Maritime Violence and Colonial State Formation in Nineteenth-Century West Malay Waters: Historiography and New Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper examines the historiography of the maritime violence (piracy) in the nineteenth-century Malay waters, and discusses the perspectives for further study on the basis of my recent research. The study of maritime violence in Malay waters was started by early colonial officials in order to legitimize their anti-piracy policy. Studies in the following generations chronicled European anti-piracy campaigns in detail. Some postcolonial scholars held an extremely anti-colonial view to counter this Eurocentric colonial history. After the late 1970s scholars attempted to situate maritime violence in the contexts of the expanding long-distance and interregional trade, or the unsteady process of colonial state formation.

I propose the following perspectives as the aspects to be further pursued: (1) its continuity from the pre-colonial trade order, (2) its impact on early colonial state formation, and (3) the formation of borderland communities and their relationship with the colonial governments.

The case study of the raiders in Galang, south of Singapore, showed that maritime violence was not always an obstacle for trade but also a part of it. The colonial authorities maintained complicated attitudes toward maritime violence in order to bring the network of the traders and raiders under their control, rather than simply conducting armed suppression. A typical borderland society appeared in Galang. Their community was ethnically
mixed, and became a part of the network of raiders and traders interconnecting the Malay waters.

**Keywords:** maritime violence, piracy, colonial state, Malay, historiography, borderland