

Theorizing the Postcolonial City:

Colonial Logistics and Hybrid Spatialities in Kuching, Malaysia

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Abstract:

The city plan of Kuching is not influenced by systematic planning principles, but rather, it is deeply embedded within colonial infrastructural logistics to meet the demands of global trade services and social structures. The postcolonial city is a palimpsest of hierarchical and territorial imprints from former colonial governance. Much of urban growth is concentrated around nodes, prioritized for resource collection and distribution. Therefore, this paper delineates how the current state and city governance recalibrate inherited infrastructures of economic development from the past, resulting in hybrid spatialities in this northwest city of Borneo. We narrate how the Brooke dynasty, British administration and the Malaysian state have each developed and reappropriated logistics infrastructure based on their own agenda, leaving an indelible mark on the urban fabric and society of Kuching today. These findings are based on content analysis of city plans, visual surveys, government media and secondary sources. We aim to open up new ways of understanding how multi-layered infrastructure and spaces produced by successive waves of different political strategies resulted in uneven development around the postcolonial city, and why some centres are given preference over others.

Introduction

At the beginning of the colonial era, territories were acquired and exploited for their resources, and port cities were established to administer trading and exports. This strategy, termed as 'colonial logistics', is about:

'...imposing rationality and efficiency on the unpredictable and uncontrolled...in order to transform nature into a resource for commodity production and capital accumulation. Colonial logistics produced specific spatial and social relations at the local, regional, and continental scales.'¹

Indeed, these production of multi-scalar spaces and social relations also allude to the emergence of new or expansion of existing settlements, activated to accommodate the economic capacities and demand for labour within this logistical setting. Urban settlements usually develop at strategic locations along the transportation networks for collection and distribution of these resources from plantations, mines, or other sites of production to port cities. Each town or city that grew during the colonial era played a role as a functioning node within an organized single entity. From this paradigm, the trajectory of urbanization for every postcolonial city differs from one another depending on its geopolitical positionality within the infrastructural network founded by their former colonial administrations. When a country gains independence, its colonial logistical scaffold, which was constructed from infrastructural priorities for resource extraction, is re-oriented as the new government takes over, and re-establishes a new economic network.

¹ Scotto, 'Colonial and Postcolonial Logistics', 70.

A study of this interface between former colonial logistical networks and postcolonial urbanism has not received much attention from urban scholars. During the recent *International Congress of Colonial and Post-colonial Landscapes* held in Lisbon by DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte in 18-20 January 2023, only two papers presented research related to this interface.² It is certainly ironic, given the fact that the Congress was supposed to address colonial infrastructures and how they led to housing production or 'conditioned future spatial models of the independent countries.'³ Despite the 'Postcolonial' certainly evident in its heading, the Congress seems heavily one-sided, as most of the papers presented discussed colonial urban landscapes and administration, yet rarely do the scholars, who are mostly from the Global North, seem to address the postcolonial trajectory of these landscapes. Keynote speakers mostly came from the Global North; i.e. Alessandrio Petti from Italy, Johan Lagae from Belgium and Peter Scriver from Australia. They seem to reproduce the systemic hierarchy of epistemic power imbalance, in which scholars from Europe and Anglophone nations are perceived as the custodians of knowledge in colonial urban landscapes. While this is not meant to be a polemic against the organizers of the conference, we question whether these academics have an inkling of the epistemological exclusion they are generating. Without including alternative narratives or diverse perspectives from Global South academics who have the lived experiences of being in former colonized countries, this event seems to have become a self-glorification of former colonial powers.

Speaking of epistemic power imbalance, postcolonial urban studies produced by the Global North seem to centre around the themes of injustice, oppression, and poverty within informal settlements⁴ at a neighbourhood urban scale. While their intentions are noble, this obsession with informality, or 'poverty porn'⁵, elevated as a utopia of sustainable self-management and as an antithesis to formally planned cities, seems to obscure a deeper understanding of the underlying issues of inequality within urban spaces which emerged through former colonial structures. Rather than demarcating the city within its region, postcolonial scholars could enrich their studies by thinking relationally and contextualizing them within wider, regional, and territorial development. Cities are interwoven and tightly connected within operational landscapes of resource extractions, agrarian transformations, and industries, fettered through processes of globalisation.⁶ By engaging in interdisciplinary studies involving geography and political economy, rather than boxing themselves within social sciences, scholars could potentially unearth a plethora of findings.

On the contrary, it is not rare to find publications discussing urbanization within infrastructural networks in postsocialist urban studies. Postsocialist countries are often thought of as that Second World, the in-between areas that are neither of Global South nor Global North. As with postcolonial cities, postsocialist cities are also embedded within the 'infrastructural thinking' and 'socialist scaffold' of their former regimes.⁷ Fruitful discussions surrounding the imprint of railways, trams, and newly built highways on the current fabric of cities in East Germany, Russia, Czechia, Slovakia, and others,

² Archwar, 'International Congress of Colonial and Post-colonial Landscapes', <https://dinamiacetiul.wixsite.com/congress-archwar/copy-of-programme-1> (accessed 11 February 2023).

Those papers were 1) 'Surviving in the conflict for natural resources: three settlement dynamics in the Zambezi River basin' by Ana Beja da Costa and Wim Wambecq; and 2) 'Violent environments, banana corporations, and urban forms in the Costa Rican Caribbean' by Natalia Solano-Meza.

³ Archwar, 'International Congress of Colonial and Post-colonial Landscapes', <https://dinamiacetiul.wixsite.com/congress-archwar> (accessed 11 February 2023).

⁴ Kellett, 'Original Copies? Imitative Design Practices in Informal Settlements'; Spolaor and Oliviera, 'Urban Forms of Informality: Decoloniality as a Perspective for Morphological Studies'; Di Raimo et al., 'Informality through Sustainability: Urban Informality Now'; Roy, 'Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning.'

⁵ Mota, 'Mapping Patterns of Inhabitation: Visual ethnography as a tool for critical pedagogies of housing design in the Global South.'

⁶ Brenner, 'New Urban Spaces: Urban Theory and the Scale Question.'

⁷ Zarecor, 'What Was So Socialist about the Socialist City? Second World Urbanity in Europe.'

have emerged over the past decades,⁸ highlighting their importance on urbanization. This is not to say that there are no studies of infrastructure-led urban transformations in postcolonial urban studies⁹ but rather, a disproportionate number of scholars choose to focus on informal settlements, as if they are the only element that defines the whole city, rather than looking at the big picture.

Renown urban geographers Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin mentioned in their well-known book *Splintering Urbanism* (2001) that, “Infrastructure networks, now widely seen through organic metaphors as the very 'connective tissue', 'nervous systems' or 'circulation systems' of the nation, became an essential focus of power, legitimacy, and territorial definition of the modern nation state.” In newly independent countries, their first national five-year plans often entail a recalibration of the inherited ‘colonial logistics’ strategies of economic development. This involves, of course, the expansion and reconfiguration of infrastructural networks, to strengthen the legitimacy of the new elected powers. As Lefebvre (1978) argues, “Only the state...is capable of taking charge of the management of space ‘on a grand scale’ – highways, air traffic routes – because only the State has at its disposal the appropriate resources, techniques and ‘conceptual’ capacity.”¹⁰ Several decades on, neoliberal policies, globalisation and international corporations determine the emergence of these new spaces, integrated within the scaffold of colonial logistics.

