

Building borders in a borderless land: English colonialism and the *alam Minangkabau* of Sumatra, 1680–1730

David Veevers

Abstract: This article adopts the concept of securitisation to understand the failure of the English East India Company's attempt to build a territorial empire on the island of Sumatra in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Securitisation formed a key component of European colonialism, involving the creation of fortified and militarised borders both to exclude groups from entering newly defined territorial spaces, but also as a way to control goods, labour and resources within those spaces. Ultimately, this form of imperialism failed on the west coast of Sumatra, where a highly mobile society participated in a shared political culture that made any formal boundary or border between Malay states too difficult to enforce. Trading networks, religious affiliations, transregional kinship ties, and migratory circuits all worked to undermine the Company's attempt to establish its authority over delineated territory and the people and goods within it.

Keywords: securitisation, borders, empire, East India Company, colonialism, imperialism, Sumatra, Malay.

Note on the author: Dr David Veevers is a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at Queen Mary, University of London, where he researches and teaches early modern Britain and its empire, South Asia and Global History. David has published widely on these topics in, amongst others, the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* and the *Journal of Global History*. His first book, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750*, was published with Cambridge University Press in 2020. His next book, a new history of the British Empire in the early modern world, will be published by Ebury and PenguinRandomHouse in 2023. David can be reached at D.Veevers@qmul.ac.uk

In 1716, servants of the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) deposed Raja Massau from the Sultanate of Inderapura on the west coast of Sumatra. They had charged him with maladministration, but in reality his failure to fulfill VOC pepper quotas had sealed his fate.¹ Raja Massau had no intention of abdicating his position, however, and instead left Inderapura and headed southward, crossing into the country of Manduta. This region had once formed part of the Inderapura realm but had broken away in 1695 after a period of civil war. Through the efforts of the English East India Company, which had thrown its weight behind the cause of the rebel Sultan Gulemat, Manduta was divided into two independent states. The southern region was placed under the rule of the company's candidate, who established it as the Sultanate of Anak Sungai.² In exchange for English support, Sultan Gulemat awarded the company a monopoly over the country's abundant pepper crop. This was cemented in an agreement in which the sultan also promised to enforce coercive pepper quotas and conceded to finance a chain of *paggars* or forts on his northern border, to be garrisoned by company troops, as a check to Dutch-Malay threats to English interests in the region.³

However, despite the independence of Anak Sungai after 1695, and the efforts of the company to control Manduta by erecting a formalised and fortified border to protect its pepper plantations and control its labour force, Raja Massau was not considered a foreign interloper by the Malay when he set himself up in the border town of Ooray in 1716. Instead, he was welcomed by the *dupati* [Malay chief], with whom he set about fortifying Ooray. Exasperated, the English authorities observed how 'his subjects resorting to him', Raja Massau attracted followers to the town from across Inderapura and Manduta and set about forming a new centre of royal power within Anak Sungai's borders.⁴ Over a period of several months, Raja Massau began to exert his authority over the surrounding *dupatis* and village headmen, levying fines and attacking the villages of those who rejected his authority. While this newly emerging framework of Inderapura power overlapped with the Anak Sungai Sultanate, it was not considered a threat and elicited no response from Sultan Gulemat. On the other hand, the company, concerned that Raja Massau 'design'd to have got the Power of those parts', dispatched their own force of English and Bugis soldiers to oust the 'interloper'. After a week-long siege of Ooray, the company's expedition 'took the Town by storm', killing both Raja Massau and the *dupati*.⁵

The presence of the company on the west coast of Sumatra in the late 17th and early 18th centuries was one of repeated attempts at delineating, building and

¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to court of committees, 7 July 1716.

² Kathirithamby-Wells (1976: 81).

³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 29 October 1695.

⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to court of committees, 7 July 1716.

⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to court of committees, 7 July 1716.

fortifying clear territorial borders in a largely borderless land of shifting boundaries and fluid allegiances. Although the west coast was a crowded political landscape of dozens of independent polities, they nonetheless participated in a shared political and economic culture which rendered formal and fortified territorial borders porous and, in some cases, obsolete. Individual states shared joint sources of sovereignty and even co-governed the same regions. Raja Massau might have been the ruler of a northern sultanate, for instance, but that position also made him a key figure of Islamic legitimacy throughout the west coast, allowing him to rebuild Inderapura power amongst the sovereign spaces of the southern sultanates without being ejected as an aggressor. As the English observed nervously, Raja Massau ‘usurp’d the sovereignty w^{ch} was very likely to extend into the dominions’ of other Malay vassals without resistance.⁶ Similarly, the company may have garrisoned a chain of forts around Anak Sungai in order to control who or what might enter or leave the region, but as the pepper trade relied on the movement of people and goods around multiple overlapping geographic and social sites—from female highland pepper cultivators to their male merchant kin in the lowlands who transported and sold their goods downriver—the economic growth which the English sought to exploit relied on a high degree of uninhibited mobility and exchange across regions.

This article uses—and challenges—the concept of securitisation to shed light on the failure of the East India Company to build a territorial presence on the west coast of Sumatra at the turn of the 18th century. By studying securitisation within the context of the company’s colonial expansion, it will challenge the conceptual understanding of ‘security’ and its subsequent process of ‘border making’ as being one of survival, to argue instead that in the early modern period, Europeans regularly invoked security and pursued the project of border making as a form of imperialism. In doing so, it challenges traditional Eurocentric conceptualisations of securitisation studies which too often portray Europe as the ‘apex of civilized “desecuritization”’, an argument which contributes to ‘sanitizing its violent (settler-) colonial projects and the racial violence of normal liberal politics’.⁷ On the contrary, the free movement of people and goods across different polities in the Malay world of western Sumatra was rarely invoked as a security issue and as a result rendered exclusive militarised borderlands between states as largely redundant. The English, on the other hand, regularly employed securitisation as a strategy to territorialise its power, control key commodities, regulate and police labour, and disenfranchise those groups which refused to conform to its expectations of subservience. As such, the process of securitisation was a European construct, one that caused the sort of anarchy and destruction which scholars of securitisation often assign to the non-European world.⁸

⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, Bantal to Bencoolen, 13 June 1716.

⁷ Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020: 3–22).

⁸ Howell and Richter-Montpetit (2020: 3–22).

