

Modernization of Shipping and River Sailing Business in Palembang 1860-1930

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the development of shipping on the rivers in Palembang, especially those operated by joint venture companies (*kongsi*) between 1860-1930. The main discussion in this paper is on which factors drive the modernization of shipping and the development of sailing business in Palembang during the aforementioned period. Palembang, located on the Musi River banks on the east coast of southern Sumatra, has abundant potential natural resources. In the middle of 19th century, the engine technology increase shipping along the river, primarily by European joint venture. They faced tough competitor (both visible and covert) from similar joint venture company owned by Chinese, Arabian, and some from Palembang's traders. This paper focuses on the perspective of maritime history and will be supported by various primary sources like archives and newspaper.

Keywords: Palembang; Sailing; Economy; Boats and Ships

1. Introduction

Palembang is located on the Musi River banks on the east coast of southern Sumatra. As such, transportation on water has characterized the town for centuries. During the premodern history of Palembang, most people depended on the river for their income. Economic growth strongly depended on shipping and shipbuilding. For example, when ships and boats were developed, the economy improved, because with development of shipping industry techniques, the mileage, the capacity, safety and comfort of the means of transportation became better as well. This improvement is positively affected the economic progress, as well as other life sectors such as social, cultural, and political sectors (Purwanto, 1998: 15-16). Based on statements above, further investigation will focus on what motivates the modernization of shipping and the

development of shipping business in Palembang in the late 19th and early 20th century. Moreover, it is asked how shipping business in Palembang grew rapidly after the modernization of the shipping industry especially after mechanization of shipping is applied.

2. Palembang During the 19th And Early of the 20th Century

Palembang is strategically located near the Bangka Strait between the Batavian and Singaporean trade zones. On land it also serves as a hub between Jambi to the north, Bengkulu to the west, (Stibbe, 1919: 259) There are several big rivers in Palembang, but the Musi river is the central one with a length of about 700 km, but only about 550 km is navigatable. These territories stretch from the western mountainous region of Bukit Barisan (in the proximity of Kepahiang) to Bangka Strait (Faille, 1971: 16). In addition, there are also many tributaries at the river branches flowing into the Musi river, more than two-hundred in Palembang alone. Water transportation, whether boats or ships, is highly depended on weather and climatic conditions which affect the tide of the Musi river¹. During the dry season, the river turns shallow, and sailing from the Musi river estuary (Sungsang) inlands is difficult due to twigs and trunks floating away² on the river. The best time for sailing the Musi river is during tide or during the rainy season, when the river can easily be sailed up to *Uluan* (inland).

In the early 20th century, Palembang emerged as a new economic power outside of Java Island. Various newly planted commodities in Palembang, coffee and rubber for example, and rising prices of older commodities increased Palembang's significance to the local and international markets. The term community plantation (*Kebun Rakyat*) was popular at the time, because the majority of coffee and rubber plantations were owned and managed by the local people (Purwanto, 2002: 205-211). The development of these commodity markets went hand in hand with a fluent distribution. Hence, this was great moment to introduce engined ships and boats which were suitable for river sailing.

¹ The Musi River estuary width ranged 100-150 roed (1219 meters, 2128 meters). At low tide the water about 4-5 feet (1.22 to 1.52 meters), while during high tides of 10 feet (3.04 meters), a length six to ten hours. (ANRI, Palembang bundles No. 67)

² Twigs and driftwood naturally, became an obstacle in shipping, especially if the timber was accidentally swept away as a form of defense strategy in the war, it became "an obstacle" to be considered by the enemy. This was evident in three wars between the Sultanate of Palembang with England (1811), and Netherlands (1819 and 1921) (Wargadalem, 2012: 84-85, 227-228, 262).

3. Modernization of Shipping in Palembang

The Introductions of shipping with engine technology in Palembang occurred around the middle of the 19th century. The change was driven by Dutch shipping joint venture called the *Nederlandse Stroomvaart Maatschappij*. This joint venture began by operating several steamers on the rivers of Palembang. The routes taken were between long-distance ports (for example: Palembang-Singapore and Palembang-Batavia) and of short duration (usually once a month). The next type of engined ship was *Stoomwiel*. This kind of ship was operated by *N.V. Industriële Maatschappij*. At first, these ships were from Europe, and then this joint venture obtained additional funding from Willem Cremer a family member of the Minister of Colonies at the time, so the assembly took place at the port of Palembang (Peters, 1997: 59-61).

The ships above generally served as passenger ships, while others were reserved for plantation commodity products. In addition to *stoomwiel ships*, there were also engined barges called *Tongkang*. These Ships were usually unable to move by engine, but they needed other engined boats to pull or drag the *Tongkang* boat. The ships were commonly used for distribution of bulk of mining products, such as coal. *Tongkang* was widely used in Palembang, especially since the advent of mining products. By 1915 there were about 39 *tongkang* sailed in and out of the port in Palembang (Asnan, 2016: 116-117). Engine ships was likely very easy to "steal the heart" of Palembang community and quickly shift the dominance of traditional ships and boats, especially ahead of the 20th century. Referring to the concept of Campo (1993: 33-60) About the invasion of technology, boats and the traditional ships still in use, but they seek territory or part of the river that was not navigable for engine ships. There are several advantages possessed by the ship-engine compared with traditional ships, such as: do not depend on the nature (especially the weather and wind), the shape is slender and flat, and the main thing of this ship is speedier than the traditional one. The engine ship only took one week from Palembang to Lahat, while the traditional boat took one month with the same distance (Peters, 1997: 60).

