



The Social Landscape of Kampong Ayer: Marginalization and Modernization in a Traditional Water Village

Yuqian Chu

National University of Singapore, 21 Lower Kent Ridge Rd, 119077, Singapore.

How to cite this paper: Yuqian Chu. (2024) The Social Landscape of Kampong Ayer: Marginalization and Modernization in a Traditional Water Village. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(7), 1754-1759.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.07.038

Received: June 21, 2024
Accepted: July 18, 2024
Published: August 14, 2024

***Corresponding author:** Yuqian Chu, National University of Singapore, 21 Lower Kent Ridge Rd, 119077, Singapore.

Abstract

This article delves into the intricate social landscape of Kampong Ayer, a well-known water village in Brunei, examining its deep-rooted historical significance alongside contemporary challenges and the community's responses to marginalization. Through a qualitative analysis of academic journals, historical records, and official policies, this study illuminates the profound impact of modernization on Kampong Ayer's traditional way of life. Key themes explored include the village's physical functioning, its evolving social structure, affective marginalization, and cultural specificity, providing a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in this unique community. Additionally, the article underscores the pressing need for sustainable development and cultural preservation amidst the pressures of tourism and economic change. By highlighting these aspects, the study offers insights into the resilience and adaptability of Kampong Ayer's inhabitants, while advocating for policies that balance modernization with the preservation of cultural heritage. Through this lens, the article appeals to broader discussions on the implications of urbanization and economic development on indigenous and traditional communities worldwide.

Keywords

Kampong Ayer; Brunei; social landscape; modernization; marginalization; cultural preservation; sustainable development; tourism; community dynamics

1. Introduction

The earliest written record of Kampong Ayer can be traced back to Antonio Pigafetta's travel account of 1521, in which Kampong Ayer is described as a bustling and lively trading city with luxurious palaces, known as the "Venice of the East" (Nicholl, 1975). Nowadays Kampong Ayer has a population of about 13,000 people and consists of 34 named stilt villages (Hassan & Yong, 2019). Modernization has brought water-dependent inhabitants with amenities such as electricity and running water, and Kampong Ayer is increasingly being promoted as one of Brunei's key tourist attractions. As a water village with a distinctive landscape, Kampong Ayer distinguishes itself from other tourist destinations in the country. According to Ahmad (2013), it is even said that "a trip to Brunei is incomplete without a visit to Kampong Ayer".

2. Research Methodology

This article will mainly use a qualitative analysis of academic journals, books, news, and official policies to examine the different levels of marginalization that Kampong Ayer as a landscape has experienced and the responses to it. It

can be argued that the term “landscape” has been transformed over time from an initial unit of land jurisdiction to a complex entity that has been imbued with meanings by different groups and disciplines that go beyond its physical significance. According to Bender (1993), landscape is more than just a physical environment and can be defined as a symbolic space that embodies identities, cultures, and histories shaped by human interactions and memories, and that not only carries emotional metaphors of the present but also participates in power dynamics and is an important medium of interaction with the future. By understanding the landscape as a continuous cultural narrative, we can gain deeper insights into how social structures and cultural changes are made visible through this external expression. It is the materialization of history and human activity, a physical record of time, and at the same time a place where we interact with these memories.

The analysis will therefore focus on four main dimensions, the first of which is the physical functioning, due to the separation from the economic benefits of Brunei's urban core, which is also reinforced by the geographic isolation factor of the water and the poor basic infrastructure. Secondly in terms of social structure, with limited local employment opportunities, residents of Kampong Ayer are at risk of isolation through exclusion from mainstream social activities (the first two dimensions are also largely intertwined). Thirdly, effective marginalization in Kampong Ayer can manifest itself in internal conflicts with migrants, insecurity, lack of autonomy, and a diminished sense of belonging. A final symbolic disconnect is seen in the neglect of the cultural specificity of the Kampong Ayer, where depictions of the Kampong Ayer as a relic of the past and the development of tourism policies that are incompatible with contemporary development goals may also subconsciously emphasize marginalization.

3. Modern Challenges and Responses

3.1 Infrastructure and geographic isolation

The spatial layout and housing design in Kampong Ayer are largely intertwined with the local environment and vitality needs, for example, the floors made of nibung palms, the roofs made of woven palm leaves, and the bamboo that is readily available in the estuaries and valleys and is lightweight and easy to transport in the traditional houses of Kampong Ayer constitute a common resource for the inhabitants in their daily lives (Zainuddin, 2021).