Securitisation Studies has largely remained the preserve of International Relations scholars. Since the 1990s, the Copenhagen School has provided an analytical framework for understanding the construction of ‘security’ in modern international politics, one which reveals a discursive construction of key issues as potential security threats.⁹ Born during the later Cold War at the intersection of Strategic and Peace Studies, Securitisation Studies has formed a crucial theoretical framework within which to understand the domestic and foreign policies of the conflict’s antagonists, especially the Soviet Union. The ‘securitisation of politics’ in this period provided the context for the state’s propagation of an existential threat to its being—the idea of an external challenge that would help consolidate political authority internally. Confined to the understanding of securitisation as a ‘speech act’, subsequent post-Copenhagen scholarship has however broadened the concept significantly to include other forms of representation such as material practices, as well as to trace securitisation over time instead of more narrowly as an act of specific intervention. More importantly for scholars of colonialism and empire—with its vast geographical, cultural and political manifestations—new research has conceptualised securitisation not just as a process invoked by threat, but one that developed within a variety of different contexts.¹⁰

As influential as studies in securitisation have been in other fields, historians have been slower to adopt the concept. Yet, as since ideas and perceptions of security change over time, it seems obvious that studies in securitisation should be a major concern of historians, and perhaps even more appropriately, historians should be a major concern for scholars of securitisation.¹¹ As early as 1984, the German historian Werner Conze historicised security studies in a broad—but largely Eurocentric—historical survey, arguing that ‘*securitas*’ only became more important than ‘*pax*’ as a key concept of political life after the Wars of Religion, and that by the later 18th century society was largely the object of security policy.¹² More recently, Christopher Daase has suggested the possibilities securitisation studies pose to historians attempting to reconstruct the different ways early modern decision makers and societies dealt with danger and uncertainty.¹³ In most cases, historians have rightly confined themselves to using securitisation ‘not as a mandatory framework, but as a useful conceptual “tool kit”’.¹⁴ The field of history which naturally lends itself to this ‘tool kit’ the most is undoubtedly that of studies in colonialism and its associated border-making practices. Over the last two decades, such scholarship has transformed our understanding

⁹ Stritzel (2014: 13–14).

¹⁰ McDonald (2008: 1–2).

¹¹ Conze (2012: 453).

¹² De Graaf and Zwierlein (2013: 48).

¹³ Daase (2012).

¹⁴ De Graaf & Zwierlein (2013: 51).

of what constitutes a border. Securitisation studies has largely predicated itself on the conceptualisation of borders as clearly delineated territorial spaces, regulated and controlled by the nation state.¹⁵ But new historical definitions of borders and borderlands has instead discovered ‘ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the end points of empire are also forks in the road’.¹⁶ Such revisionism forces us to reconsider why and how decision makers and their public audiences securitise such porous and shifting borders, and in doing so emphasises the inherent failure of European colonialism as a border-making exercise.

By adopting the conceptual tool kit of Securitisation Studies to understand the failed border making of English colonialism on the west coast of Sumatra at the turn of the 18th century, this article exposes both the role English emotional responses to their Malay surroundings played in creating a colonial mindset which demanded heavily fortified borders and the control and regulation of territory through a feeling of vulnerability, as well as the more practical imperial concerns of company servants which sought to monopolise goods and labour within certain territories, largely by excluding other actors—whether foreign or indigenous—from doing so. But far from a world of well controlled and clearly delineated territorial borders, by the early 18th century this process of border making had all but collapsed, shipwrecked on the shore of the *alam Minangkabau*—a Minangkabau world which was all but desecuritized by the time the English East India Company arrived in the 1680s. Through an understanding and practice of sovereignty which was based on people and not territory, while living within a landscape which promoted highly fluid and mobile social and economic systems, and sharing in a wider transregional political culture which rendered natural or fortified borders all but obsolete, the Malay of the west coast were able to dismantle the company’s colonial framework by the early 18th century.

A world beyond borders and boundaries

Servants of the company first arrived on the west coast of Sumatra in 1684, where they established a string of small factories across a 200-mile strip, from Inderapura in the north to Silebar and Bengkulu in the south. The company’s presence on the Indonesian archipelago had been much longer than this, however. Successful factories in the sultanates of Jambi in eastern Sumatra and Bantam on Java had helped the company capture a large share of the pepper trade which had formed the most important component of its early investments. But in 1679 the factory at Jambi was

¹⁵ Deleixhe *et al.* (2019: 639–47).

¹⁶ Hamalainen & Truett (2011: 338).

destroyed when a neighbouring power invaded the sultanate, while at Bantam the company was expelled in 1681 following a palace coup in which the new sultan had been supported by its rival, the Dutch VOC.¹⁷ Without a new base in the region, the English Company was in danger of being squeezed out of the pepper trade altogether. Reconnaissance of the west coast of Sumatra revealed a region even more promising for pepper than either Jambi or Bantam—unlike those entrepôts, the west coast was a direct source of production. More importantly, it appeared neatly carved up into separate, independent riverine districts that made monopolisation by the company an easier prospect.

These early observations of the west coast were not necessarily wrong. Across the 200-mile stretch of the west coast of Sumatra, at least 20 major rivers cascade down from the Bukit Barisan mountain range. Not only did these small riverine worlds host their own extensive pepper plantations, but they acted as highways for the transportation of even more abundant pepper vines which were cultivated in the Minangkabau Highlands, nestled far up in the valleys of the Bukit Barisan range. Every year, migrating Minangkabau men rowed downstream to transport the pepper which their female family members had laboriously cultivated.¹⁸ When they arrived at the coastal ports or towns, they joined a throng of *orang kayas* (literally ‘rich men’), *nachados* (Malay merchants), and Javanese and Chinese merchants and brokers. Pepper would be exchanged for commodities such as textiles, rice and especially silver—prized by highland women as a sign of status, and therefore the preferred mechanism of exchange on the coast.¹⁹ In most cases, these watery highways tied disparate family clans together, with some kin leaving the highlands to operate in the coastal ports on behalf of their highland families. Interconnected routes of the west coast therefore allowed the same tribe or clan to operate simultaneously in the mountains and on the coast. This great movement and interaction of people and goods kept the region in a constant state of flux and motion, one in which the riverine districts facilitated and shaped cultural and commercial life.

This economic ecosystem, which connected the coast and the rivers with the highlands, relied on nebulous borders through which different political and cultural groups could move freely. This is not to suggest that obstacles and even borderlands did not exist on the west coast of Sumatra. Narrow mountain routes into the highlands—especially the Subang Pass—could become subject to levies as a form of control by local rulers. Nearer the coast, tolls could be enforced on certain rivers as a way for a ruler to encourage people to use other waterways, steering traffic to benefit themselves and undermine their competitors.²⁰ Conflict could also close

¹⁷ Reid (2015: 155).

¹⁸ Andaya (1995b: 551).

¹⁹ Andaya (1995a: 174).

²⁰ Colombjin (2005: 17).

off certain regions between different tribes or chieftainships. For instance, in 1719, disputes over access to the salt trade led to war between the Kerenci foothill tribes—often known as the *orang gunung* or ‘mountain people’—and the people of Sungai Lemau. The Kerenci had usually acted as middlemen in the trade between the coast and the highlands, but the private trade in salt of the *pengeran* or chief of Sungai Lemau threatened their participation. The dispute turned violent, ‘some being kill’d, the resentment continued’, until full blown war broke out. The conflict strangled the routes between coast and mountains, and subsequently the movement of goods and people between the two came to a standstill. But it was a temporary disruption, and soon the Kerenci once again agreed ‘to send down people’ from the foothills ‘to trade in the produce of their Country’.²¹ Yet these were essentially conflicts over access to trade and revenue rather than security or territory. Furthermore, even these instances indicate the connective nature of the west coast’s supposed barriers. Rather than acting as impenetrable borders, highland gorges, raging rivers and upland-lowland routes instead served to connect the people of the west coast into a highly mobile circuit.