This article reconceptualizes the postcolonial city as a product of path-dependent governance of colonial logistics by looking qualitatively at Kuching as an example. We chose Kuching due to its unique position as having one of the most important ports in Borneo and its layers of colonial history, in which each colonial administration set up its own logistics for resource extraction. This lesser-known Malaysian city has not received much attention in scholarly journals, particularly in the realm of city planning. City planning in Kuching is a manifestation from the colonial logistical amalgamation of road networks, river routes, existing buildings, and the use of various social spaces.

During the pre-colonial era, it was the collection point for resources from rainforest transported via rivers. Later on, during the Brooke administration, main roads were built to deliver resources from mines and cash crop plantations. This entrepôt grew as houses, administrative buildings and facilities were constructed along the roads, with incoming labour and urban migrants. We pose the following research questions; 1) In what ways does colonial logistics help us understand the present? and 2) How did colonial logistics shape the urban fabric of Kuching?

Research is carried out by scrutinizing historic city plans from local archives, visual surveys, political agendas through official media and secondary sources. It interrogates the planning history of this lesser-known Malaysian city through the theories of planetary urbanization¹¹ and hybrid spatialities generated through path dependency, from the local urban to regional scale. Analysis shows that the continuity of the Brooke dynasty and British colonial infrastructural scaffold into the postcolonial era in Kuching has led to new forms of urban spaces, expanding agglomerations and social transformations, described as hybrid spatialities. Hybrid spatialities in this context is defined as the product of the embeddedness of former colonial systems with new forms of postcolonial neoliberal capitalism.¹² By identifying the hierarchy of colonial infrastructures and how they are reappropriated and reproduced

⁸ Khairullina and Ganges, ‘Tram, trolleybus and bus services in Eastern-European socialist urban planning: Case studies of Magdeburg, Ostrava and Oryol (1950s and 1960s)’; Tuvikene et al., ‘Post-Socialist Urban Infrastructures’, Mulíček and Seidenglanz, ‘Public transport in Brno: From socialist to post-socialist rhythms.’

⁹ Akhter, et al., ‘The Spatial Politics of Infrastructure-Led Development: Notes from an Asian Postcolony’; Apostolopoulou, ‘Tracing the Links between Infrastructure-Led Development, Urban Transformation, and Inequality in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.’

¹⁰ Lefebvre, 1978, 238.

¹¹ Brenner

¹² Golubchikov et al., ‘The Hybrid Spatialities of Transition: Capitalism, Legacy and Uneven Urban Economic’

over time, this article aims to open up new ways of understanding the contested spaces emerging at multiple scales across the postcolonial city.

Kuching as a Resource Hub during the Brooke dynasty

Located in Sarawak, Kuching was an important port before the arrival of James Brooke. Arabs, Indians, and Chinese merchants came from beyond the Malay Archipelago, to trade with shore-based communities.¹³ The Sarawak River in Kuching was an important mode of communication between foreign traders and the indigenous peoples who reside in the rainforests.¹⁴ The Malay coastal settlements are the earliest forms of settlements that still exist to this day in Kuching predating the colonial period. From 1823, northwest Borneo was ruled by the Bruneian Sultanate. Malays and Bruneians inhabit the north side of the Sarawak River whereas the Chinese and Indian traders occupied the south side.¹⁵

The first recorded city development of Sarawak emerged when James Brooke, the young British adventurer landed in 1839. After settling the tribal dispute, Brooke became the first Rajah of Sarawak and granted territory from Tanjung Datu to Samarahan River by the Sultan of Brunei, Omar Ali Saifuddin II.¹⁶ England was under Queen Victoria (1839-1901) and at the peak of Industrial Revolution, transitioning into manufacturing processes and engineering production in Europe that brought social change as well as transformation in the urban environment. Consequently, there was a demand for raw materials, given the exponential increase in production capacity. Colonies where these raw materials were abundant were highly sought after. The peace and stability of the Brooke government encouraged exploration into business and the exploitation of natural resources in Sarawak. The British-owned Borneo Company that conducted business in Sarawak in 1856 realized that there was more potential within the state. Under Ludvig Helms, they were allowed to set up offices, and godowns around what is now known as the Padungan area.¹⁷

Despite being the capital of an agrarian state, Kuching flourished as foreign trade grew, thanks to water transportation. The river connected Kuching to another important urban settlement of Bau, an upriver goldmining town inhabited by Chinese workers. Historical records indicated that Bau was the second largest urban settlement in the Sarawak River basin in the 1840s, due to the influx of Chinese. There was a brief tension between the first Rajah and the Chinese goldminers at Bau, because of imposed taxes by the former on the latter, which led up to the *Chinese Rebellion* in 1857. After quelling his adversaries, Brooke was able to gain more control of the Upper Sarawak region and its resources, although he still encouraged the presence of Chinese traders. Brooke was in debt to the Borneo Company, and it took more than a decade for the economy to stabilize. The Borneo Company eventually took over the mines in Bau while also advancing the commercial export of sago, opening sago-processing plants in Kuching.¹⁸ When Mukah, the main producer of sago in the second division of

¹³ Jarzombek, 'Borneo, the river effect, and the spirit world millionaires.' Shore-based communities consisted of Malay, Javanese, Chinese, Bruneians and Indian traders. Malays mostly settle on the lowlands along the coast while Ibans, Bidayus and other indigenous groups lived upriver. Borneo has a wealth of sources, such as bird's nests, hornbill ivory, rattan, rice, bamboo, sago as well as gold and diamonds. Upriver indigenous communities extracted these sources to trade with shore-based communities, who in turn traded them with foreign merchants.

¹⁴ Jarzombek

¹⁵ Ting, 'The History of Architecture in Sarawak Before Malaysia.'

¹⁶ Ooi, 'Protection of Native Interests and Economic Development: The Economic Policies of Raja Charles Johnson Brooke of Sarawak, 1868-1917.'

¹⁷ Yong, 'Padungan: History and Humanity in a Heritage precinct of Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia.'

¹⁸ Kaur, 'The Babbling Brookes: Economic Change in Sarawak 1841-1941.'