However, the relative disadvantages of houses with these lightweight materials are that they are flammable and not durable, such as being easily eaten by termites. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Kampong Ayer house underwent a series of modernizations, including concrete pillars and a wooden walkway connecting the Kampong Ayer. However, this shift from relying on the natural environment as resources to purchasing modern materials from land-based vendors has greatly increased the cost of living for the inhabitants, and the instability of the river's high tides caused the foundations of many of the houses to rot or even collapse (Hassan & Yong, 2023).

As a traditional water settlement with a large population, the generation of large quantities of waste is an almost unavoidable environmental consequence. Daily activities in the household such as cooking and personal hygiene generate corresponding organic waste and other non-biodegradable garbage, and due to the lack of designated waste collection and disposal areas in Kampong Ayer, residents may discharge waste directly into the waters surrounding the Brunei River.

Goh (1991) once interviewed 115 households in Kampong Ayer about their daily lives and waste production and the results showed that only 16.5% of the houses had waste disposal facilities, per capita water consumption was 205 liters per day, and due to the lack of soils in Kampong Ayer that can absorb wastewater, basically 100% of toilet sewage and boiling water is left back in the Brunei's rivers. Although residents in Kampong Ayer have attempted to clean up garbage as a short-term measure, these efforts have been described as temporary and limited in scope, suggesting a lack of sustained support or and intervention in the implementation of long-term waste management solutions (Goh, 1991).

3.2 Economic disconnection and employment issues

According to Hassan et al. (2022), the poor residents of Kampong Ayer can be broadly categorized into four potentially overlapping types: elderly residents who have a strong sense of belonging and are reluctant to move; those who rely on the local environment for their main income, as exemplified by fishermen and water taxi boat operators; those who cannot afford to pay rent elsewhere in Brunei; and low-income foreign migrant workers.

Nonetheless, the mutual aid system still forms the character of the community in Kampong Ayer and provides residents here with favorable and convenient modes of transaction, such as renting a single room rather than a whole

set of houses, and selling a few home-baked cakes rather than running a restaurant that requires significant costs (Hassan and Yong). Although this resulted in relatively small profits, it was greatly adapted to the geographic and social conditions of Kampong Ayer (higher levels of trust and lower levels of materialism).

From the level of traditional craftsmanship, many residents moved out of Kampong Ayer in the 1960s because other sectors of the economy, such as the oil industry, offered better salaries and benefits. After the residents left, there was a significant decrease in the number of people who relied on handicrafts as a source of income, and the transmission of these crafts to future generations stagnated, leading to the loss of knowledge and handicraft skills to a large extent. This has largely resulted in the loss of knowledge and artisanal skills (Bakar, 2020).

As suggested by Azalie and Yong (2022), the development of cultural heritage-based industries and the rebuilding of production structures, especially those based on fading knowledge and information held by aging former residents, will help to realize cultural preservation. In addition, as mentioned earlier, initiatives to revitalize Kampong Ayer will also need to consider environmental sustainability, taking advantage of the natural dynamics of integrating local communities into cultural and heritage industries. Integrating the current Kampong Ayer community into the modern market economy network through interconnectivity, with policy and legal support from relevant government and cultural institutions in Brunei will help empower its residents, create economic opportunities, and ensure the sustainability of Kampong Ayer as a cultural heritage site (Islam, 2020).

3.3 Social isolation and affective marginalization

It can be argued that different landscapes are filled with unique memories and meanings, and this uniqueness gives residents an emotional attachment to a particular space. However, the increasing trend of globalization and worldwide labor mobility has made the boundaries of "sense of place" increasingly blurred (Mayhew, 2015). According to Rabikowska (2010), the normalization of immigrants' daily lives is considered to be a sense of order that arises when they leave their homelands and enter an environment with different norms, values, languages, and lifestyles in order to adapt to their surroundings. In a cultural sense, however, the landscape remains specific and exclusive, such as dissenting voices of other races that are not accepted by the group tend to provoke a sense of exclusion among the natives. This is especially true for foreign immigrants, who may face the double condition of adapting to a new environment as well as integrating into an invisible community.

According to Hassan et al. (2022), the sense of community in Kampong Ayer is very strong and is manifested in the fact that daily necessities such as salt are shared with neighbors. Houses are even shared during special ceremonies such as weddings or celebrations of festivals, and the joys and losses of community members are shared to a great extent to reinforce this sense of community. The study of Hamdi et al (2023) on local residents' perceptions of immigrant workers revealed a variety of attitudes among respondents, with many maintaining positive perceptions of immigrants, while others had cautious or negative perceptions, and a fear of immigrants destroying Kampong Ayer's collective identity and community culture was commonly voiced. The data also suggested that the presence of "foreigners" in Kampong Ayer is often met with racial discrimination or suspicion, which, combined with out-of-place habits and illegal behaviors, seems to reinforce the impression that they do not belong in Kampong Ayer.