If Sumatra’s natural borders were rarely used to inhibit social and economic mobility, its political borders similarly proved highly porous. There was a clear relationship between the two, of course. The mobility of west coast society and its geography together prevented the emergence of centralised political structures. Multiple routes between the coast and mountains, and across the coast itself, made control of trade, resources or people difficult. Attempts to monopolise these in a particular territory only led people and their trades to shift to a different route, river or district.²² Consequently, the region boasted few hegemonic powers in the 17th century. Yet, the political landscape of the west coast was not determined by geography alone. Indeed, Sumatran political authority and claims to sovereignty were rarely articulated through control of territory alone. Rather, kinship ties, political bonds through gift-giving and rewards, and the subordination of people actualised a state or ruler’s control on the west coast. This was certainly how several faraway sultanates managed—albeit inconsistently and loosely—to maintain their claims to suzerainty over the west coast. These had been more directly enforced by the Sultanate of Aceh, which extended its rule down the west coast by 1628. The sultan installed governors within each riverine district to collect tributes of pepper, as opposed to exercising territorial rule.²³ In the course of their three-year tenure, Acehnese governors forged significant local links through marriage, patronage and monopolies.²⁴ Acehnese control did not

²¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to court of committees, 10 January 1719.

²² Colombjin (2003: 499–500).

²³ Khan (2015: 8).

²⁴ Kathirithamby-Wells (1969: 460).

last long, however, and barely ten years later the sultanate had abandoned its claims to the region when it transferred its rights over the pepper tribute to the VOC, who had only mixed success in exercising its authority outside of the far northern region of the west coast.²⁵ Similarly, much of the southern part of the west coast by the mid-17th century had fallen under the suzerainty of the Sultanate of Bantam, which, like Aceh, also actualised its sovereignty partly through a tributary relationship based on pepper, and partly through important marriage alliances—the most crucial being with the Rajas of Inderapura.²⁶ In exchange for annual quotas shipped to Bantam, the sultanate left the individual Malay districts alone and accorded them virtual independence in their affairs, while maintaining strong kinship links to the region's elite. It was control of people, and not territory, through which distant suzerains articulated their sovereignty over the west coast. As the sultan of Bantam's ambassador informed servants of the company shortly after their arrival at Bengkulu, the Malay in those districts 'are and have allways been ye Slaves of ye King of Bantam'.²⁷ Social and geographical mobility, alongside the largely non-territorial suzerainty claimed by distant powers, thus ensured that no major political borders divided the west coast of Sumatra.

Perhaps a more important product of the region's geographic and commercial mobility was the shared political culture enjoyed by the region's polities and tribes. On the east coast of Sumatra, a number of culturally and even ethnically distinct powers engaged in an armed struggle for territorial dominance. The sultanate of Jambi, for instance, was a Javanese state, whereas its rivals Johore and Palembang were Malay kingdoms, each with different political traditions and customs. By 1679 Jambi was on the losing end of a long war with its neighbours, and the capital was sacked, destroying the company's factory there in the process and killing its servants.²⁸ The struggle for economic and territorial dominance on the east coast of Sumatra stood in stark contrast to its counterpart in the west. Here, Minangkabau migrants from the highlands comprised the majority of the population. Sheltered in the wide plateaus of the mountains and nourished by the rich volcanic alluvial soil, the Minangkabau Highlands was the most densely populated region of Sumatra—with roughly a quarter of the island's entire population crammed onto the highland plateaus. The capital at Pagaruyung alone was estimated to have numbered 8,000 people.²⁹ For several centuries, migrants had periodically spilled out of the plateaus and descended down onto the west coast to form new Minangkabau communities and establish trading

²⁵ Kathirithamby-Wells (1969: 465).

²⁶ Kathirithamby-Wells (1987: 29).

²⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Suttra Getra to Bengkulu, [?] January 1686.

²⁸ Andaya (1993: 128).

²⁹ Andaya (1995b: 540).

towns and ports to export the benzoin, gold, elephant's teeth and, of course, pepper, which was desperately sought after by Chinese, Javanese and European merchants. Almost every polity the English encountered on the west coast could trace its origins back to the Minangkabau. Sungai Lemau, within whose jurisdiction the company's settlement of Bengkulu lay, celebrated its descent from the Minangkabau during special occasions, and its people flocked to Bengkulu in 1687 to pay their respects to a visiting prince of the Minangkabau royal house.³⁰ And despite being the principal sultanate on the west coast, even Inderapura had to have the succession of its rulers rubber-stamped by the Minangkabau kings in order to gain legitimacy.³¹

Indeed, the Minangkabau Highlands were ruled by kings—plural. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Minangkabau had been an expansive territorial power whose wealth was derived from control of the gold trade.³² During this period, Islam became adopted as a state religion, and Minangkabau transformed into a centre of Islamic culture and learning, quickly overtaking the Sultanate of Aceh as the font of all religious legitimacy in Sumatra. For reasons that are not well recorded, by the time the English and Dutch had arrived on the west coast, the Minangkabau polity had transformed from a territorial empire into a loose federation of highland communities, ruled not by a single sultan, but rather by three kings whose own powers were 'scarcely superior to those of a common raja', according to the company servant-turned-historian William Marsden.³³ Instead, individual Minangkabau communities became highly autonomous, rejecting the old patrilineal order in favour of new matrilineal traditions which placed significant emphasis on collective government. As the system evolved, the three kings transitioned into figureheads: symbols of Minangkabau Islamic authority which saw their political power replaced by significant cultural and spiritual influence over Minangkabau society. As migrants descended from the highlands and set up new communities on the coastal plains, the matrilineal tradition created a more egalitarian political system, in which individual riverine districts elected their sultans and tribal chiefs. So when the Sultan of Inderapura attempted to impose a patrilineal succession on his southern district of Manduta by installing his son as deputy there in place of his sister's son, Raja Adil, who had been elected by the *menteri* or councilors in Manduta on the basis of his matrilineal claims, the *menteri* of both Manduta and even of Inderapura itself rose up in defence of the Minangkabau tradition and forced the sultan to recognise Raja Adil as deputy.³⁴ Up and down the west coast, councils of *menteri* and federations of *peroatins* or riverine chiefs controlled the *adat* and upheld

³⁰ Kathirithamby-Wells (1970: 57).

³¹ Kathirithamby-Wells (1976: 66).

³² Marsden (1783: 275).