Sarawak finally ceded to Brooke, he and the Borneo Company were able to control the sago trade. Meanwhile, Ludvig Helms continued to diversify the economy by making use of jungle produce such as rattan and timber. Cash crops such as coffee, tea, coffee, tobacco, black pepper, and sugar cane were introduced. Along with the exploitation of antimony, and quicksilver mines, Helms' efforts increased exports and overall income of the state, through ties with the ports in Singapore. In 1870s, he also formed the Sarawak Steamship company.¹⁹ During the peak year of antimony in 1872, the Borneo Company cleared pathways and horse-drawn trams in Bau to transport mineral deposits to the Sarawak River which led to Kuching.²⁰ James Brooke eventually cut ties with Brunei and Kuching became a major trading port city in northwest Borneo rather than a vassal state of Brunei.²¹

For the first 30 years under the Brooke dynasty, infrastructure was still in its early stages, and river transportation was still essential. Transport was reliant on rivers and the sea along the coast. However, the foundation for the urban fabric of central Kuching was already established. The central Main Bazaar and Carpenter Street area were laid out in a simple, formal grid plan, and the industrial buildings in the Padungan area were functionally implanted along the coast, facing the river (Figure 4). A rivulet, Sungai Kuching separates these two areas, connected by a bridge, which was later drained when roads were added later (Figure 1). Malay villages dotted along the coast on the north bank next to the Astana palace, facing opposite the Pengkalan Batu where the Court House and monuments of the epitaph were located. Chinese shophouses were located throughout Carpenter Street and the Main Bazaar.

Charles Brooke, who became the second Rajah of Sarawak, was the one who developed the road infrastructural networks of Kuching, as shown on the 1890 map. According to Joan Rawlins, "If James Brooke was the founder of Sarawak, then Charles Brooke was its builder. He ruled for nearly 50 years and did more than anyone else to mould Sarawak into the country we know today."²² She further elaborated that Charles Brooke was very prudent in managing finances, investing in infrastructure and supervising construction of official buildings. He established the Public Works Department (PWD), which acquired unused territory through collective state ownership laws.²³ When PWD drained the swamps and built roads, they created a more conducive environment for housing development.²⁴ Roads and gridded housing settlements were introduced, particularly around the Satok area. Water, electricity, and stormwater drainage services were laid out along these roads. These land-use and settlement patterns gave shape to subsequent generations of urban planning of Kuching.

Investment in infrastructure and housing increased productivity of labour, accelerated circulation of goods and raw materials, particularly along the main thoroughfares, Blacksmith, Padungan, Rock and Palm Roads. The shophouses fronting these roads reflected the trade of the Chinese migrants to serve the growing population of Kuching. Produce from the tea, pepper, and coffee plantations on the hills of Matang were transported to the city centre via Blacksmith Road. Rock Road initially functioned to connect the mineral deposits from Bau to Kuching, before Palm Road was built parallel to it, connecting to the railway line (Figure 2). It was the only railway line which existed in Sarawak, operating between Kuching and the 10th Mile, now known as Kota Padawan. This railway line was used to transport gravel from quarries at the seventh mile. These two roads conveniently intersect with Blacksmith Road, aptly named because of the blacksmiths who worked on the mineral deposits collected from Bau. To increase efficiency in the flow of processed goods from Borneo Company to the port, Thomson Road and Padungan Roads were established between the Main Bazaar and Padungan in the 1890s. At the turn of

¹⁹ Rawlins, 'Sarawak 1839-1968.'

²⁰ Ritchie, 'A History of two Brooke Bazaars.'

²¹ Lockard, 'The 1857 Chinese Rebellion in Sarawak: A Reappraisal.'

²² Rawlins, 127

²³ Ting, 71-72.

²⁴ Walker.

the 20th century, when rubber was introduced, Rubber Road appeared parallel to Blacksmith Road, connected to rubber plantations. A rubber mill was erected in Padungan.²⁵ Therefore, to bypass the traffic, an outer ring road was constructed, linking Rubber, Nanas, Pisang, Blacksmith Roads to Pending and Padungan Roads via Green Road. This allows raw produce to be processed in factories or stored in warehouses owned by Borneo Company before being exported.

Kuching evolved at the waterways and wharfs, before expanding outwards through the land. Through colonial logistics, the Brookes managed and reorganized the urbanisation fabric in multiple scales. Set up to transfer goods and resources from plantations in the hinterlands to Kuching for exports, logistical infrastructures impacted the physical and social transformation of the city. The Brookes provided fixed support to stabilise the dynamic processes of capital circulation. For instance, they built Fort Margherita and the Square Tower to control river traffic. These strategies were intermeshed into the scale of architecture and urban, to serve not only capital accumulation but to accommodate the growing labour market and an increasing pluralistic society.

Under Charles Vyner Brooke, the third Rajah, roads were built to allow easier access to the interiors following the 1931-1934 Dayak 'unrest.' This allowed more frequent visits, as well as to facilitate transportation of timber while conquering more lands for plantations. The timber trail was laid out not far from the river fringe, used to transport logs to the city, onto what is now known as Batu Kawa Road. Palm Road, which runs along the north-south axis intersects with the east-west Batu Kawa Road at the Third Mile. This Third Mile connects to Serian, which became the longest stretch that was built during the Brooke dynasty period, in 1940.²⁶

These trade and economic policies affected the social transformation of Kuching. Employment opportunities encouraged the migration of Chinese in the 1870s as well as Indian Muslims.²⁷ The population of Kuching swelled from 6,000 people in 1848 to 20,000 in 1880, due to the expansion of non-indigenous migrants. Indigenous Dayaks were deployed by James Brooke to live in Padungan for defense purposes following the 1857 uprising, though they were later moved to Kampung Tabuan, three miles away when Padungan expanded commercially.²⁸ Christian missionaries encouraged the construction of churches and schools which were a new form of construction for the local population, although they had local architectural characteristics. Changes and development in Kuching took hold after a fire destroyed 190 units of shophouses in 1884 at Carpenter Street, China Street and Bishopgate Street. Following this tragedy, Charles Brooke insisted that these buildings were rebuilt with stronger building materials such as bricks and concrete. Thus, brick kiln factories appeared in Sekama Road, near Padungan to facilitate these new laws.²⁹ Other buildings began to appear such as the Government office located on the Court Building Site and the police station located on the Chartered Bank Building Site.

Despite the diversity, the Brookes practised the system of tripartite settlements. In 1900, Charles Brooke designated the north bank only for the Malays, forcing the Malay residents of Kampung Pinang to relocate,³⁰ so that he could construct Ban Hock Road (Figure 2). Charles Vyner Brooke set up the Kuching Sanitary and Municipal Advisory Board in 1921, to evaluate the hygienic conditions of settlements and ensure buildings comply to British standards. After the Borneo Company closed down its mining business in Bau of that same year, it was no longer necessary for blacksmiths to inhabit Blacksmith Road. The Board reported concerns about the environmental degradation around the area

²⁵ Sarawak Gazette, 1910

²⁶ Kaur.

²⁷ Sim and Talib, 'Tra Zehnder: Iban Woman Patriot of Sarawak.'

²⁸ Lockard, 1978.

²⁹ Yong, 26.