4. Sailing Business in Palembang

The use of ship engine technology in Palembang became common in the early twentieth century. It could not be separated from the increased production in Palembang, both from plantations (rubber, and coffee), and mines (coal and oil). There were many engined ships from many joint venture shipping companies ready to pick up and to sell these commodities to the

markets, be it local, regional or inter-insular such as to Batavia, Singapore, Siam and China (Zed, 2003: 95-96). The Europeans were pioneers in the introduction of engined ships in Palembang. These ships carried people, plantation products, and mining products. One of the oil companies in Muara Enim once used the services of this joint venture (*N.V. Industriële Maatschappij*) to transport oil from the local region to the port of the Musi river, but unfortunately one of the ship sank in 1903 (ANRI, *Algemene Secretarie, Department Der Marine Bijlagen* No. 13 449, 18 November 1904).

Another European joint venture company was the *Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij* (KPM), established in 1888. This joint venture came to be through a merge of the shipping companies called *B.C. Nederland* and *Rotterdam Lloyd*. After being established, KPM immediately took over contracts from trading voyage from former joint venture companies (Dick, 1988: 406-408). It could do so because KPM received assistance in its funding and political position from the Dutch colonial government, thus they took the lead in competing with other joint venture shipping companies in the Dutch East Indies (Sulistiyono, 2004: 162-164). In the territory of Palembang, the routes taken by KPM were route 4 (Java-Muntok-Palembang-Jambi), 4a (Palembang-Batavia), 4c (Palembang-Singapore), 4f (Palembang-Menggala-Batavia), and river lane (Sekayu, Rupit, and Muara Enim) (Sulistiyono, 2004: 214-215; this includes transiting ships).

Other than KPM, there were other joint venture companies owned by the Chinese, the Arabs,³ and the locals. These shipping joint venture companies did not only sail local routes but also tried to take regional and international ones especially Palembang to Singapore to compete with KPM. Most of the joint venture companies which took these routes were operated by the Chinese and the Arabs, for example: *N.V. Tiong Hoa Loen Tjoen Maatschappij* and *Kongsi Chu Sung kin* (sailing from Palembang to Singapore), *Goan Tja Sam* (sailing from Palembang to Menggala), and *Alimoenar Assegaf & Co* (sailing from Palembang to Muntok). Unfortunately, the routes were deserted by passengers and cargo, making it less profitable especially from Palembang to Muntok and Menggala (Peters, 1997: 61; Richter, 1911: 279)

In addition, there were also some local joint ventures which took several local routes via the Palembang river (Table. 1).

³Those of Chinese and Arabs that own the joint venture was registered as a Palembang civilian, but if we tracking their ancestor, most of Arabs in Palembang from Hadrami and the Chinese many thought they came from Hokkien (Van den Berg, 2010:95; Cabaton, 2015: 178-179).

Table 1. List of Joint Venture Shipping Companies in Palembang 1910

Joint Venture	Ships	Type	Flag	Route
Kiam Boh	Lematang	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Baturaja
	Hong Seng Bie	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Enim
	Sin Heng Bie	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Klingi
	Post Paket	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Afwisseland
Tjia Kiam Tjie	Noer Salim	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Klingi
	Sin Joe Sing	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Rupit
Tjiah Koh Ping	Tan Joe Sing	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang Muara Enim
	Klanten	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Baturaja
Eneng	Wilhelmina	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Moesi Ilir
Haji Apidin	Mir Moesi	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Moesi Ilir
	Emma	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Afwisseland
Sidiek	Tonghin	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Rupit
Haji Akip	Rawas	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Muara Enim
Lim King Tjang	Soerolangun	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang Afwisseland
Mohammad Tajip	Mirlina	Passangers	Netherland	Palembang-Moesi Ulu

(Source: Richter, 1911: 280)

The routes mentioned in the above table were not sailed by KPM, the dominance of Chinese Shipping was prominent on these routes as is shown by the number of joint venture companies and ships they had. The number of ships also increased up to the 1920s with 47 ships in total by that year, Most of these ships were owned by the Chinese (Zed, 2003: 94-95). Around 1915 to 1925, there were approximately a thousand ships with a small or large tonnage sailing to Palembang's bay each year (Newspaper Boemi Melajoe, August 11, 1927).

Other than serving trade routes, some joint ventures also served transport for the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Hajj services were provided by specialized shipping joint ventures for Hajj pilgrims. One of the local agencies in Palembang was *Haji Tohir*. This agency handled the various needs of the people who would go on a Hajj pilgrimage, including shuttling to locations in *Uluan* (Newspaper of Kabar Kemoedi, October 16, 1926).

The trades that occur in Palembang continued to increase along with the progress of modernization in the field of shipping. It's just that there seems to be a negative side in practice,

in the event we will meet the legal trade and shipping authorized by the government and private sectors. but also known to many persons who want to use this to smuggle commodities. The superiority of engine ship can be used for accelerating of smuggling mobility besides the smugglers actually want to avoid the high taxes by the government indeed (Tagliacozzo, 2005: 86).

5. Conclusion

Rivers became an important part of people's lives in Palembang from very early. Prior to 1930, the river was the only access to the hinterland areas producing valuable commodities. Since shipping technology introduced engine power systems such as the steamed ship and *stroomwheel* ships, the problems faced by traditional boats and ships were overcome. Ships powered by engines made transportation less dependent on the weather and water level (unless completely receded to dry and shallow). In addition, the use of these ships reduced the sailing time. This new technology made shipping businesses in Palembang grow rapidly. Various joint venture shipping companies served a variety of services during the mid-nineteenth century until the first quarter of the twentieth century. The development of shipping and sailing businesses also had a significant impact on economic development, the travel time could be shortened to make the distribution of people and goods flow faster. These two things were interrelated to one another. Thus the modernization of shipping and sailing brought development and improvement in businesses and the economy of Palembang.

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