³³ Marsden (1783: 267).

³⁴ Kathirithamby-Wells (1976: 74).

Minangkabau customs, creating a political culture that transcended the boundaries of individual states. Borders—whether rivers, mountains or militarised barriers—did little to stop the participation of west coast communities in this broader framework.

By the time the company arrived in the 1680s, the west coast of Sumatra had transformed into an *alam Minangkabau*—a Minangkabau world, in which its various polities and tribes adhered to matrilineal social and political traditions, based their governments on *adat* or highland laws, professed a fundamentalist form of Islamic worship, and wrapped themselves in Minangkabau legitimacy by, for instance, using a shared set of royal seals in diplomatic correspondence and seeking the approval of the ‘three kings’ during times of succession. Despite being shorn of its political power, the Minangkabau royal house ‘was held in a sacred light’ by all of the migrant communities on the west coast who, though forming independent states, remained part of the same *alam Minangkabau* which plugged them into a shared cultural, political and religious tradition.³⁵ The result was a land largely unburdened by militarised or conflict-ridden borders, and instead home to overlapping jurisdictions, joint-rule and intensive transregional exchange and movement between states who enjoyed a shared political culture. Bengkulu, for instance, which would become the headquarters of the company from 1685, was governed by four *dupatis* or chiefs, jointly appointed by the *pengerans* or rulers of the neighbouring states of Sungai Itam and Sungai Lemau. In that sense, Bengkulu’s government was the product of a shared sovereignty. When the English arrived and negotiated for possession of Bengkulu, the two independent *pengerans* acted in such complete concert, that the English mistakenly referred to Raja Muda of Sungai Lemau as the ‘Young King’ and Kalipa Raja of Sungai Itam as the ‘Old King’, believing them to be co-rulers of the same state.³⁶ The English can be forgiven in their confusion. Although the territories of Sungai Lemau and Sungai Itam lay predominantly on either side of the Bengkulu River, each one also established villages on the opposite side, and the *dupati* of Bengkulu were drawn from both states.³⁷ Much of the west coast proved a patchwork of intermingled and overlapping communities, often sitting on top or alongside one another without significant displacement or conflict.

The lack of major territorial friction between overlapping states owed much to the deterritorial nature of sovereignty on the west coast. Like those faraway suzerains at Aceh or Bantam who claimed to rule the people of the west coast, and not the coast itself, local Malay rulers also exercised authority over the people, and not the land. When the Minangkabau prince Ahmad Shah ibn Iskandar entered into an alliance with the English company at Bengkulu in 1687, he settled in the port and hoped to

³⁵ Marsden (1783: 267).

³⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Madras, 28 October 1685.

³⁷ Bastin (1965: 2).

turn it into a new centre of Minangkabau kingship. Not only did he order the opening of a new market and the establishment of a royal mint at Bengkulu, but he also relocated thousands of Malay to the port, including 1,000 of his own followers as well as bringing ‘the People from the other side of the River to them’.³⁸ Rather than expand Bengkulu’s borders across the river, by force or otherwise, Ahmad Shah ibn Iskandar instead sought to bring the people to him and his new capital.

Yet if sovereignty was exercised not over land but over people, it was also articulated by local rulers as residing *in* the people as well. Popular sovereignty was another Minangkabau tradition which developed with the Highland kingdom’s transition from a centralised monarchy, into a loose federation of communities by the 17th century. The custom was captured in the Minangkabau proverb *dilahir urang majambah, dibatin kito manjambah*—‘externally the ruler is to be respected by his subjects, but actually it is the ruler who has to respect his subjects’.³⁹ Shortly after their arrival in 1685, the English were puzzled to find that ‘ye kings have noe command over their People’, who they discovered possessed a range of powerful rights which the English could not reconcile with monarchical states.⁴⁰ The egalitarian political system put power largely in the hands of the *menteri*, *peroatins*, *dupatis* and even individual village heads, all of whom came together to elect or sanction those rulers that abided by Minangkabau traditions, and worked to reject and expel those who did not. When Sultan Gulemat was deposed by the company as ruler of Anak Sungai in 1716, Raja Kecil Besar was installed as his replacement. However, his appointment was not sanctioned by the 20 *menteri* of Inderapura, who acted as the custodians of the Minangkabau *adat* on the coast. Worse still, when Raja Kecil appointed his own son as heir to Anak Sungai, breaking with matrilineal tradition, the *menteri* threw their weight behind a rival claimant, Merah Bangun, a Minangkabau prince from Inderapura. In 1728 the *menteri* had Raja Kecil assassinated, and Merah Bangun ascended to the throne as Sultan Gundam Mersah.⁴¹

To foreign observers at the time, and historians since, the popular sovereignty which shaped west coast political systems suggested an inherent instability, as polities appeared to be in a ‘constant state of flux’.⁴² The ascension of a new ruler in the southern state of Sungai Itam in 1686 demonstrated this dynamic in a ceremony designed to display the new ruler’s election through the support of the people, rather than their hereditary succession. As the state’s *peroatins*, *dupatis* and ‘Hill Chiefs’ came together to confirm Raja Kalippa as the new ruler, he was led by two chiefs and the royal

³⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 20 July 1688.

³⁹ Cited in [Kathirithamby-Wells \(1976: 73\)](#).

⁴⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Inderapura, 5 October 1685.

⁴¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, Bengkulu to Madras, 30 September 1728.

⁴² [Colombjin \(2003\)](#).

ambassador on a procession through throngs of lancers, musketeers and archers who began ‘firing of ye pieces’ and ‘proclameing him King’—confirming that his new rule relied on their willingness to fight for him. Later in the procession, the Raja was led to the steps of the *ballay* or palace. At the top of these, a man appeared ‘on the behalfe of all ye People’, and ‘Demanded severall questions of his ability, whether he was fitt or capable of a Kingly office’. Even now Raja Kapilla had to remain silent, and instead the royal ambassador answered ‘yes’ on his behalf. Once this was completed, Raja Kapilla ‘ascended ye ballay after his feet was washed & ye having presented all ye hill Rajas’, was finally confirmed as the new ruler of Sungai Itam.⁴³ The English deputy-governor observing the ritual dismissed the whole affair as rambunctious and chaotic. There was, he noted, ‘noe difference to be found between king & subjects’.⁴⁴ The English perceived this to be weakness, of course, but it was a political system particularly suited to the fluidity and mobility of west coast society, one which drew its traditions from a highland culture which emphasised political federation rather than monarchical or territorial centralisation. The day-long ceremony played an important role at the beginning of a new ruler’s reign in confirming the federated and decentralised nature of the Sungai Itam state.