³⁰ Sarawak Gazette, March 2, 1900.

led to their relocation to Padungan.³¹ Land ownership and subdivision in areas around Padungan and Satok (Blacksmith Road) were regulated, and housing placed along these roads were given to non-indigenous migrant groups such as the Chinese traders.³² As demand for rubber, gold, gambier, oil and pepper boosted Sarawak's exports in early 1900s, the land around Padungan, previously a Native Communal Reserve, was reappropriated by the third Rajah for road development. Reports of unsanitary conditions and overcrowding around Kuching's commercial district³³ is an impetus for Brooke to issue a Town Planning Scheme in 1927, which lists down the government's intentions to develop the area according to strict building codes and construct more shophouses, allocating them to the Chinese.³⁴

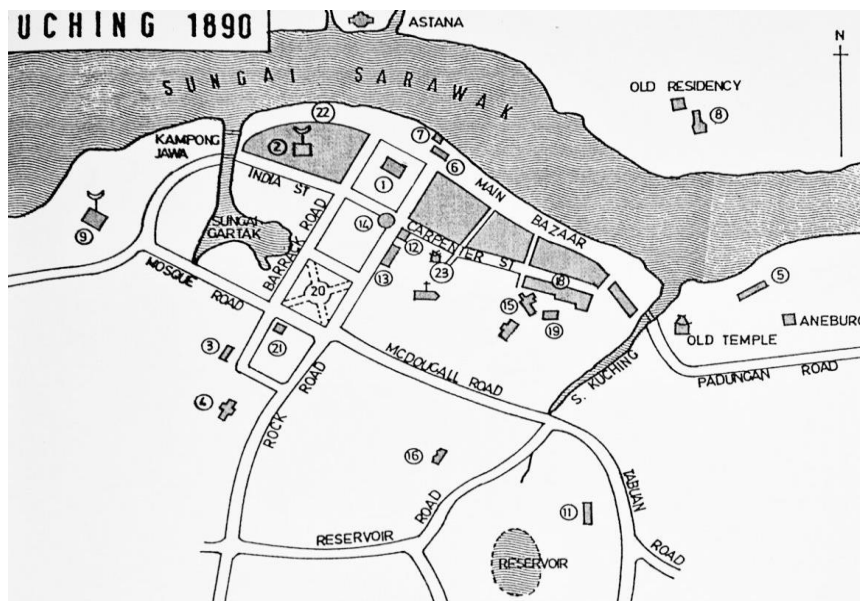


Figure 1 Map of Kuching in 1890. Source: Pollard, 1997

³¹ Sarawak Gazette, August 1, 1922. The newspaper summarized the report by the Kuching Sanitary & Municipal Advisory Board which recommended that 'the Blacksmiths be removed to an industrial area to be decided upon by a special Committee at a later date.'

³² Ting, 111-112.

³³ Ho, 'Old Kuching'; Lockard, 'From Kampung to City: A Social History of Kuching Malaysia 1820-1870.'

³⁴ Sarawak Gazette, November 1, 1927.

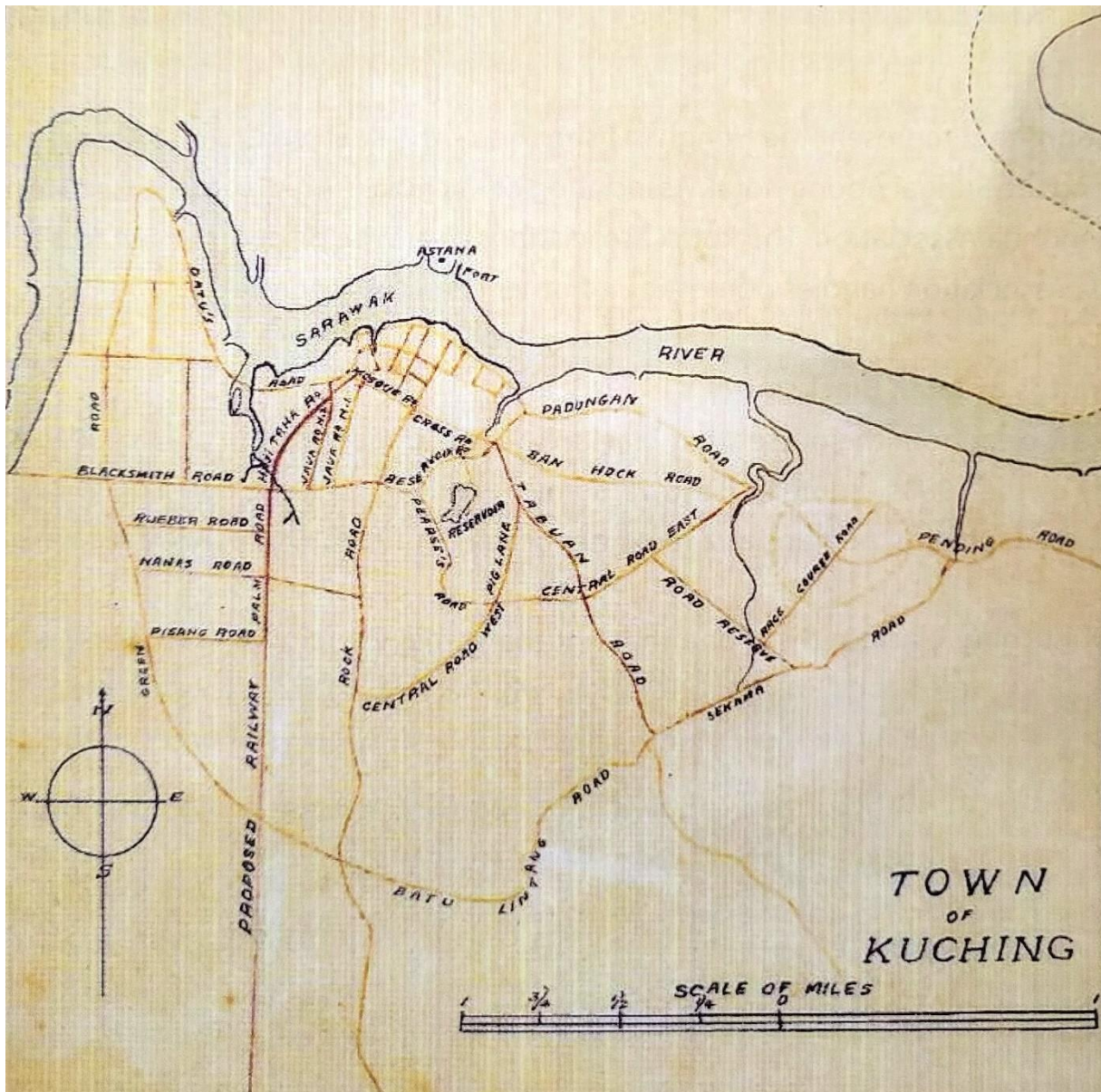


Figure 2 Map of Kuching circa 1910s. Palm Road and Blacksmith Road (Satok Road) were the main arterial roads connecting the Main Bazaar directly to plantations in the Matang hinterlands. Rubber Road, Green Road, Proposed Railway lines and Padungan Road are clearly visible here. Source: Sarawak Museum

A British Crown Colony

After being briefly occupied by the Japanese during World War II, Sarawak became a British Crown Colony in 1946. Charles Vyner Brooke promised self-governance to Sarawak, and officially, Britain's role 'was to help the development of Sarawak so that she could stand on her own feet economically and to hasten her political development in preparation for self-government and independence.'³⁵ From Penang, Singapore, Kuching to Hong Kong, Britain intended to safeguard its trade route to ensure constant supplies to war-torn Europe, further encouraging free trade within these routes. Demand for oil, rubber and pepper soared after the war, so Britain was able to ensure Sarawak made steady progress. Through the Colonial Development Welfare Fund, Britain built more roads, ports, schools, hospitals, airfields throughout Sarawak, while improving the cultivation of padi and other plantations.

