

---

APPROACHING THE MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA FROM  
THE MARGINS.  
A TALE OF MUHAMMAD SALEH, A MINANGKABAU  
WEST COAST MERCHANT OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY  
SUMATRA

**Mestika Zed**

*Center for Socio-culture & Economic Studies (PKSBE), Faculty of Social  
Sciences, State University of Padang.*

---

### Abstract

West coast of Sumatra, which was relatively remote from major centers laying on the Malacca Straits, had a lengthy history of trading contacts with the maritime Southeast Asia, especially with the Indian Ocean basins. The paper asks whether the trajectories of broader historical development of maritime Southeast Asia can be informed by way of tracing developments among the small local contexts as evidenced in the case of the fate of Muhammad Saleh, a Minangkabau west coastal merchant of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sumatra. In other words, it asks if the sea trading routes underpinning integration of the archipelagic countries are also partly valid for the world west coast of Sumatra in the early-modern era. This paper will help us to appreciate our maritime world, *how we got to where we are now*, and identify constants and trends that will assist in our understanding of maritime Southeast Asia today and in the future.

**Keywords:** maritime history, west coast Sumatra, agency, trade route, ports and commodities.

### Abstrak

Pantai barat Sumatra yang secara relatif terpencil dari pusat-pusat utama yang berada di Selat Malaka, memiliki sejarah hubungan dagang yang panjang dengan dunia maritim Asia Tenggara, utamanya di Samudra Hindia. Makalah ini mengajukan pertanyaan sejauh mana gerak sejarah yang lebih besar di dunia maritim Asia Tenggara dapat dipahami dengan melacak perkembangan di dalam konteks lokal kecil seperti dapat dilihat melalui nasib Muhammad Saleh, seorang pedagang pantai barat Sumatra di abad ke-19. Dengan kata lain, makalah ini mengajukan pertanyaan sejauh mana jalur-jalur perdagangan yang mendasari integrasi wilayah-wilayah kepulauan juga berlaku untuk dunia pantai barat Sumatra di era moderen awal. Makalah ini akan membantu kita menghargai dunia maritim kita, bagaimana kita sampai dimana kita sekarang, dan mengidentifikasi hal-hal yang tetap serta kecenderungan yang ada yang akan membantu pemahaman kita tentang dunia maritim Asia Tenggara hari ini dan hari esok.

**Kata kunci:** sejarah maritim, pantai barat Sumatra, agensi, jalur perdagangan, pelabuhan dan komoditas

Kita sudah terlalu lama memungguni laut, memungguni samudra, dan memungguni selat dan teluk. Kini saatnya kita mengembalikan semuanya, sehingga menjemput kembali kejayaan masa lalu, *Jalesveva Jayamahe — di Laut kita jaya.*  
— Joko Widodo, Presiden RI (2014)

Ibarat mencicipi bubur panas mulai dari pinggir  
[ if the porridge is too hot then starts eating from the edges ]  
— Old Proverb

## INTRODUCTION

Stimulated by the inaugural speech of new Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who recently announced an overarching concept of a “global maritime fulcrum” as the centre-piece of his administration, there has been great interests shown in adopting maritime issues from various perspectives. In recent years the discourses on maritime issues have been increasingly sophisticated and certainly expanded our understanding of various ways in which the seas can and should be studied from the various perspectives. Maritime history is one of them. A subject that I am going to discuss for this seminar is to outline the dynamics of maritime Southeast Asia, especially interrelations among the neighboring archipelagic countries by taking a case study of the maritime world of west-coast Sumatra as the point of departure. In advance I will begin with the biography of Muhammad Saleh, a Minangkabau west coastal merchant of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Sumatra.

## GENERAL IDENTIFICATION

Muhamad Saleh, a Minangkabau coastal merchant of the nineteenth century west coast of Sumatra, accomplished his autobiography in 1914 with the title *Riwayat Hidup dan Perasaan Saya* [The Story of My Life and Affliction] (Much of the material

and observations on which this paper were based on the account of Muhammad Saleh and the data gathered while I did the research on the maritime world of the west-coast of Sumatra. It is recently published by LP3ES, Jakarta (2017). I am grateful to many individuals inside and outside West Sumatra, who shared their views and experiences with me, and to the family members of Muhammad Saleh who encouraged my interest in this subject). According to his own account, he began to write it in 1870s and finished it, when he was at 73-year old. It is originally written in Minangkabau language with the Arab-Melayu (or “Jawi script”). He did it by his own in order to be the ‘lessons learned’ for his posterity. The manuscript was published later several times after Muhammad Saleh passed away. It comes out through a great effort of Saleh’s grandchild, S.M. Latief, who had been a teacher of INS School, Kayutanam, West Sumatra in 1920s. The first publication appeared in 1935 in Minangkabau language with the Latin script. Three decades later (1965) *Riwayat Hidup* was transliterated into *bahasa* Indonesia in a limited edition and published once more in 1975 in the new improved spelling of *bahasa* Indonesia (EYD).