The political autonomy of most villages and riverine districts on the west coast made any attempt to concentrate power in a particular territorial space virtually impossible, whether a court, capital or fort. Political power was linked to mobility, not hierarchy, and the most successful rulers were those who moved according to the concerns and interests of their people. This was chiefly expressed in the frequency with which a ruler would transfer or even abandon their capital without hesitation. Before Raja Massau had removed his court from Inderapura to Manduta in 1716, his father and predecessor as sultan, Muhammad Shah, had taken the exact same course of action in 1690. When the VOC threatened to increase its intervention in the sultanate’s affairs after the establishment of an English factory in the city of Inderapura, Muhammad Shah simply packed up and transferred the royal court to the southern province of Manduta, beyond the reach of VOC threats.⁴⁵ More importantly perhaps, in the past two decades the Manduta region had overtaken the north for pepper production by a significant margin. Muhammad Shah recognised that his vassals in the south had now become more valuable and more deserving of royal attention and patronage. The English, however, were left perplexed, having incurred ‘very great and extravagant expences’ establishing themselves at Inderapura and even building a fort—a major capital commitment and still a rare occurrence at this point in the company’s development.⁴⁶ But for the west coast’s rulers, whose powerbase was derived

⁴³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, consultation at Bengkulu, 9 November 1686.

⁴⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Inderapura, 5 October 1685.

⁴⁵ Consultation at Madras, 30 June 1690, in Records of Fort St. George (1917a, 16: 48).

⁴⁶ Consultation at Madras, 30 June 1690, in Records of Fort St. George (1917a, 16: 48).

from the people who sanctioned their rule and not control of the territory around which they constantly moved, attachment to certain towns or territories would have left them isolated and vulnerable. After the company's arrival at Bengkulu in 1685, English servants found it impossible to pin down and ratify certain agreements with Raja Muda, ruler of neighbouring Sungai Lemau, whose constant movement around the west coast took him far inland to his 'country dwelling' to interact with the tribal foothills, or to the southern port of Silebar to attend a Bantamese assembly, all within the space of two months.⁴⁷

English encounters with 'borderless lands' was not unique to Sumatra, of course. In many parts of the early modern world, English colonists encountered foreign systems of sovereignty over which they attempted to impose their control. Early 17th-century North America, for instance, shared many similarities with the west coast of Sumatra, especially along the north-east of the Atlantic coast. Here, a riverine world formed physically, socially and commercially fluid boundaries between different tribes and polities, with waterways acting more as vehicles of exchange and movement than formal borders. Estuaries and creeks were crowded with Native American communities linked by expansive kinship networks, shared cultural practices and participation in the same commercial systems.⁴⁸ While kinship networks frequently broke and conflict regularly erupted over controlling stakes in the wampum market supply, the control of territory was rarely the focus of such bloodshed. So, whereas the English arrivals in the 1620s understood and mapped Narragansett Bay as a single territorial and cartographic feature, in actuality it was settled by various different Wampanoag and Narragansett communities who lived within its many different riverine branches.⁴⁹ As on Sumatra, sovereignty was rarely articulated or practiced over territory. Instead, a *sachem's* authority was actualised through tributary relationships over other *sachems* and their people, creating client–patron networks that often led to wider tribal confederations, but rarely the control of their territory itself. Indeed, when the English first arrived, despite laying claim to and settling specific 'plantations', the tribes they encountered successfully incorporated the colonists into their porous patron and tributary networks, cementing their authority over the colonists through ceremony, gift exchange and cultural intimacy, a dynamic which English weakness forced them to accept.⁵⁰

To the foreign observer then, the west cost of Sumatra—like many places encountered by the English in the early modern world—looked like a land of territorial borders. At first sight, the coastal plain appeared severed from the highlands by a

⁴⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Inderapura, 18 December 1685; Bengkulu to Madras, 8 May 1686.

⁴⁸ Lipman (2015: 22–5).

⁴⁹ Lipman (2015: 16).

⁵⁰ Pulsipher (2005: ch1).

seemingly impenetrable mountain range. From these jagged peaks, raging torrents descended down to carve the coast up into dozens of strips of territory, each one with its own port or capital. From the Sultanate of Inderapura in the far north to the *Pengeran* of Silebar 200 miles to the south, independent polities and tribes inhabited these separate riverine districts. Yet, in practice, many powerful factors conspired to render this land free of securitised or militarised borders. For one, it was an *alam Minangkabau*: participating in a shared highland culture which had diffused itself across the west coast and bound the various political communities together—many of whom had developed from successive waves of Minangkabau migration. From upholding *adat* and adhering to matrilineal custom, to deriving their authority from Islamic kingship and placing sovereignty within the people, the polities of the west coast were shaped by a wider Minangkabau framework of power which negated the need for clearly defined or highly contested territorial borders. Just as important, what Europeans perceived as daunting physical boundaries in fact served to connect the region's communities together. Rivers acted as highways of movement and exchange, bringing goods such as pepper and gold down from the highlands in annual migrations to the ports. The mountains, meanwhile, developed a network of passes and trails which allowed for substantial movement and migration between upland and lowland, serving to tie disparate kinship networks more firmly together. West coast society was constantly on the move, creating highly mobile circuits of commercial, religious, familial and cultural exchange. In the 17th century, the *alam Minangkabau* thrived as a borderless land. With the arrival of the company, that dynamic came under significant threat.

Securitisation as colonialism

From the moment servants of the company weighed anchor in the Bengkulu road in 1685, it was clear that their articulation and practice of political authority was rooted in territory. Plans for clearly delineated borders, fortified spaces and territorial sovereignty pervaded the English presence on the west coast of Sumatra. In India, the company—while often entering into submissive relationships with the subcontinent's major powers, such as the Mughal Empire—had nonetheless worked hard to acquire written charters and agreements which carved out for them slices of territorial jurisdictions from which the company derived a stream of revenue, a pool of manpower and sometimes control over the production of certain key commercial goods, such as textiles or silk.⁵¹ In contrast, when they arrived on the west coast of Sumatra after 1685, the company discovered a region which they believed existed within a power

⁵¹ Stern (2011:20).

vacuum, free from hegemony. At first, they had perceived the Sultan of Inderapura to have been a great ‘Emperour’ and tried to acquire sweeping agreements from him for commercial concessions and trading monopolies.⁵² It wasn’t long before they realised that not only was his authority limited to the north, but it was also, in keeping with Minangkabau tradition, limited in terms of centralised state power. In the south, meanwhile, the company tried to negotiate with the Sultan of Bantam, before realising too that his control over the west coast districts was tenuous at best. It wasn’t long before company servants realised that there was in fact no Mughal equivalent to constrain their commercial and political ambitions, and they set about monopolising the pepper trade and securing control over both the plantations where they were produced and the significant labour required to tend the vines, with the aim of exporting 2,000 *bahar* of pepper a year, or approximately 500 tons.⁵³ Here was a patchwork of small regional powers inhabiting a pepper-rich territory over which they themselves might be able to establish some kind of hegemony.