³⁵ Rawlins, 147.

Therefore, there were more funds to improve the roads from the hinterlands to Kuching, such as the 'timber trail' and the Kuching-Bau Road. The now flailing Borneo Company, who turned lands around Bau into large estates of gambier and pepper, began to introduce rubber there after WWII.³⁶ Additionally, they began to export and distribute oil from Shell, opening the first petrol kiosk in Kuching.³⁷

In the 1950s, the British administration continued Brooke's work in implementing the tripartite settlement system. By 1954, the Kuching Sanitary and Municipal Advisory Board became the Kuching Municipal Council (KMC). As part of the racially motivated 'slum clearance', the remaining Malay residents in kampungs near Padungan were forced to evict to Matang across the river, so that their lands could be cleared for private development and housing for the Chinese.³⁸ To encourage self-sufficiency and lower dependence on imported manufactured goods, the British introduced the *Pioneer Industries Ordinance* in 1957. Small industries emerged in Padungan and beyond, producing goods ranging from tyre, printing, biscuits, cotton knitwear, rubber shoes to plywood veneers.³⁹

Due to Sarawak's vast territories and geographical complexity,⁴⁰ major highways between Kuching and other port cities of Miri and Bintulu were not built before the 1960s, and railway connections were non-existent. By the early 1900s both Miri and Bintulu developed because of petroleum, operated by Sarawak Oilfields, and became the next important port cities after Kuching.⁴¹



Figure 3 The godown near the Ban Hock Wharf, 1952. Source: Anna Studio

³⁶ Ibid, 220.

³⁷ Yong, 54.

³⁸ Ting, 153-154.

³⁹ Rawlins, 220-221; Yong, 93.

⁴⁰ Kaur, 102. The swampy environments downstream and dense rainforest between port cities in Sarawak made it difficult for land transport. Most crops such as pepper and sago were located near rivers.

⁴¹ Thomas, 'The Sarawak Government Railway.'



Figure 4 The early trading post at Borneo Company at Padungan, circa 1950s. Source: Anna Studio

Urban Changes during Early Years of Postcolonial Rule

At the beginning when Sarawak was annexed to Malaysia in 1963, its economy was mostly agricultural, and tourism is but a new economic sector. To investigate how colonial logistics is crystallized within the scale of the urban fabric in the early years of postcolonial Kuching, one must study the original location of the docks and wharfs. The Ban Hock, Lorna Doone, and Steamship wharfs were adjacent to the city centre, close to the markets.⁴² Goods and food crops that were delivered to the city centre were sold in markets. Wet markets such as the vegetable market are located on the banks of the Sarawak River - which is the area of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the fish market on Wayang Street.⁴³ The remnants of Brooke period presented in the neighbourhood of Pengkalan Batu was the beginning of city images of Kuching. The Court House, the Post Office, Fort Margherita, the government warehouse, administrative buildings, and police station still stand today.

Brooke's earlier tripartite settlement system was evident in the separate agglomeration of Chinese and Malay settlements in 1960s in the South and North of Kuching respectively.⁴⁴ In the 1970s, Kuching was a pedestrian-oriented city. The Dayaks from the interior would drop off their goods at the Sarawak Transport Company bus station at the intersection between Mosque Road and Java Street. The Dayaks would display their harvested local fruits, especially when they are in season, such as the durians, langsat, and rambutans. In the 1960s and 1970s this was the only area that served the people of Kuching with shopping items and other household goods. India Street is located between Barrack Road and Market Street (Figure 1). The two lanes, Kai Joo and Ban Hock that connect the pedestrian mall of India Street to Khoo Hun Yeang Street, provide a legal path to access Electra House, Police Station and

⁴² Wahid, 'The Physical Redevelopment of Kuching Downtown, Sarawak, Malaysia: An Urban Design Approach.'

⁴³ Sarawak Gazette, 1980.

⁴⁴ Kuching has two city councils. There is Kuching North, which is mostly populated by the Malays and Kuching South, which was mostly Chinese. Kuching North received more funding under the Malaysian Plan to develop its territories for economic and housing development.

even the new Merdeka Plaza. Khoo Hun Yeang Street linked Market Street and Barrack Road which is diverted Merdeka Plaza's construction. The linkage of Market Street, Barrack Road, Khoo Hun Yeang Street and India Street creates an enclave of diverse activities for the people in Kuching and tourists.

Until the early 1980s, the river route was highly optimized by the residents where the navigable Sarawak River enable the medium-sized ships to transport goods and passengers to Sarawak's main cities such as Sibu, Sarikei, Bintulu and Miri. Each household along the river owned a boat and sometimes, a schooner. It is used to travel to the nearby town or villages. In addition, there was a ferry from Kuching to Santubong, Buntal and Muara Tebas. The ferry was used by the villagers from those areas to reach Kuching. Ships such as Pulau Kijang (Figure 4), Rajah Mas and Chin Ming were the earlier effective water transportation to serve the people of Sarawak. Later on, when road connections and economic conditions improved, the residents became more dependent on the automobile.

