

# Kelong

## Politics for Life in the Johor Straits

Zahirah Suhaimi-Broder

*Kelong* refers to an offshore structure, made of large nets supported by trunks of nibong palm, and is used to trap fish moving out with the receding tide. They were once a common sight in the Johor Straits, a narrow channel of water between northern Singapore and southern Johor, Malaysia, but are now receding into the peripheries of urbanization and high-tech aquaculture development in Johor, and near obsolescence in Singapore. Today, *kelong* is better known colloquially as referring to situations when a group or individual appears to be given an unfair advantage over others.<sup>1</sup> This visual essay examines how (dis)advantages are negotiated within the historical and emergent conditions of coastal infrastructures for foodfish production.

The proliferation of *kelongs* off the coast of the Johor Straits began shortly after British colonization of Singapore and Malaya started in 1819, and the intensification of foodfish production was needed to feed the rapidly growing migrant population. Newly arrived Chinese entrepreneurs met this growing demand by developing *kelongs*, which outstripped artisanal fishing methods. The prohibitive cost of nets and rapid depletion of nibong palms effectively created relations of debt and dependency, particularly for indigenous Orang Seletar communities, for whom the nibong palm was a key economic resource, providing food, medicine, and materials for reinforcing the houseboats they lived on (Fig. 1).

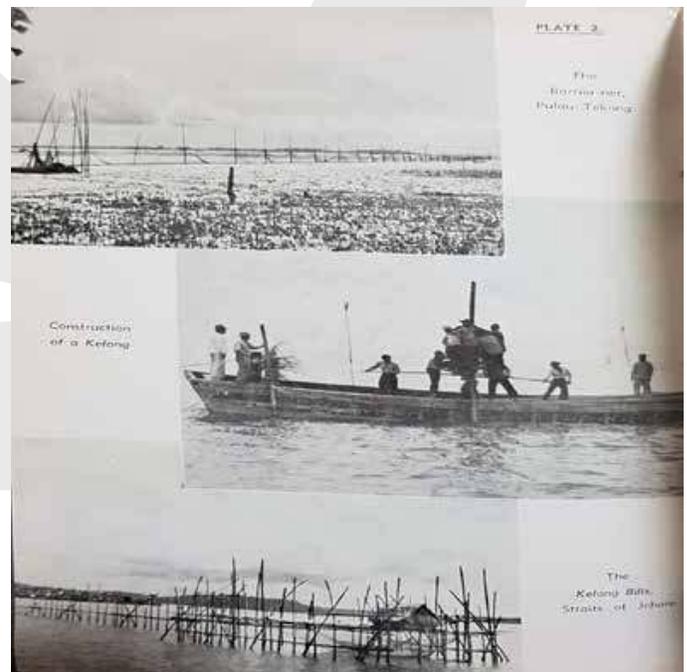


Fig. 1 Kelongs in the Johor Straits (from Burdon 1955)

Between the intricacies of these acute *kelong* conditions and other developmental pressures,<sup>2</sup> Orang Seletar communities developed various strategies for subsistence while sustaining sociobiological and metaphysical relations fundamental to their collective existence with nonhuman inhabitants of the landscape. One strategy practiced today is *pukat bakau* (mangrove nets), 2000-3000 feet nets supported by scrap wooden beams set up adjacent to mangrove forests (Fig. 2).



*Fig. 2* Dismantling pukat bakau and releasing a juvenile flower crab to the sea; photograph by Jefree Salim, a Seletar collaborator in an ongoing media project.



*Fig. 3* Floating fish farm with net-cages filled with fish species preferred by Singaporean and Malaysian consumers, namely grouper, seabass, and red snapper, and other seafood such as lobsters and mussels.



*Fig. 4* An Orang Seletar village today, framed by sparse fringes of mangroves, a large sandpile, and an under-utilised luxury waterfront commercial district. Floating barrel structures in the foreground are used for mussel cultivation, the primary means of income subject to water quality that is reportedly deteriorating.

Mangrove forests are not simply resource-rich ecosystems but reproductive sites of sociobiological and metaphysical relations for all life. These relations are instantiated when human fathers carefully leave their newborn's fresh placenta between branches of mangrove trees. If properly placed and left undisturbed for seven days by the elements, plants, and animals, his child's safety and health is assured. As Temah, a young Seletar woman explained, "...the mangroves are where all our benih (Malay word that refers to origin and embryo) must be readied for life. We exist today because our parents, grandparents, and animals and trees, protected our benih. So, we must let the [adult] plants and animals ready their benih in the mangroves too before our nets catch them."

Unlike kelongs, or the capital-intensive fish farms that have almost replaced them (Fig. 3),<sup>3</sup> pukat bakau is not a permanent structure and only stands for one diurnal tidal cycle. The casting and staking of the pukat (net), and the mesh size of the pukat itself, is aligned with the spawning cycles of specific nonhuman life. In instances when small mesh sizes are used for catching shrimp after they spawn, the practice of staying at sea with the pukat allows for immediate harvest as soon as the tide recedes, enabling the return of juvenile or spawning non-shrimp animals from the nets to the sea.

Amid ongoing kelong conditions of colonial and post-colonial coastal infrastructures, pukat bakau is living knowledge of life,<sup>4</sup> and for life; a reproductive ethic of collaborative human and nonhuman survival, for relations that have come before, and must continue to come everyday and after.

## References

- Ariffin, Jamilah, Vincent K.K. Chow, and William Chang. 2014. *My Personal Journey in Observing the Dynamic Iskandar Malaysia and Its Forgotten Sea Gypsies: Economic Development Contradictions and Cultural Change*. Kuala Lumpur: International Research Institute for Economic Progress and Social Well-being.
- Burdon, T. W. 1957. *The Fishing Industry of Singapore*. Singapore: D. Moore.
- Sather, Clifford. 1999. "The Orang Laut." *AKASS Heritage Paper Series*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki Institute of Cultural Anthropology.
- Shorter, David Delgado. 2016. "Spirituality." In *The Oxford Handbook of American Indian History*, edited by Frederick Hoxie, 433-452. New York: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "An Ontological Case for Avoiding 'Spiritual' Descriptions in Ethnography." 2016. Paper delivered at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Minneapolis.
- Tallbear, Kim. 2011. "Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints." *Cultural Anthropology*. April 24, 2011. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/260-why-interspecies-thinking-needs-indigenous-standpoints>, last access February 1, 2019.

## Endnotes

- 1 A widely known exemplar of this use would be Wilson Raj Perumal, the internationally wanted Singaporean football match-fixer, who dubs himself the "Kelong King."
- 2 So acute were the conditions of dependency, that Chinese financiers eventually owned the houseboats on which Orang Seletar families lived (Sather 1999).
- 3 See the video here: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/264933617>, last access February 1, 2019.
- 4 The emphasis on knowledge offers an alternative standpoint to Ariffin's (2014) account of this practice as "old beliefs and traditions" (p. 38). Such accounts of indigenous practice occlude the ongoing existence of Orang Seletar communities as inextricably bound to material, immaterial, and not-yet material (benih) relations with the waterscape (see also Shorter 2015, 2016; Tallbear 2011).