The company’s territorial aspirations became clear even as they negotiated with the Malay for rights over Bengkulu in 1685. The *pengerans* of Sungai Itam and Sungai Lemau, whose *dupatis* jointly governed the port, welcomed the company’s settlement there as a deterrent to potential VOC encroachment, and as a new alternative to the traditional Bantamese export market, which came with suzerain-strings attached.⁵⁴ But what they did not expect was the English demand not only for a plot of land to build a fort, but also for possession of the territory surrounding it within ‘Random of a A cannon shott every way’—which turned out to be over a mile. And this wasn’t to be leased like the settlements in India, either. Rather, the company’s servants insisted that they ‘must be the only Lords & sole proprietors’ of the territory. Raja Muda of Sungai Itam, clearly surprised by the request, observed that if he agreed to such a proposition, he would be ‘giving away his Countrey to strangers’. His counterpart of Sungai Lemau agreed and ‘begunn to Boggle att this’ as it would ‘in soe great A measure ... lessen his sovereignty’. Agreement was finally made only after long negotiations when the company agreed to pay much higher prices for the pepper crop, as well as to pay substantial sums of customs to each ruler for all pepper brought down their rivers. Even then the *pengerans* hesitated, and it took the ‘Hill Tribes’ coming down to the coast—who stood to benefit as middlemen to the highland pepper farmers—to ‘make the Young King comply’, before agreement was finally made.⁵⁵ But even as the first palisade was erected by the company around Bengkulu, both *pengerans*

⁵² Inderapura to Batavia, 17 February 1685 in Records of Fort St. George (1917b: 209).

⁵³ A *bahar* was the equivalent of approximately 500lb. BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, Inderapura to Bengkulu, 24 April 1687.

⁵⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Madras, 28 October 1685.

⁵⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Madras, 28 October 1685.

worked to sabotage the agreement. In 1686, they not only depopulated Bengkulu by ordering their people to abandon the port, but also declared an embargo to starve the company of material for building and foodstuffs for sustenance.⁵⁶ Only once the company were able to gain the alliance of Ahmad Shah ibn Iskandar, a Minangkabau prince who had been driven out of south Sumatra by the VOC and came to Bengkulu to establish a new seat of Minangkabau power, were the *pengerans* of Sungai Itam and Sungai Lemau reconciled to the company's acquisition of Bengkulu and its surrounding territory.⁵⁷

Once in control of the Bengkulu region, an emerging colonial mentality—formed largely through the vulnerability of the English on the coast—demanded the securitisation of its new territory. The Company's fiscal-military weakness made its presence precarious at best, and its vulnerability was apparent in its inability to complete the fortifications at Bengkulu. York Fort and its successor Fort Marlborough were in a constant state of partial completion and disrepair. After the Sultan of Bantam sent a Dutch-Javanese force of 4,000 soldiers to Silebar to threaten the new English presence up the coast in 1686, the deputy-governor despaired that if they 'must defend ye place wth our own small strength' they would be easily ran off the coast. He gathered the soldiers nonetheless, and when he asked them if they would stand with him, they 'unanimously declar'd that they were incapable to encounter such a number', as there were barely eleven healthy soldiers standing—disease and the climate having decimated the company's albeit small ranks.⁵⁸ But just as the deputy-governor made plans to surrender to the Bantamese army, the Dutch-Javanese force had itself fallen apart through disease and desertion. After this close encounter with destruction, the colonial authorities became obsessed with separating themselves from the surrounding Malay behind impregnable fortifications. 'Wee doubt not', the deputy-governor reported to his counterpart at Inderapura, 'but that when wee are upon this hill & have finish'd the worke wee intend wee need not feare all ye Javas that come agatt us'.⁵⁹ And despite no provocation, the Malay were soon conflated with the Javanese as a threat in English minds. One company servant reasons that Bengkulu would remain vulnerable to the surrounding Malay 'untill that we are of our selves strong enough to oppose any enemy'.⁶⁰ But the company's establishment at Bengkulu was chronically short of funds and material, and York Fort remained more of a wooded palisade than the stone-bastioned fort servants envisioned. The same went for Fort

⁵⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, Bengkulu to Madras, 26 January 1686.

⁵⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to court of committees, 26 June 1688.

⁵⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, Bengkulu to Inderapura, 18 January 1686

⁵⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to court of directors, 7 January 1686.

⁶⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, Bengkulu to Inderapura, 18 January 1686.

⁶¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, Bengkulu to court of directors, 27 February 1713.

Marlborough, which was established in 1713 when York Fort was deemed too poorly built and quite indefensible.⁶¹ Within a year several stone bastions had been erected, but a severe storm and several earthquakes caused it to ‘tumble down being crackt in severall places’.⁶² Five years later, Fort Marlborough was still a building site, so that when a Malay uprising threatened the port in 1719, company servants had to throw up a temporary turf wall and ditch to protect themselves.⁶³ In that sense, the company’s securitisation was driven as much by an emotional response to their vulnerability, than it was by actual material threats to their position. This was a common dynamic within the English empire. In New England in the 1620s before the Great Migration of the following decades, English vulnerability meant that they rarely left their plantations or ships, and if so, it was usually along waterways or as part of heavily armoured and heavily armed columns.⁶⁴ On the west coast of Sumatra, the more vulnerable the company felt, the more it sought to securitise its presence, and yet it was this exact dynamic that undermined the colony’s success even further.

The company’s securitisation of the Bengkulu territory rested on a combination of establishing a clearly defined border around the port, and by regulating the movement of people to and from the region. For starters, Orumkay Lila, the company’s broker and one of the west coast’s principal *orang kaya* or ‘rich men’ who exercised considerable political influence and commercial interest, was brought in to govern the Bengkulu jurisdiction outside of York Fort’s walls.⁶⁵ As the company would ‘never be able to bring ye people under government’ as they perceived the Malay to be ‘alwaies troublesome’, they employed Orumkay Lila as he was ‘much feared by all’ and was considered ‘ready to quell such growing insolence as wee dayly mett wth’.⁶⁶ Orumkay Lila fulfilled his brief effectively, and kept the Malay inhabitants under a rather severe government. When William Dampier was employed at Bengkulu in 1690 as a gunner in the fort, he found two of the *dupatis* clamped in stocks ‘for no other Reason but because they had not brought down to the Forts such a quantity of Pepper as the Governour had sent for’.⁶⁷ But Orumkay Lila’s repressive government over the port soon caused a backlash amongst the Malay, whose discontent threatened to spill into a general uprising. Rather than acknowledge their role in facilitating the repression, company servants instead ‘Cutt off Orankey Lilos head for Severall crimes’, after which they claimed they ‘lived in peace wth the Mallayes’.⁶⁸

⁶² Cited in Veevers (2013: 691).

⁶³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, James Morris to court of directors, aboard the Queen, 6 February 1719.

⁶⁴ Lipman (2015: 86).

⁶⁵ Kathirithamby-Wells (1986: 260).