*Riwayat Hidup* first brought to public through the article written by Tsuyoshi Kato (Tsuyoshi Kato, “Rantau Pariaman: The World of Minangkabau Coastal Merchants in the Nineteenth century” in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (August 1980), pp. 729-52. The manuscript attracted his attention firstly through Prof. A. Teeuw, a well-known Dutch scholar of Leiden University, the Netherlands). According to Kato, the manuscript is a remarkable document in many respects: • it is unique document in the sense that there is only few Indonesian autobiographical documents written before or in the early twentieth century; • it is unlike most subjects of Indonesian autobio-

graphical documents which used to tell the story on political carriers, but told the story about his own family history, that includes his trading experiences and aboard sailing ships in international sea traffics and kept in touch with various trading networks; • it was not coming out of the hand of Western-educated people or political elite or nationalist elements, but from the hand of an autodidact who himself was a self-made local merchant of Minangkabau.

In short, there is no accounts on traveling along the west coast of Sumatra that recorded his life as eloquently as Saleh wrote of himself in the arena of international sea traffics of the west coast and individual achievement. Distinctly west coast Sumatra forces not only shaped Saleh's life but gave him the skill, patronage, and audience for writing his life story.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

### **Family Background**

Born in 1841 in a small village Pasir Baru near Pariaman, a sea-port town in the west coast of middle Sumatra, Muhammad Saleh was not a native of Pariaman. His mother, Tarus, came from *nagari* (village) Guguk Tinggi, IV Koto, Agam, about 7 km from Bukittinggi. In about 1820s, Tarus moved to Pariaman with her cousin named Malin Kuniang when little Tarus was still under ten years old at that time. There is no mention why Tarus family had to leave her village in the *Darek*, the classic homeland of Minangkabau people laying in the highland of present West Sumatran province. Some observers speculated that Tarus family probably moved to Pariaman due to avoid the Paderi war, a perpetually bloody civil-war which broke out in the *Darek* at that time.

In the early 1840s Tarus met and married Peto Rajo, a rich man from Pariaman and Tarus was his second wife. Peto Rajo was actually an Aceh origin and a descendant of local *raja* (minor king) from

Rigah in Rantau XII of western Aceh, that is one of the Minangkabau *rantau* in the *pesisir* (west-coast). It is also not clear enough when Peto Rajo's ancestor begun to settle in Pariaman. However, it was said that Saleh's grand-father already well-established merchant in Pariaman since the eighteenth century.

One of his trading partners was A.F. van den Berg, a former Dutch VOC personnel who switched his profession into private businessman in Padang during the English *interregnum* period in the early nineteenth century. Van den Berg controlled almost all port cities of west coast Sumatra and had practically established his export-import monopoly of local products from small to large ports and shipped them to Europe. Peto Rajo was talented broker and shrewd, so that he quickly gained the confidence of van der Berg, who opened and became head of Dutch factory (NHM) in Pariaman. His good relation with van den Berg did not only take place in business affairs, but also proved to be beneficial in many respects. He could read, write and calculate by informal way, but it was "Pelember" (van den Berg) who taught him the significance of book-keeping (*buku dagang*), the commercial ledge as one of the core of *jiwa dagang* (the soul of business). Eventually he got reliance from Mr. Palembang who entrusted him to do business, buying local products brought down from the *Darek* to entrepot of Pariaman under control of van der Berg.