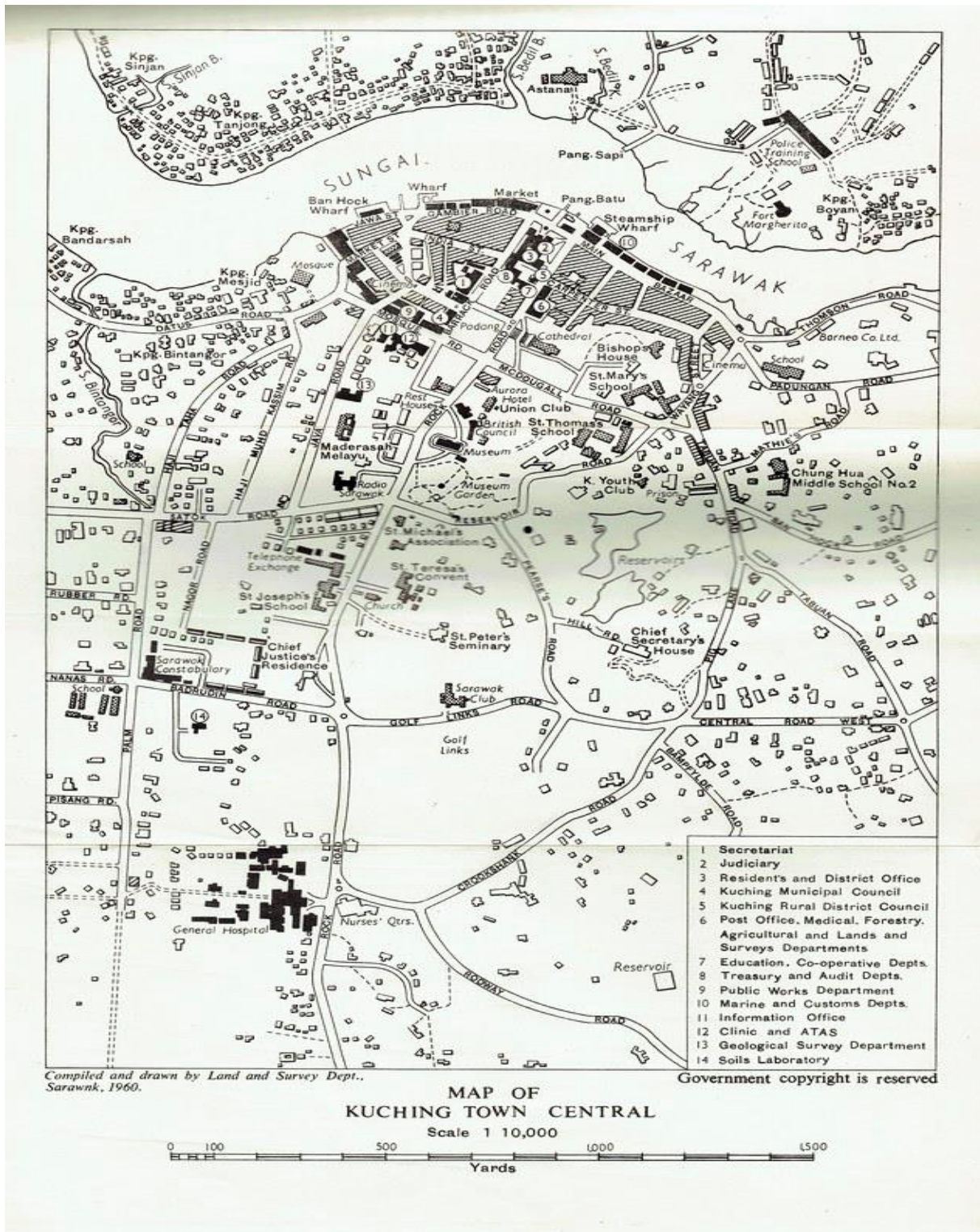


Figure 5: Map of Kuching in 1960. The city was still characterized by a hodgepodge of settlements, except for the Main Bazaar and wharf area. The British administration ensured better road infrastructures to aid circulation of resources and goods. Source: Steven Runciman, *The White Rajahs: A History of Sarawak from 1841 to 1946*, University Press, 1960.

Kuching under the Malaysian Five-Year Plans

Since becoming part of Malaysia in 1963, the entrepôt of Kuching became interdependent on its relations with other ports in Peninsular Malaysia, among them Port Klang, Penang, Tanjung Pelapas and Pasir Gudang. Under these new conditions, the federal Malaysian and Sarawak state governments mobilized new forms of policies designed to target spaces for economic growth, reconfigured

infrastructural networks and territorial planning. As the capital city of Sarawak, the merge with Malaysia led to rescaled approaches, as Kuching was no longer an important node that would determine its own global flows, but rather, a coordinate of state territorial power, within the Malaysian hierarchy where Kuala Lumpur and its connecting Port Klang had authority. The difference between cities as nodes and cities as coordinates is elucidated by Neil Brenner⁴⁵ in which he prescribed,

'As nodes in global flows, cities operate as loci of industrial production, as centres of command and control over dispersed circuits of capital, and as sites of exchange within local, regional, national and global markets... Second, as coordinates of state territorial power, cities are regulatory-institutional levels within each state's organizational hierarchy. The term 'coordinate' is intended to connote not only the embeddedness of major urban centers within the state's territorial matrix but also their changing structural positions within the multiple, overlapping regulatory networks through which state power is constituted, deployed and transformed across spatial scales. These coordinates may be interlinked through various means, from legal-constitutional regulations, financial interdependencies, administrative divisions of labor, and hierarchies of bureaucratic command to informal regulatory and coordination arrangements, interurban policy networks, and ad hoc, issue-specific modes of cooperation.'

Under the auspices of Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak, Sarawak was integrated within the first Malaysian Five-Year Plan in 1965. This was the first in a series of Malaysian Plans which impacted planning in Sarawak in various scales, up till today, as there is now the 12th Malaysian Plan. Among its implications are the provision of proper infrastructure, a housing programme, planned urban development, and the restructuring of the local councils. An important governing body that was established in 1965 was the Ministry of Urban Development and Natural Resources (MUDeNR). This indicates that the federal and state governance recognized that management of natural resources and urban planning were inextricably linked. Subsequently, this ministry would become the most powerful institution to determine land-use and territorial planning in Sarawak. Its function is to control the resources by setting up ordinances for protection or extraction, such as the Mining Ordinance (2004), Wildlife Protection Ordinance (1998), Timber Grading Regulations (2007), and Sarawak Biodiversity Regulation (2004). Furthermore, it also amends the Land Code (1998), Land Use Ordinance (2007) and coordinates programmes such as those under the Land and Survey Department.⁴⁶

Booming oil exports from Sarawak's offshore rigs in Bintulu and Miri led to the relocation of Kuching Port from Ban Hock wharf to the Biawak Oil Jetty in Pending, next to Shell and Esso operations in 1972. A wealthy Chinese banker had already built the Pending Port residential and commercial complex in the 1960s, in anticipation to accommodate growing number of ships.⁴⁷ Under the new federal governing regime, crude oil from Sarawak, is processed in Kuching before later being transferred to major ports in Peninsular Malaysia. Operating at a larger capacity, the Kuching Port expanded and was fully relocated to Pending, where the width of the river is wider to accommodate increasing cargo ships. Kuching's main exports from 1960s-80s were antimony, bauxite, timber, pepper, and rubber, though processing and manufacturing electronic industries were slowly encroaching the industrial estate of Pending and Bintawa. Consequently, given the relocation of the trading post to Pending, Ban Hock Wharf gradually became obsolete, and roads were rerouted to recirculate goods and raw materials towards Pending in the 1980s.

Kuching city changed extensively during the Second Malaysian Plan under the reign of Tun Abdul Rahman Yakub (1970-1981) when he was the Chief Minister of Sarawak. With the MUDeNR in place, he set up the State Planning Unit to expedite the development of Sarawak specifically in Kuching. Up

⁴⁵ Brenner, 138-139.

⁴⁶ Sarawak Ministry of Urban Development and Natural Resources.