⁶⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, consultation at Bengkulu, 11 November 1686.

⁶⁷ Dampier (1707, repr. 1931: 125).

⁶⁸ Consultation at Madras, 5 August 1692 in Records of Fort St. George (1917a: 35).

Orumkay Lila's removal did not end the company's harsh government over Bengkulu, however. Far from it. Successive deputy-governors transformed Bengkulu into a highly regulated colonial space in which the Malay inhabitants and those who crossed into the Bengkulu territory were monitored and controlled. The free-flow of commerce became heavily regulated, and the *nochados* had to apply to York Fort for a passport to operate on the Bengkulu River.⁶⁹ The *dupatis* of Sungai Lemau and Sungai Itam were removed from the government of the port, and the *pengerans* were 'deprived of their antient Privileges of being judges of the Country', a territory they were now excluded from with the exception of official diplomatic business. Instead, the deputy-governors exercised absolute authority, and one, Robert Skingle, had the brother of the *peroatin* or district chief of the Bengkulu River 'butchered' for crossing the border without authority and carrying off a 'slave wench'.⁷⁰ From 1708, those entering the company's territorial bounds were disarmed and forced to surrender their weapons to the English garrison, a humiliating proposition in a culture where weapons possessed great ceremonial significance and social standing.⁷¹ Soon the territory was 'in a flame' and the 'consequences must have been fatal' had not a fleet of English ships arrived and deterred a general uprising.⁷²

Further unrest was created by a series of strict regulations which were brought in on what the Malay could cultivate within Bengkulu's borders. For instance, limits were enforced on how much cotton could be exported. Although cotton proved more profitable to the Malay than pepper, the company feared that its cultivation would lead to a decline in pepper production.⁷³ Finally, the salt trade became a monopoly: not officially, but every successive deputy-governor established a *de facto* private monopoly over the commodity. This practice was devastating to the Malay. For those living in Bengkulu's borders, the monopoly drove prices up and threatened the consumption of salt as a fundamental foodstuff and preservative, causing distress and often hunger. For those beyond the Bengkulu territory, especially the *orang gunung* or foothill tribes, whose main source of income was as middlemen salt traders to the Minangkabau Highlands, the monopoly threatened their entire commerce. The practice, noted a report by Madras in 1719, 'bred a great deal of discontent & uneasiness among the People'.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/2, consultation at Bengkulu, 10 December 1686.

⁷⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/6, Bengkulu to court of committees, 4 July 1710.

⁷¹ Colombjin (2003: 512–513).

⁷² BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/6, Bengkulu to court of committees, 4 July 1710.

⁷³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 14 April 1701.

⁷⁴ A Charge Exhibited by the President & Council of Fort St. George against Mr Richard Farmer of Breach of Orders and Severall Other Misdemeanours Committed by Him, Madras, 2 July 1719, Records of Fort St. George (1917a: 1010).

Controlling the flow of people into the Bengkulu territory and regulating the behaviour of those who inhabited it effectively severed the port from the coastal plain which had previously enmeshed it within wider agricultural, commercial, cultural and migratory networks with the foothills and highlands. This development had severe consequences for the English presence. For one, it ensured Bengkulu remained chronically on the verge of starvation, as most of its rice and grain came from the highlands.⁷⁵ The company was therefore forced to place the demand for provisions into most of its treaties with west coast powers, essentially placing its survival in the hands of newly subjugated vassals.⁷⁶ It also ensured Bengkulu remained consistently underpopulated, as the Malay chose either to migrate to escape the scarcity of food and the harsh demands of the colonial authorities, or were themselves forcefully displaced from the territory by the company. For instance, when the neighbouring territory of Jangallo was annexed to the south in 1711, the *dupati* and ‘all the Inhabitants [were] expell’d and oblig’d to settle in a remote part of the Country’. Displaced from their homeland, the people of Jangallo were ‘reduc’d to great necessity’s, having been stripped of all their substance and are now plac’d in a country unfit for the plantation of Pepper’ and far removed from the rivers they had lived on for centuries.⁷⁷

Once depopulated, Jangallo—famous for its abundant wildlife and agricultural produce—was systematically pillaged and stripped of all its resources for the benefit of Bengkulu. The moment the Malay were expelled, company servants swooped in to ‘take an acct of what goods, grain, Cattle &c.’ were to be found there, and then began to ship them back to Bengkulu on barges.⁷⁸ As great flotillas of grain and paddy made their way downriver to Silebar, the deputy-governor sent upriver a horde of licensed buffalo hunters to track down Jangallo’s vast herds—the largest concentration of water buffalo on the west coast.⁷⁹ The territory was also carved up in substantial detail. ‘The whole country’ was declared ‘by rt & Conquest invested in’ the company, including the entire north side of the Silebar River stretching ten miles to Bengkulu in the north, as well as the port of Silebar itself. The country south of the river was divided into an upland and a coastal territory and awarded to Jangallo’s neighbours, whom the company had recruited as allies in the conquest—a large *carrang* or hill marking the boundary between them.⁸⁰ The ancient homeland of

⁷⁵ Colombjin (2003: 520).

⁷⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/3, Articles of Agreement between the Company and Sultan Gulemat and Raja Adill, 26 September 1695.

⁷⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, *Dupati* Jangallo to Bengkulu, December 1712.

⁷⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 11 May 1711.

⁷⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 18 May 1711.

⁸⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Articles of Agreement between the Company and Pengeran Jantinolli and *Dupati* Allum, 2 June 1711.

the Jangallo people, then, was carved up into three new territorial units with clearly defined borders, upheld by written treaty. For the role of treatise in European colonialism, see [Ittersum \(2018: 160\)](#). Having expanded the Bengkulu territory ten miles south, the Silebar River became a new securitised border, and the company decreed that no one on the opposite side was to build or settle within 100 foot of the new river-border.⁸¹

While rapine and pillaging partly alleviated the resource-starved Bengkulu territory, company servants also pursued strategies to tackle the region's depopulation. Their first recourse was to attract Chinese immigrants, whom servants deemed 'the only people proper to improve this settlement'.⁸² This was partly on account of the success of Dutch Batavia as a colonial city, in which almost 40 per cent of the population were Chinese migrants.⁸³ As in Batavia, so at Bengkulu it was hoped that the Chinese would establish domestic industries and services such as brick making, carpentry, tavern-keeping, and act as traders.⁸⁴ Immigration was slow, however, as Bengkulu had established an unenviable reputation in the archipelago, with only 20 Chinese residents in 1700. With gradual incentives and concessions offered by the company, this increased to a community of perhaps 1,000 across the Bengkulu territory by 1730.⁸⁵ Unfortunately their successful commercial and industrial enterprises fell prey to the competition of private English traders, which led to their periodical expulsion from Bengkulu, as in 1709.⁸⁶ Similarly, Chinese attempts to set up extensive sugar and arrack plantations outside of the port caused intense backlash from the Malay. See Gib, the Captain of the Chinese community, was granted land from the company six miles from the port along the border with Sungai Lemau in 1715.⁸⁷ *Dupati* Bentering, a district chief in the neighbouring territory, complained to the company's deputy-governor that the conversion of the land to sugar and arrack farming disrupted the traditional Malay buffalo grazing grounds along the border. When the company ignored these complaints, *Dupati* Bentering gathered 500 men and stormed and torched the Chinese plantations in 1719.⁸⁸

The challenges posed to Chinese migration was partly resolved by the company's development of a large enslaved African population. As early as 1686, with the Malay-imposed embargo against Bengkulu, the deputy-governor informed the court

⁸¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Articles of Agreement between the Company and Pengeran Jantinolli and Dupati Allum, 2 June 1711.