However, Peto Rajo also was doing business with many native merchants from outside West Sumatra — e.g. Bugis merchants who traded silk fabric and sarong cloth in Pariaman, where his parent's house for long time was commonly used to be a kind homestay for traders coming from outside. Peto's business more and more expanded to include coffee, salt, *kerbau* (water buffalo), skin item, cinnamon, and other forest product. He also owned

three boats for sending coffee and forest products from Pariaman to Padang, and employed many merchants and clerks at his office. He also owned many *budak* (slaves); some Minangkabau, Batak and Niassans for handling rough works around the entrepot or taking care household works, such as looking after his children. At the height of his prosperity Peto Rajo told little Saleh that he accumulated capital more than 1.00, 000 *rial* (one *rial*, an old Spanish currency is equivalent to f. 2 Dutch gulden).

### **Little Saleh**

By the time Saleh was born his father business went totally bankrupt. In *Riwayat Hidup*, Saleh told the story why the business of his father downed fall. It is said that partly due to the fact that Mr. Palembang, his business partner and big boss eventually left Padang for Holland for good, so that he lost his big reliant umbrella. Besides, the lost of his father's fortune also closely connected with his father's lavish life style. Being hedonist who like pleasures (*berdunia*) like drinking, opium-smoking and gambling, which were not simply a matter of private self-indulgence but were also building image to public and aristocrats around him by demonstrating his wealth and status as 'noble man'. One way to show off his wealth, for instance, was riding on an expensive horse equipped with expensive export quality saddles on the way to cock-fights place. Peto Rajo married four times during his life time and had many children. The additional burden for him was also a large amount of unpaid credit among those merchants who worked for or with his business networks.

Practically the younger Saleh found himself in poverty condition. He never seems to have enjoyed and benefited from formerly great wealth of his father except his *jiwa dagang* (the soul of business). He had lost his mother when his mother gave

birth at the time he was still at young age (about at 6 years old). Saleh was the youngest among three children of his mother: one elder brother and one elder sister. They were raised thereafter by two slaves in his village near Pariaman. In addition to his siblings, Saleh had six half-sisters and two half-brothers.

### **Lonely Times**

Saleh's early life was thus difficult. Whether or not he was born without vision in his right eye is unknown. What is certain is that the eye was not only sightless, it became a repulsive looking constrained that brought young Saleh ridicule and, later, when he was ten years, his elder sister, Nangsibah — who was married to Pakih Sutan Ja'far and had children — asked him to stay with her in Pariaman proper (town), where he could help her around the house. The following years Saleh begun to work a while at village *lepau* (small store) after being asked by the Malin Kuning, that is his *mamak* (uncle), the one who previously brought his mother, Tarus, moved from their village in the *Darek* to Pariaman. Saleh begun to get acquainted with *pasar* (market transaction) when he was occasionally asked by Malin Kuning to go purchase to a weekly market while his *mamak* was very busy. Saleh later married a daughter of his uncle (Malin Kuning).

### **Trial and Error**

There were many trial-and-error fortunes that he had tried to go through, before reaching established businessman in the late of the nineteenth century. At the age of thirteen years old, Saleh went to the beach where he earned twenty cents a day working with fisherman in hauling *pukat* (the dragnet). However, upon hearing the advice of his father, suggesting him not to continue hauling the dragnet for long because the work would not help him to develop his mind (*akal budi*) and the expense

of life as well. So he switched then to start a new endeavor. It brought him to becoming peddling dried fish (*ikan kering*). One day Saleh and his friend Abdul Kasim heard and visit someone named Sidi Melaut, a big merchant who owned a ship in Pariaman. He had just returned from from Sibolga, and brought dried fish in a large amount. With saving money they had in their disposal, Saleh and Abdul Kasim wanted to buy it all up. Sidi Melaut was reluctant to discuss business with these two young people. Besides he had not finished yet with total calculation of the cost he had spent on buying the fish in Sibolga, including the expense of renting small boats for transporting fish from the shore to the ship, transportation cost from Sibolga and Pariaman and so forth. Upon hearing that explanation, neither Saleh nor Kasim knew how to calculate and estimate total cost they had to pay.

Although transaction at that time had not taken place, Sidi Melaut impressed upon both of them and it was to a new beginning for Saleh to think his future business. While continuing to run peddling dried fish he begun to study at night under various mentors. One of his textbook for the “three-r” (reading, writing and arithmetic) lessons was *Buku Melayu* (Malay book), published in England and brought by the merchants from Penang. For that courses Saleh and some ten other students had to paid respectively fifty cents, plus a bottle of lamp oil per month to one teacher. In addition to learn the “three-r” lessons regularly, Saleh also continued to learn how to pray and read the Quran properly.