A former resident who has moved out of Kampong Ayer interviewed by Hamdi et al. (2017) stated "Objectively, living on land is more suitable for modern life; but I find that living in Kampong Ayer is in my body and my soul." It seems that the experience of living in Kampong Ayer brings about a feeling of homesickness that transcends the purely physical environment. This attachment goes beyond nostalgia for a traditional way of life and it reflects an adherence to cultural identity. On the other hand, however, the Kampong Ayer in the official narrative often seems to be portrayed in a negative light, such as its high environmental risk of exposure to disasters such as fires, and its poor sanitation, which is incompatible with modern development goals.

It seems that Kampong Ayer has been transformed into a symbol of poverty and backwardness in the context of modernization, which Hamdi et al. (2017) describe as "like a refugee camp you see every day". According to Rahman (2020), some residents of Kampong Ayer reported that they felt insulted and rejected by land-dwelling residents, which to a large extent led to a sense of shame about their origins. This continued social marginalization and negative labeling not only affects the social identity of Kampong Ayer residents and to some extent weakens their motivation to improve their living conditions and pursue social mobility, but may also exacerbate socio-economic segregation within the nation-state.

As modernization progresses, Kampong Ayer residents may suffer a degree of emotional marginalization when they are actively or forcibly relocated and when they change their lifestyles. This is not only because of the loss of

physical connection to their traditional environment but also because the transformation deeply touches the core of their cultural and social identities, impacting their self-identity and sense of belonging to the community. Understanding and supporting the emotional needs of Kampong Ayer residents as they face the challenges of modernization is therefore critical to protecting their mental health and cultural identity.

Such support can be achieved through the implementation of community building projects, cultural preservation activities, and the provision of emotional support services to help residents preserve their cultural heritage while making a smooth transition to a modern living environment. In addition, the establishment of online platforms and the organization of offline activities to promote dialogue and communication between Kampong Ayer residents and land-based residents in this internet era can also be important steps towards bridging the social distance and reducing prejudice.

3.4 Cultural specificity and neglect

Symbolically, the promotion of Kampong Ayer as a cultural tourism destination can bring some economic benefits, but at the same time, it may lead to cultural exploitation and commodification of the settlement's heritage. Portraying Kampong Ayer primarily as a tourist destination may reduce its cultural significance to a marketable commodity, reinforcing stereotypes and exoticizing the community. This form of development can symbolically sever Kampong Ayer's true cultural identity from the tourism industry's portrayal of it, thus potentially marginalizing the residents and their heritage.

According to Lopes and Hasnan (2022), The Antiquities and Treasure Trove Act, 2002 enacted by Brunei in 2002 covers regulations for the protection of culturally significant sites, artifacts, and buildings considered to be of high historical value, and provides for procedures for the discovery, restoration, and trading of historical treasures to promote the preservation of Brunei's cultural heritage. However, as the Act focuses mainly on the protection of monuments and historical artifacts, it may not fully cover the intangible cultural heritage and water village community values of Kampong Ayer.

It is worth recognizing that Kampong Ayer houses the Cultural Tourism Gallery, which is operated by the Brunei Tourism Board under the auspices of the Brunei Museum. Exhibitions include not only thematic exhibitions and live demonstrations of handicrafts, but sometimes cultural performances are held at specific times. The mini-exhibition in the gallery vividly illustrates the historical process of Kampong Ayer through various exhibits and artifacts and the audio-visual room plays videos documenting the daily life of Kampong Ayer, while the observation deck at the top of the tower offers a wide view of Kampong Ayer and its surrounding area.

The gallery not only showcases the historical landscape of the area through artifacts including handicrafts and clothing, but can also be seen as a means of preserving Kampong Ayer's traditions, allowing local residents and visitors from around the world to learn about and recall the past (Taimour, 2016). However, in order to help Kampong Ayer become a "living heritage" beyond its mere material significance, its heritage conservation program should at least include activities that encourage the active participation of the local population in the conservation of the site.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to promote the interaction between tourists and local communities, which can go a long way towards deepening the understanding of the cultural elements of the destination. For example, encouraging tourists to participate in a range of cultural activities - such as performing dances in traditional costumes or fishing with traditional fishing gear - can greatly enhance their first-hand experience of the culture of the Kampong Ayer inhabitants. Such interactions not only allow visitors to discover and appreciate the uniqueness of the local culture but also provide the community of Kampong Ayer with the opportunity to showcase and share their customs and traditions, thereby enhancing their pride and satisfaction, as well as bringing about positive social and economic impacts for the local community.