⁴⁷ Leigh, 'Rising Moon: Political Change in Sarawak', 117.

until now, state institutions which are responsible for urban planning in Kuching are the State Planning Authority and Land Survey Department. The Land Custody Development Authority (LCDA) worked with town councils, government, and private corporations to redevelop the town centre (Wahid 1988). As for building construction, Sarawak has its own set of laws amended under the tutelage of MUDeNR, the Sarawak Building Ordinance whereas the states in Peninsular Malaysia use the Uniform-Building-By-Laws (UBBL). However, the former does accept regulations and guidelines from the latter. A bridge that linked North Kuching spanning the Sarawak River marked the beginning of the growing agglomeration of Sarawak. More land across the river in North Kuching was available for government offices, starting with the Wisma Bapa Malaysia and Lapau Building. The road which links South Kuching along the Astana Road to the Wisma Bapa Malaysia opened a new frontier into the opportunity of real estate development in Petra Jaya, North Kuching under the Sarawak Housing Commission (SPPS). Petra Jaya became a mass housing complex, with high-rise offices, government buildings, and schools. Extension of road networks linked Petra Jaya with rural areas and decentralized downtown businesses in Kuching. Throughout the 1970s, the population in central Kuching, which was concentrated around the former wharves, was eventually redistributed, to the surrounding areas, as housing projects in Petra Jaya, Kenyalang Park, Sungai Maong, Tabuan, and Matang emerged, albeit in different phases.

Inherited colonial spaces acquired new meanings in the postcolonial era, generating rampant neoliberal capitalist development around the city from 1980s onwards. As neoliberalism appropriates geographical inequalities as basis for growth,⁴⁸ resources are concentrated in strategic locations and certain areas become centres for targeted investments and economic development. An example is the Metrocity Township in Matang and Tabuan Jaya. In 1988, Kuching North City Hall was founded, to administer the Malay-dominant city on the north bank, including Matang and Petra Jaya. Kuching International Airport was built near the Seventh Mile, now Kota Sentosa, along with commercial and housing projects. Despite the tremendous amount of building activity around Kuching, its town centre did not exhibit any drastic changes from 1963 to 1987, apart from the market-wharf area.

Meanwhile, the Borneo Company, which had influence over the infrastructural networks of Kuching in its primary years, had been sold in 1967 to a Singaporean company and was briefly under Sarawak Economic Development Corporation (SEDC) as part of Sebor (Sarawak) Sdn Bhd in 1970s before being sold again and is now defunct.⁴⁹ The demise of Borneo Company signalled the dawn of new entities that would rule Kuching, ushering in global brands that would finance commercial buildings around the city. The Hilton hotel was built where the former offices of the Borneo Company used to be, as the land value is lucrative. Luxury hotels, big financial corporations, and multinational companies built high-rise towers at the site of Borneo Company's former offices between Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan Bukit Mata and Jalan Padungan, known as the Golden Triangle.⁵⁰

As the wharfs near the Main Bazaar ceased to function, the government decided that Kuching should transform itself from a utilitarian port city into a global city. The godown next to the former Ban Hock wharf were removed and proper landscaping was done along the embankment of Main Bazaar and down towards Thomson Road, to create an attractive promenade, which is now popularly referred to as the Kuching Waterfront in 1993. In the 21st century, the Kuching Waterfront has transformed itself, with additional landmarks, such as the New Sarawak State Legislative Assembly Building, DUN (2009), Darul Hana Pedestrian Bridge (2017), and the new Masjid India (2019) dwarfing the Brooke colonial heritage. Fort Margherita, Astana, and the Square Tower are now barely visible amidst the glitz and glam of these new celebrated icons, symbolizing the political presence and legitimacy of the Sarawak state government. The Gambier Street Market, which was next to Ban Hock wharf, continued to

⁴⁸ Golubchikov et al., 619.

⁴⁹ Yong, 54.

⁵⁰ Yong, 65.

operate until 2008, when North Kuching decided to move it to Medan Niaga Satok, due to its unsanitary conditions and to reduce congestion.⁵¹ Medan Niaga Satok is strategic because of its direct connections to Matang and the Pan-Borneo Highway via the Green Road.



Figure 6: Aerial view of what is now known as the Kuching Waterfront. It shows the Main Bazaar, lined with Chinese shophouses on the south bank (right) of the Sarawak River. High-rise buildings belonging to luxury hotels and finance corporations stand on the site of the former Borneo Company. In the foreground are the New Sarawak State Legislative Assembly Building, DUN (2009) and the Darul Hana Pedestrian Bridge (2017). The Gambier Street Market, formerly situated at the end of Darul Hana Bridge on the south bank was demolished and relocated to Medan Niaga Satok. Beyond them is Fort Margherita and Malay village settlements on the north banks (left), remnants of former colonial tripartite system. Source: Malay Mail, 2022.

The rescaling from state to national economic development policies administered by the Malaysian federal government led to exponentially larger approaches in territorial planning. Under this new postcolonial cartography, new swaths of lands were appropriated for more resources as export-oriented extractions between Sarawak and Sabah, the Peninsular and then the world economy intensified. In the 1960s, the ‘timber trail’, the former railway lines and the forty-mile Kuching-Serian Road were fused to form what would become the Pan-Borneo Highway.⁵² More rainforests were cleared, and more lands designated for cultivation of agriculture. Sarawak adhered to the Natives Customary Rights land (NCR) – which evolved since the Brooke period where the term – ‘*terang*’ which means clearance, when the natives would clear the land and claim it as theirs. Under the Malaysian Economic Plan in the 1970s, they were given the privilege of developing that land for agricultural purposes, with help from the state government. Agricultural sources from indigenous villages were collected along the Pan-Borneo Highway, and distributed in commercial centres throughout Kuching, especially at Kota Sentosa and Padawan, known as hubs for tropical fruits.

⁵¹ The Star, ‘Gambier Street Market to close, traders told to move,’ May 28 2008.

⁵² The Pan-Borneo Highway is a vast road network that connects the two Malaysian states in Borneo; Sabah and Sarawak.

Palm oil, which was introduced decades earlier, was cultivated commercially in the 1990s, with incentives from the federal government. To reap more benefits from palm oil plantations and to speed up circulation, the federal government proposed to upgrade the Pan-Borneo Highway to a dual carriageway in 2015.⁵³ The Highway connects all the major port cities in Sabah and Sarawak, thereby increasing productivity of labour and resources. Work has been carried out in 2018 up until the present day. More lands were cleared, and the state must recompensate their native occupants when NCR lands were claimed for infrastructural development, although whether all these NCR claims have been rectified remains to be seen.⁵⁴ Indigenous people who were displaced end up in the city or peri-urban areas of Kuching, as precarious workers. They set up makeshift informal homes between the planned housing developments, such as Kampung Chawan near the cemetery.

The 2030 Masterplan: Where do we go from here?

In 2022, the State Planning Unit under the MUDeNR unveiled the new Kuching City Local Plan for 2030 (See Figure 7). The difference between this plan and the one set in the 1960s during the first Malaysian Plan was the inclusion of a larger, more expansive territory under the Padawan Municipal Council. Previously, Kuching South and Kuching North were considered the only urban territories within the Kuching division of governance. Known as the Kuching Rural District Council when it was formed in 1956, it elevated to a municipality status as part of the Kuching City territory in 1996.⁵⁵ However, its areas of jurisdiction are large and surrounds the boundaries of both Kuching South and North. The official town of Kota Padawan, situated at the 10th Mile where the colonial railway line used to be, has now become part of the larger Kuching agglomeration.