One year later Saleh stopped being a paddler. Now he knew sufficiently how to run business on his own and had saved f.500 (gulden). The early business knowledge that Saleh so readily acquired was available before sailing the seas first, when his elder half-brother, Saat Tuanku Manggung Randah — he himself a trader and

village head near Pariaman — asked Saleh to work for him. The first task was to sail to Sibolga loading with rice under a *nakoda* (a ship’s captain) Bandaro Mudo. *Nakoda* commonly worked for *induk semang* (financial backer), transporting commodities from one port to another, selling and purchasing commodities at various ports and receiving some share of whatever profits were gained in the transactions he did.

There was about twelve years, from the ages of fourteen to twenty-six (1855-1867) Saleh’s quick and favorable responses to the demands of ocean travel quickly became apparent. As a result, he was given greater latitude in his role as *nakoda muda* (assistance) at first, later as full *nakoda*, sailing between Pariaman port and various port towns along the western coast of Sumatra (see Map A). In his career as *nakoda*, Saleh worked for no less than six different *induk semang* and with different ships as well. As *nakoda-cum-mercahnt*, Saleh bought red paper, onions, potatoes, cabbages, *sakar* (unrefined local sugar) and other kitchen commodities; all of these products brought down from the Darek. This brought Saleh to developed his business networks with hinterland merchants. Most of these commodities sold at his *warung*, commonly taken by *nakoda* coming from outside West Sumatra.

The opening of Suez Canal in 1869 also had influence on the old sailing traffics along west coast of Sumatra. Regular steamship connection between Batavia and port towns of Sumatera (Bengkulu, Padang, and Sibolga dan Aceh) at the end of the nineteenth century and by the early twentieth century declined the importance and profitability of the *nakoda*’s shipping activities. The business environment that Saleh developed so skillfully around him eventually helped determine that he could no longer go to sea as an active seafaring merchant. It was not only the manage-

ment but also and maintained his network with the Darek's merchants and as supplier of Dutch logistics in Pariaman and Padang.

### A Great Leap

A great leap in Saleh business career began in 1867 when he expanded his business networking and commodities. He was twenty-six old at that time. He brought resin from Pulau Telo (Tello island) and *minyak manis* (coconut oil) from Pariaman itself, and sold it to merchants coming from Darek in pasar Sicincin, a junction point between Pariaman and Darek. More importantly, he also opened the *kedai* (shop) in pasar [market] Pariaman and later also in Padangpanjang, made good contacts, not only with the Darek's merchants but also with Chinese partners and the Dutch Assistant Resident, Tuan Krama (Mr. Kramer), who eventually appointed him as *anemar garam* (salt contractor) since the Dutch salt-monopoly only valid for licensed merchants. Saleh's business hereafter recorded a very steady growth. Saleh was a very wealthy and respected richest man in Pariaman. For his greatness he was awarded the noble title, Muhammad Saleh gelar Datuk Orang Kaya Besar.

When he accomplished his autobiography 1914, his business enterprise was greatly diversified. He still dealt with daily business, produced and sold-copra, and other agricultural commodities with some entrepots, owned many ships, even a shipyard in the Pariaman port. He also owned a number of shops in Pariaman and Padangpanjang and had his own agency in Sibolga. He invested some of his property in the form of buildings and lands. A big and beautiful house in the down-town of Pariaman reflected his business imperium which was managed under his *Maskapai Dagang Pariaman* (Company) erected by Muhammad Saleh in 1901 and later continued by his posterity.

Saleh's life story illuminates some aspects of the maritime dynamics of Southeast Asian countries. Allow me to sketch some of main points as follows.

- First, the west coastal world of Sumatra has historically been the scene of maritime dynamic and commercially oriented people. The life story of Muhammad Saleh represented worthy spiritual heirs of this long tradition, at home in the arena of international power politics or individual achievement.
- Second, his homeland, Rantau Pariaman, laying midway along the north-south axis of Sumatra, is a relatively "open" society, likewise many coastal communities everywhere. Its population was cosmopolitan. It is the place for various foreigners and natives for a long time: Arab, India, Portuguese, French and the Dutch and Chinese (Bibliographical sketch, see in separate sheet below), as well as native outside Minangkabau: Acehnese, Mentawaiian, Niassen, Buginese, Madurese, Javanese and Malay people in general.
- Third, distinctly west coast Sumatra forces not only shaped Saleh's life but gave him the skill, patronage, and audience for writing his life story. The root of Saleh achievement partly lay in his shrewd response to the advent of Dutch colonial rule in the mid-nineteenth century. He established and maintained close ties with the Dutch officials and with the native merchants as well. More importantly he endeavored to control the source of commodities he traded. Apart from being the provider of trade routes, the sea along west coast Sumatra also provides foods, commodities and opportunity for Saleh to become a *nakoda*-cum-merchants and at the same time ships and port offered gateway to emancipation in developing his mind

(*akal-budi*) and mind his business partners.

