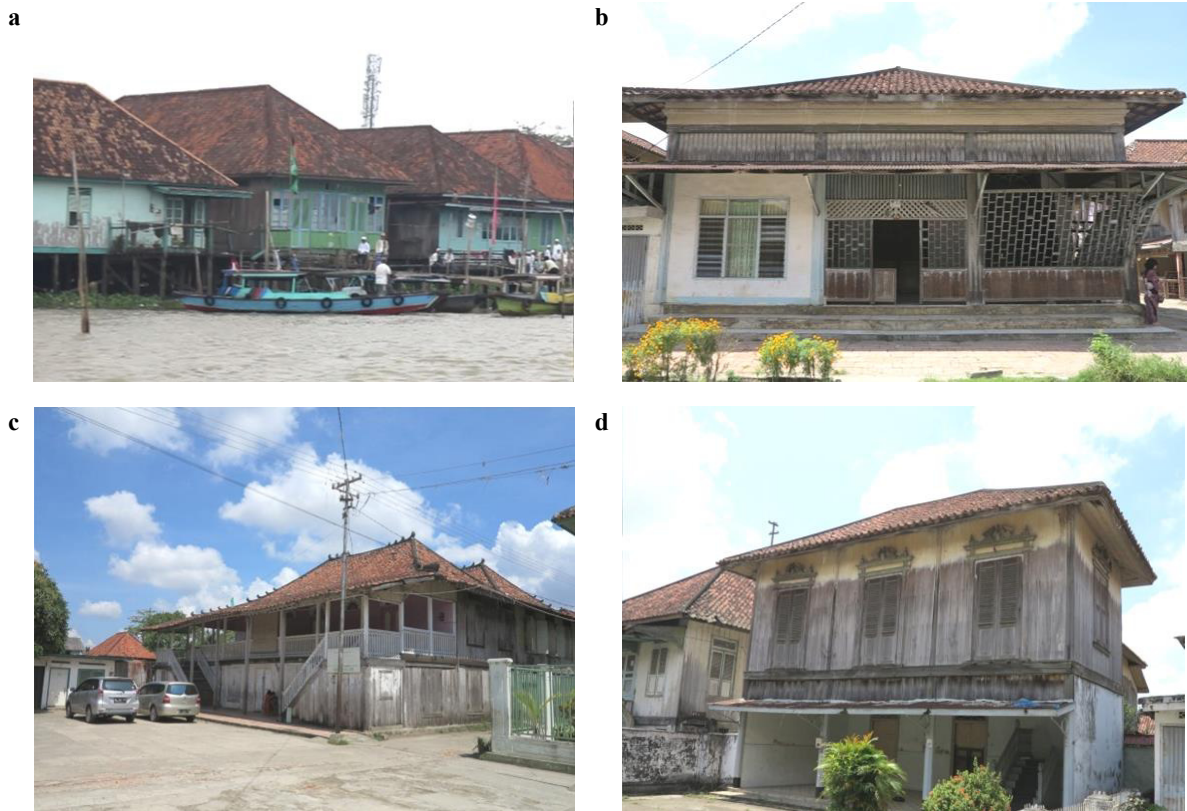


Fig. 2. (a) The *Riparian House*; (b) The *Landed House*; (c) *Almunawar Architecture*; (d) The *Transformed Stilt House*

The transformation of stilt houses takes place in this area where the space between stilts is used as living space. In original stilt houses, the ground level is a space for anticipating the tidal cycle of the river. Subsequently, this space is converted to as part of the house. People adjust the ground floor from tide by slightly raise the elevation and build a wall enclosing the space. Nowadays stilt houses look similar to landed houses. The ground floor is then used as a garage and storeroom, and some are utilized as extended rooms of the house. The later landed buildings have a

quite different architecture compared to original buildings in the riparian area. They do not use wooden pillars but stone structure. They have a lower elevation than the older ones.

Details on façade, ornaments and building construction of the buildings are influenced by the colonial architecture. Important buildings are situated near the street instead of riverfront, by which orientation to the river was ignored. Buildings in this settlement do not exhibit any Islamic influence. Each house has a detail of Islamic ornament as decorative elements, but the house form is still in local architecture style. Some houses are inspired by the inner court of typical Arab houses, and the mosque becomes the center of religious activities. However, those are not significant enough to create an Islamic place-bound identity.