The 2030 Plan describes new mixed-use developments such as the Batu Kawa New Township, destined to become a 'modern sub-urban centre' and the 'western entrance gateway' to Kuching city.⁵⁶ As Padawan was located next to the Semenggoh Nature Reserve and at the intersection of routes to known natural attractions such as waterfalls, hiking trails and hot springs, the Plan prescribes the Kota Padawan area as a 'frontier gateway town to the subsequent vast southern wild conservatory and hinterland of Kuching City.' On the plan, the Kota Padawan is referred to as the 7th and 10th Mile, as the areas around Kuching International Airport and the town have merged. Besides Kota Padawan and Batu Kawa, the map indicated the formation of new strategic urban centres in Matang, Tabuan, and Kuching Isthmus. Residents of Kuching no longer rely on the Sarawak River as the main mode of transporting goods, considering technological advances enabled better roads. In recent years, the city has become increasingly car dependent. To ease traffic congestion, the government has made efforts to improve public transportation with the introduction of Sarawak ART System Project in 2022, to be constructed over the next few years.

The growing city of Kuching and its agglomeration have become what David Harvey (1989) would term, spatial fixes, as anchor for capitalist industrial growth. After successive waves of being a Brooke colonial city, a British crown colony, and a Malaysian postcolonial city, each period induced urban and social restructuring, to optimize the capitalist accumulation process. From the 2030 masterplan, the directionality of the flows and the geometry of the circuit resemble the ones established by the colonial powers. The roads used to transport antimony, coffee, tea, rubber during the colonial era, are now part of a larger expanded circuit. The niches along the circuit historically played a role in colonial logistics,

⁵³ The Borneo Post, 'Sarawak palm oil industry – A catalyst for rural development', November 2, 2021. <https://www.theborneopost.com/2021/11/07/sarawak-palm-oil-industry-a-catalyst-for-rural-development/> (accessed on 6 February 2023).

⁵⁴ Abram et al.

⁵⁵ Padawan Municipal Council.

⁵⁶ Sarawak Ministry of Urban Development and Natural Resources. See Kuching City Local Plan interactive map on the official website, at <http://kclp2030.com/>. The masterplan was downloaded on 5th August 2022.

such as the subcentres of Kota Padawan and Kota Sentosa. Planners working on urban design studies and placemaking in Kuching would benefit from an understanding of spatial fixes, which influence the market value of affected spaces.

This article considers studies of extraction, resource geography which form the constituents to the urban dialectic of Kuching between agglomeration and transformation of the hinterlands. According to Lefebvre (1991), each new set of economic relations produces its own spaces, appropriating them according to their needs and to conform to a certain image. This is certainly true for the contested spaces produced in Kuching when it was under the Brooke dynasty, the British administration and now as an autonomous state within federal Malaysia.

Clark and Tracey (2004) delineate two aspects of path dependencies, which are inheritance and endowment. Inheritance of infrastructures from colonial logistics is evident in the urban fabric of Kuching, but endowment path dependency entails investment in its inheritance. Therefore, endowment counts for the processes of interpreting spatial legacies with new meanings, influenced by national federal policies and current social practices. While Kuching is path dependent on the legacy of urban logistics from its past, the endowment of these legacies led to how it is today.

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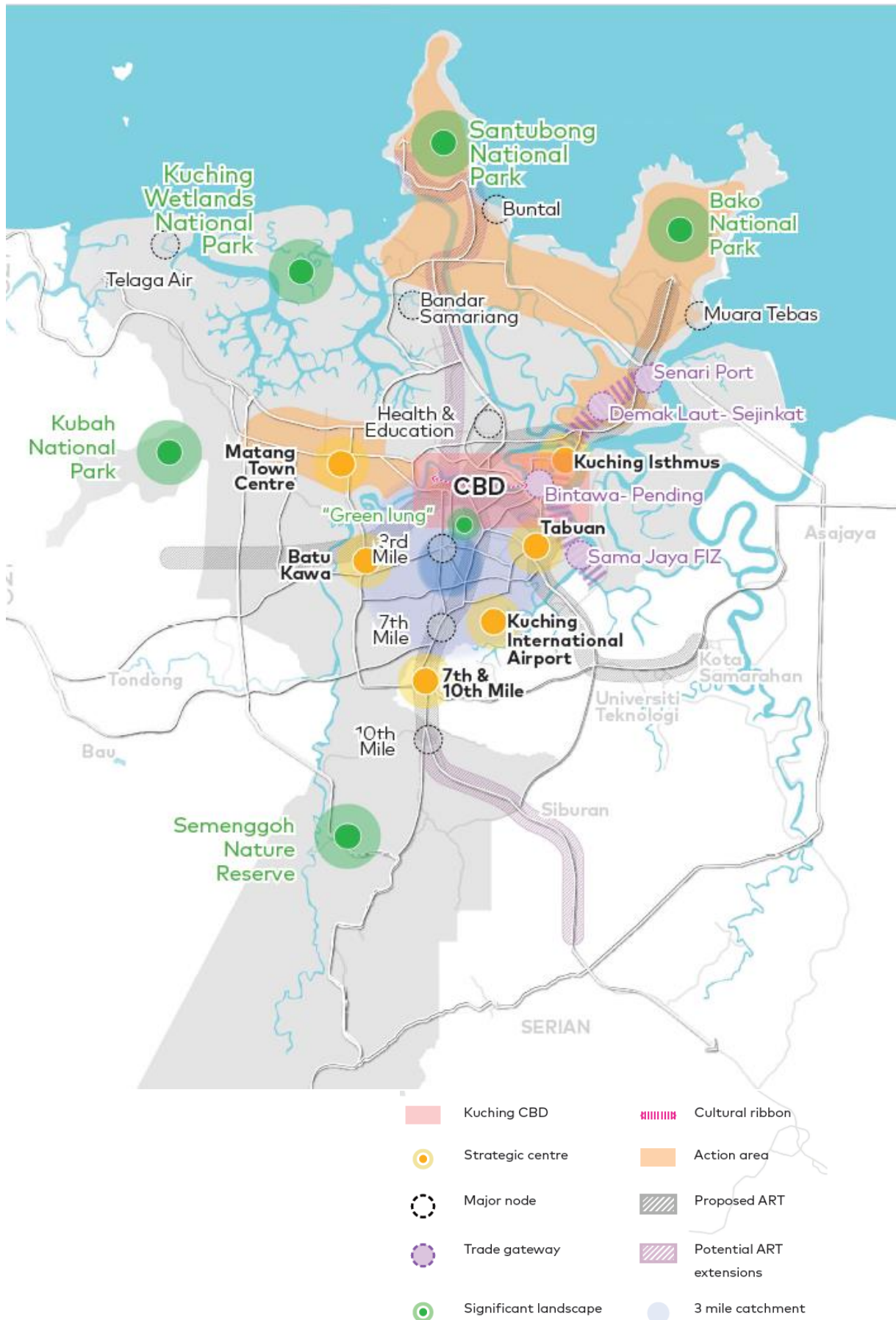


Figure 7: Kuching Masterplan for 2030. Source: Sarawak Ministry of Natural Resources and Urban Development

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