- Fourth, Pariaman as part of Rantau Minangkabau, also shared main characteristics of Minangkabau people, that is one of the few of Indonesian ethnic groups who is known as "*saudagar*" (trader) and the place where the local merchants are not at all inferior to the Chinese in their business acumen. Minangkabau people also are used to *merantau* to all over *Nusantara* (or archipelagic countries of maritime Southeast Asia) which includes Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brunei and Singapore).
- Fifth, although west coast of Sumatra is relatively remote part from major centers laying on the Malacca Straits, it belongs to a part of maritime networks of Southeast Asia in general and of the "*sea of Melayu*" in particular as Leonard Y. Andaya puts it (Andaya, 1988 : 89-100).

Footnotes no. 2) Works written by prominent scholars offered ample piece evidences on the trading contacts between the west coast Sumatra and various nations. The following sources are only illustration adopted from some essay articles; earlier contacts with various nations,

- with Arab and India, see for instance J. Przulski, "Indian Colonization in Sumatra before the 7th Century", *The Journal of the Greater India*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 1934): 92-101; M.J. van der Meulen, "Suvarnadvipa and the Chryse Chersonesos", *Indonesia* (Cornell), 18 (Oct. 1974): 1-40; Jane Drakard, "An Indian Ocean port: Sources for the earlier history of Barus", in *Archipel*. Volume 37, 1989. *Villes d'Insulinde* (II) pp. 53-82;
- with the Portuguese, see Mark Dion, "Sumatra through Portuguese Eyes: Excerpts from Joao de Barros *Decadas*

*da Asia*", *Indonesia* (Cornell), No, 9 (April 1970): 129-62, and C.R.Boxer, "Portuguese and Spanish Projects for the Conquest of Southeast Asia, 1580-1600", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.III (1969): 118-36;

- with the Dutch, there is voluminous works in Dutch and English languages and redundant to mention here, but for introductory accounts please consult John Davis, "The First Dutch Visit to Sumatra, 1599", in *The Voyages of John Davis, the Navigator* (ed.) by Albert Hasting Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1880): 40-51, and Taufik Abdullah, "Impact of Dutch Policy on Sumatra", in Haryati Soebadio and Carine A. du Marchic Sarvaas (eds.), *Dynamic of Indonesian History* (Amsterdam, New York and Oxford: North Holland Publishing Company, 1978): 207-20; J. Kathirithamby-Wells, "Forces of Regional and State Integration in the Western Archipelago, c. 1500-1700", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (March 1987): 24-44.
- with the English, see J. Kathirithamby -Wells, "A Survey of the Effects of British Influence on Indigenous Authority in Southwest Sumatra, 1685-1824", *BKI*, 129 (1973): 239-68 and F.C. Danvers, "The English Connection with Sumatra", *The Asiatic Quarterly Review*, Vol. I (1886): 411-31.;
- with French see Anthony Reid, "The French in Sumatra and the Malay World, 1760-1890", *BKI*, 129, 2 (1973): 195-237.
- with American see Walter Murray Gibson, "American Pepper Traders with Sumatra", in George Grancille Putnam, *Salem and Their Voyages. A History of the Pepper Trade with the Island of Sumatra* (Salem: The Essex Institute, 1924): 17-49.
- with German see Hermann

- Kellenbenz, "German Trade Relations with the Indian Ocean from the End of the 18th Century to 1870", *JSAS*, Vol. VIII, 1 (March 1982): 133-52.
- with other Europe countries see C. Koninkx, "The Maritim Routes of the Swedish in East Company, 1731-1833, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, No. 26 (1978): 1-30; R. Quested, "Russian Interests in Southeast Asia: Outlines and Sources, 1803-1970", *JSAS*, I, 2 (1970): 48-60.