4. Conclusion

In general, this article focuses on the social transformation of Kampong Ayer as a landscape and its significant or subtle marginalization as a traditional water village in the process of modernization. Despite its geographical proximity to the CBD of Bandar Seri Begawan, Kampong Ayer faces the realities of geographic isolation and economic disconnection, as well as poor infrastructure, social isolation, emotional marginalization, and insufficient preservation of cultural heritage.

5. Future Outlook

In terms of future outlook, this article emphasizes the need for comprehensive and multi-disciplinary strategies to

address these challenges, such as improving infrastructure, enhancing community participation, promoting cultural preservation, and improving the socio-economic status of residents. In particular, under the pressure of globalization and modernization, the question of how Kampong Ayer can maintain its cultural identity and improve the quality of life of its residents has become an urgent one.

While this article provides insight into the multifaceted issues of Kampong Ayer, there are key questions that need to be explored further, such as how to concretely implement cultural and social engagement programs and how to assess the long-term effects of these interventions. In addition, although the potential for community development through cultural tourism was mentioned, the possible negative impacts of tourism activities, such as cultural exploitation and resident exclusion, were not analyzed in sufficient depth. Therefore, future research needs to more comprehensively assess the two-sided nature of the impacts of cultural tourism on communities in order to ensure that tourism development brings economic benefits while respecting and protecting the interests of local cultures and residents.

References

- Ahmad, A. (2013). The constraints of tourism development for a cultural heritage destination: The case of Kampong Ayer (Water Village) in Brunei Darussalam. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 8, 106-113.
- Azalie, I. A. N., & Yong, G. Y. (2022). Heritage Industry as Conservation Strategy for Kampong Ayer (Brunei Darussalam). *Brunei-Museum Journal*, 26-50.
- Bakar, H. (2020). Development, change and modernization in Kampong Ayer over the last fifty years. In *Continuity and Change in Brunei Darussalam* (pp. 152-164). Routledge.
- Bender, B. (1993). *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*. Oxford: Berg.
- GDP per capita (current US\$) - Brunei Darussalam. (2022). *World Bank*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=BN> (Accessed: 8 April 2024).
- Goh, K. C. (1991). Garbage problems of a water settlement, Kampong Ayer, Brunei Darussalam. *Journal of Environmental Systems*, 21(1).
- Hamdi, M. F. Z., Abdullah, N., & Narudin, H. D. (2017). *Space, place, and identity: How migration have transformed Kampong Ayer (Brunei)*. Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam.
- Hamdi, M. F. Z., Abdullah, N., Narudin, H. D., & Carnegie, P. J. (2023). Belonging and Unbelonging in Kampong Ayer, Brunei Darussalam. In *(Re) presenting Brunei Darussalam: A Sociology of the Everyday* (pp. 171-184). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Hassan, N. H., & Yong, G. Y. (2018). A vision in which every family has basic shelter. In *Sustainable Development Goals in Southeast Asia and ASEAN* (pp. 190-209). Brill.
- Hassan, N. H., & Yong, G. Y. (2019). The cultural value of bakuts in Kampong Ayer, Brunei Darussalam. *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 19, 47-63.
- Hassan, N. H., & Yong, G. Y. (2023). Climate Change and Sustainable Development of Kampong Ayer: Its History, People, and Environment. In *Public Policy's Role in Achieving Sustainable Development Goals* (pp. 96-114). IGI Global.
- Hassan, N. H., Rigg, J., Azalie, I. A., Yong, G. Y., Zainuddin, N. H. H., & Shamsul, M. A. S. M. (2022). Making do and staying poor: The poverty context of Urban Brunei. *Geoforum*, 136, 132-141.
- Islam, S. N. (2020). Prospects and challenges of heritage tourism at Kampong Ayer (water village) in Brunei Darussalam. *Continuity and change in Brunei Darussalam*, 165-175.
- Lopes, R. O., & Hasnan, M. H. (2022). The expression of cultural identity in mosque architecture in Brunei Darussalam. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and-National Studies of Southeast Asia*, 10(1), 39-58.
- Mayhew, S. (2015). *A dictionary of geography*. OUP Oxford.
- Nicholl, R. (1975). *European Sources for the History of the Sultanate of Brunei in the Sixteenth Century*. Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Museum.
- Rabikowska, M. (2010). Negotiation of normality and identity among migrants from Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom after 2004. *Social Identities*, 16(3), 285-296.

- Rahman, K. (2020). *Negotiating Intergenerational Support: The Effects of Socio-Demographic Changes and Economic Development in Kampong Ayer (Brunei Darussalam)* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southampton).
- Taimour, S. (2016). *Conservation of Kampong Ayer as a Living Heritage Under Brunei Law*. LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing.
- Zainuddin, N. H. H. (2021). Evolution of Stilts in Kampong Ayer. *Brunei Museum Journal*, 2021, 95-110.