

Piracy in the Malacca Straits: notes from the field

Theme >
Field notes

30 September 2004, at night, 03:27N - 99:47E, Malacca Straits:

Robbers board a tug with a barge in tow. They break the windows, steal equipment and take the master and a sailor hostage, whose whereabouts remain unknown. Three days later in the same area, eight armed pirates in a fishing boat fire at another tug, damaging the wheelhouse and destroying navigation equipment. Four pirates armed with guns board the ship and steal the crew's belongings, again taking hostages.

Eric Frécon

Although the number of incidents worldwide has diminished, pirates are attacking more and more vessels in the South China Sea and in the Singapore Straits. According to the latest reports, the pirates - who can be violent and unscrupulous - focus on small, local vessels: tugs, supply ships and fishing trawlers. But who are the pirates? Why do they take such risks? And where do they come from? In order to answer these questions, one has to meet the pirates, their families, their neighbours and friends.

The pirate story in brief

In the 1980s and 90s, pirates came from many places to the Riau Archipelago, especially the city of Palembang on Sumatra. Syaful Rozy was a famous chief, a Robin Hood of the sea, who distributed the booty from plundered vessels. Thanks to him, the imam could finance the building of the mosque. From their *kampung* in the archipelago, pirates travelled to other islands in the Malacca Straits or the South China Sea. In the late 1990s and at the beginning of the millennium, the gang of Winang settled near Jemaja, in the Anambas Archipelago. There the pirates lived among local fishermen for a few months, surveying and attacking vessels. They then came back to the Riau Archipelago before joining their families in Sumatra.

The village on piles hidden in a bay between mangroves and small islands is located six kilometres south of Singapore in the Riau Archipelago, at the epicentre of modern day piracy. Since breaking his thigh bone boarding a ship, Winang's former assistant is handicapped. Today his gang attacks small vessels crossing the strait between Singapore's opulent skyscrapers and the sordid houses on piles. Although its golden age is over, the *kampung* remains one of the main pirate dens of the Malacca Straits. It seems to perpetuate a tradition - or habit - of armed robbery of ships from the Malay coast and along strategic sea lanes.

In the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Chinese traveller Tchao Jou-Koua described in an explanatory note on *San-fo-ts'i*, the Chinese name for the Sumatran maritime power of Sriwijaya, how the local authority controlled navigation in the region: 'if a merchant ship passes through without putting into port, boats go out to attack it in accordance to a planned manoeuvre; people are ready to die (to carry out this enterprise).'¹ Later, Muslim sultanates developed along the maritime routes - until the nineteenth century, entire communities lived by pirate raids, and were armed by local authorities (see also the article by Ota Atsushi). They contributed to the development of strategic commercial warehouses in Malacca, Johor and the Riau Archipelago in the heart of the Malay Straits. Maritime guerrillas regulated regional relations, as did Barbarossa in the Mediterranean.

Guided tour into a pirate den²

Before arriving, one has to stop at Batam Island, where one is confronted by the economic crisis. In this free trade zone, the sidelined masses of the Asian boom inhabit 40,000 illegal residences. Idle people look for jobs; the atmosphere is heavy. Batam is close to exploding - the population has grown from 38,000 in 1980 to some 500,000 today.³ The island where the pirates live is very close to the coast of Batam. Here, as elsewhere in Indonesia, the market road is colourful and stalls bustle with life. Following the *muezzin's* call, merchants fry their rice in stalls for the pilots of the taxi boats and the rickshaws drivers. Apart from its gaming rooms, which remain open during the day, it looks just like any other village on piles. After the post office, at the end of the market road, we turn left and enter the den in Kampung Tanjung. The hideaway is ideal: an island amidst many others, only six kilometers from Singapore.

The first house is the police station, a crude cabin overlook-



Umar: 2-III

ing the port with a view of the Straits. Local police are no doubt aware of the criminal activities - to get to the Straits, pirates pass under their windows. People say that a few years ago, police used to collect a tax from boats sailing around the island. Two one-engine sampans are the police's only patrol boats; the pirates have two- or three-engined speedboats. Clad in sarongs, the policemen prefer to take fresh air in front of the station or to visit the prostitutes on Pulau Babi - Pig Island - close by.