Most of the houses in the riparian area have been modified, but the neighborhood structure is still in its original form. This condition showed transformation and adaptation process of a traditional settlement that might implied the learning point of urban history transformations (Tajudeen, 2012). The architecture of the new houses reflects the sociocultural condition of the inhabitants that dominates the construction process of the settlement. All of these characters contribute a strong place-bound identity.

3.2. *Islamic Water Community Culture*

Even though the built environment has maintained the original condition, yet, Islamic culture has also been practiced in Almunawar settlement. Islamic way of life starts from the morning when the call to dawn prayers is chanted. Men, wearing white robes and caps, go to pray at the community mosque on the riverbank. The men in this community are mandatory to perform *Sholat* (praying) every day. The routine activity of praying has indirectly strengthened solidarity among them and given a strong Islamic character and atmosphere in the settlement.

From the morning until noon Islamic school activities characterize the central area. An Islamic school is placed in one of the old buildings in the central open space. This school is established out of the initiative of this community to accommodate students from inside and outside of the neighborhood. In this school student learns Islamic teachings and formal education. There is also a pre-school education initiated by some residents, where children under the age of five study the reading and writing of the holy Qur'an. This pre-school uses the ground space of a transformed house as classrooms. There is no activity in the neighborhood after school time until the sun set. The men go the mosque again when the call for *Maghrib* prayer comes.

The central open space in this settlement has a vital function for public and school activities. The space is used to accommodate family feasts, wedding ceremony, or various ceremonies during religious rituals. The Islamic rituals such as the celebration commemorating the Prophet Muhammad's ascent to Heaven and the community's founder are always held in this open space. Ritual ceremonies are always interpreted as gathering events for the extended families of the Almunawar. The events reinforce relationships among families and bring a sense of togetherness in the community.



Fig. 3. (a) The islamic school; (b) The memorial ceremony of the Almunawar Founder; (c) The weekly islamic discourse.

There is another common space at the edge of the settlement. The open space is located at the *riparian* area as an entrance to the settlement from the river. In this open space people built a community mosque for Islamic activities. In Muslim communities, the mosque is the place for daily religious activities and intellectual and social activities. It is not only used as a sacred place but also as a place for bonding and bridging the social capital. The Mosque has an important role in establishing the identity of Islamic locus (Fridolfsson & Elander, 2012). The mosque is always occupied with activities, and it creates a lively environment. The Almunawar Mosque is well known for its religious activities. Many people outside the community, especially those who live in the *riparian* Musi area, come to this mosque.

Many mosques in the Musi *riparian* area are built on the river, and people use the boat as a transportation mode to move from one mosque to another. The river has an important role for the transportation and religious activities in the settlements. Daily and routine activities of the Islamic community are dependent to this water environment. The daily life of the Almunawar community is identified by water culture and strong Islamic values. The uniqueness in Almunawar settlement at the riverfront of Musi becomes a social attraction. Every week at the riverfront people see

men who wear 'koko' (flowing robes) are waiting for the boats. The commitment to wear traditional clothes has created a unique atmosphere of Islamic water settlement (figure 3).

The Arab community with their Islamic culture has been succeeded to maintain the harmonious atmosphere of riverfront settlements. Cultural activities become instruments for the creation of Islamic identity. This living culture of the community and the place contribute to the sustainability of a place-bound identity. The Almunawar settlement has showed that cultural activities bring up the real soul of the place-bound identity. The activities of the community establish the physical environment as well as the identity of the place. Ultimately they will bring vitality and sustainability to the place identity.

4. Conclusion

The *riparian* ecosystem is very dynamic and complex. It integrates ecological elements with issues of economic development and human activity. To preserve the identity of riparian settlement requires awareness on social-cultural values of the settlement. The loss of water culture might be reduced by identifying, valuing and preserving the cultural values of the inhabitants.

Place-bound identity is perceived as a result of the uniqueness of the built environment and social activities of the community. The identity of the place is an illustration of a harmony between the place and the culture of the society living in the place. The creativity of the community makes built the environment accommodative to their routine activities. In the Almunawar settlement, the unique culture of the community has maintained the sustainability of the place-bound identity. At the same time, the unique culture has not ruined the structure of the place.

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