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Pirates gather on Pulau Babi before attacking vessels in the Straits. They drink and take morphine, probably to forget the danger. Boarding incidents at night are delicate, as they can count on neither a Global Positioning System nor spotlights. The backwash of the ships' propellers make climbing onto the boats perilous. This is done with the help of grappels or large gaffs with a sickle on the end, more suitable for collecting coconuts than for boarding ships moving at 25 knots.



Belakang Pulau 2-III

At two o'clock in the morning, the pirates get back to their den at the far end of the bay. Their houses on piles, in the middle of a maze of rickety footbridges, are accessible only from the sea. Their neighbours are either smugglers or fishermen with families. During the day, pirates work as taxi-boat drivers and can move freely. Inhabitants never talk of their nocturnal activities. Crouched on his boat docked at the jetty, a sailor sporting Ray-Ban glasses draws: 'Pirates, they existed an eternity ago...' But what does 'eternity' mean in the *jam karet* - or elastic time - country? This is a kind of *omerta*, the oath of secrecy that rules triads. Pirates exist but nobody dares to talk about them. Even the village chief opts for a *laissez-faire* policy - so long as the unemployed do not rebel and heavy weapons from Aceh aren't involved. This is the price of the social peace.

Pirate gangs in the maritime suburbs of Singapore

The village chief continues to survey everybody; he asserts that there are seven bands of five to six men, like the Buton gang which his former son-in-law manages. The oldest, occupying beautiful hillside buildings, train the younger generations who play *sepak takraw* - a spectacular mix of football, volleyball and badminton - everyday until the *mahrib*, the fourth prayer after sunset. Some of them like Arif can't wait to get money and wear jerseys and shoes 'made in West'. Young idle people and poor unmarried taxi-boat drivers collaborate with external recruits. Indeed, the old chief adds: 'recently, a group came from Palembang (south of Sumatra) to be trained on the job!'. All these sea-brigands obey more experienced and charismatic pirates. Their gangs are far from the triads of Hong Kong who make off with boats, then repaint and rename them. The attacks on the waters off the den arise from petty robbery, and their weapons are worn. In the Sulu Sea, the gangs possess M-16s and bazookas; in the Riau Archipelago, one has to be content with *parang*, long Malayan knives and pistols.

The main actors of this shady play are two powerful brothers. One of them adds political shrewdness to the courage of his warrior brother. Both control the entire island - the main village, the market and the den along the bay. They act like lords in front of the inhabitants, their serfs, whom they strike when angry. They are as warlords vis-à-vis the government in Jakarta, the central power far away. The two brothers know all and enjoy political connections; pirates have to give them accounts of their activities.⁴

The visitor won't meet long or black beards in the den but sea-hooligans and the desperate poor. Modern Malay piracy has no romantic, anarchist, utopian or religious roots. After the demise of the pirate myth, people seem to be transferring their fears and fantasies to fundamentalist terrorists. If Joseph Conrad came back in the Malay world, he would draw his inspiration from the terrorists, not the idle pirates. ◀

Notes

- Coedes, George. 1964. *Les Etats hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* [Hindu States of Indochina and Indonesia]. Paris: de Boccard, p. 439.
- Two trips were necessary in 2002 and 2003 to localize the den, made possible by the stories of an old missionary and a retired pirate who now organises boxing matches in Batam. Then, the challenge consisted in entering the *kampung* where the pirates live. Fortunately, a young Indonesian, who grew up in this village on piles hidden in a bay, between mangroves and small islands, kindly acted as my guide; I had met him in a school near Batam. In the den, he introduced me to pirates, fishermen and procurers. Above all, he warned me about attempts to rob or attack me.
- Frécon, Eric. 2005. *Jolly Roger over Southeast Asia: history of the resurgence of the sea piracy*. New Delhi: Sampark.
- Nasrul, a fisherman from Kampung Tanjung. Interview by author, 5 February 2004. Kampung Tanjung (Riau), Indonesia.

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