⁸² BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 17 February 1700.

⁸³ Farrington (2003: 113).

⁸⁴ Farrington (2003: 114).

⁸⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 17 February 1700; Farrington (2002: 115).

⁸⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/6, Bengkulu to court of directors, 4 July 1710.

⁸⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to court of directors, 17 July 1716.

⁸⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/58, consultation at Bengkulu, 24 March 1719.

of directors ‘how absolutely necessary it is, that 50 or 60 slaves be sent here to serve in ye ffactorie’. Due to the scarcity of labour in Bengkulu, those Malay who remained in the territory were able to charge the significant sum of ¼ dollar per day for their services, a price the company’s servants were unwilling to pay for such ‘rascals’.⁸⁹ The first significant cargo of 200 enslaved Africans from Madagascar arrived in 1690, and by 1700 a large slave village had grown up two miles from Bengkulu.⁹⁰ Slaves were mainly used as forced labour in building and maintaining York Fort and, after 1714, the new and larger Fort Marlborough, but enslaved African were also armed and used as guards to patrol or garrison the border.⁹¹ The deputy-governor argued that enslaved Africans would provide ‘some kind of balance in case of need against an enemy, they being as much strangers to the Sumatreans as they are to us’.⁹² Fortunately many of the enslaved Africans were able to find freedom by fleeing beyond English territory. Incidents of mass-escapes were common, as in 1695 when 30 slaves managed to break out of their quarters at Silebar and disappear into the jungle, finding refuge with the *pengeran* of Jangallo, whose country—before its annexation—company servants described as a ‘refuge’ for runaway slaves.⁹³

The failure of European border making

The company’s problematic border making on the west coast of Sumatra was not just confined to the Bengkulu region, however. In 1695 civil war broke out in Manduta between the Inderapura Sultan on the one hand, and several chiefs on the other whose popularity with the *menteri* and *peroatins* provided them with legitimate claims to the throne. Naturally, the company seized the opportunity to secure a monopoly over by far the biggest pepper-producing region of the west coast. By providing mediation in the civil war and then providing troops to support the rebel rajas, by the terms of the Treaty of Tryamong, the company was able to secure the pepper plantations. The Treaty not only divided Manduta into two new territorial jurisdictions with clearly defined borders—the northern portion going to Raja Adill, and the southern to Sultan Gulemat—but it also laid the foundation for a massive expansion of the company’s colonial authority into the north. For instance, the company was granted ‘the sovereigne power and Dominion’ over fortified settlements at every port in the new Sultanate of Anak Sungai that they created in the south. Every Malay family within

⁸⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to court of directors, 6 January 1686.

⁹⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/92, court of directors to Bengkulu, 19 December 1690.

⁹¹ Logan (1956: 346).

⁹² BL, APAC, IOR/E/3/91, court of directors to Priaman, 21 October 1685.

⁹³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, instructions to Henry Griffith, Bengkulu, 24 April 1711.

Anak Sungai were compelled to plant 2,000 pepper trees every year, to provide the company's settlements with quotas of food and material, and to pay customs on any cotton exports, which were now limited to 50 tons annually so as not to undermine the company's pepper demands. And to counter what the English found was the frustrating propensity of Malay rulers to move around their country, the company bound Raja Adill in the north, Sultan Gulemat in the south, and all of their chiefs, to certain residencies or capitals, their removal or transfer from which could only be authorised by the company.⁹⁴

If the Treaty of Tryamong territorialised the political structures of the new sultanates created by the company in the north, it also paid special attention to the securitisation of those new territories. Now that it was in possession of abundant pepper producing countries, the Company, like at Bengkulu, sought to regulate the economic and political life of the new sultanates by detaching them from their regional networks with neighbouring Malay powers and the polities of the foothills and highlands. Perhaps the most ambitious article in the Treaty then was the commitment of Raja Adill and Sultan Gulemat to finance and build a chain of *paggars* around their new borders, 'for our Protection and ye Peace of ye Countrey', explained the English chief of Tryamong.⁹⁵ Once built, the company garrisoned each *paggarr* with five or ten soldiers. The new territorial borders drawn up by the company now became actual fortified boundaries bristling with soldiers and guns, stretching some hundred miles from Inderapura in the north all the way down to Seblat in the south on the border with Bengkulu. The region's ports and towns were becoming increasingly important for their strategic value, and not necessarily for the commercial benefits the company had originally moved into the area for. Tryamong, which had been the company's original headquarters in the north, had declined as a port and as a pepper producing region by the early 18th century. Nonetheless when pushed to abandon it by the directors in London in 1713, the Deputy-Governor insisted on keeping Tryamong as 'being the most northern settlement your honrs have on this Coast, it seems necessary to maintain it ... To prevent any persons from making any inroachment within Our bounds'.⁹⁶

The company's willingness to defend its new colonial borders in the north with force was not just about the exclusion from the region of what they perceived to be external threats. Just as important to the company's border making was the policing of those trapped within its borders. For instance, it wasn't long before the 14 *menteri*

⁹⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/3, Articles of Agreement between the Company and Sultan Gulemat and Raja Adill, 26 September 1695.

⁹⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/3, Articles of Agreement between the Company and Sultan Gulemat and Raja Adill, 26 September 1695.

⁹⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, Bengkulu to court of directors, 27 February 1713.

of Manduta became dissatisfied with the company's settlement over the region. They had been working towards a more blended arrangement before the company's intervention in 1695, shaped by Minangkabau *adat* or laws. The *menteri* sought to elect Raja Adill based on his right to rule through the matrilineal line, with Raja Massau, the Inderapura Sultan's heir, as deputy, providing the new regime with a strong connection to the legitimising kingship of the Inderapura throne.⁹⁷ But as Sultan Gulemat was more willing to concede to the company's sweeping economic and political demands, the company insisted on the division of Manduta, with their puppet sultan in control of the most productive territory in the south. But the arbitrary territorial divisions in a region thoroughly shaped by the *alam Minangnakabu* was problematic, at best. The company were well aware that the Treaty of Tryamong would need to be imposed at the point of a gun, declaring that only 'a strong' *paggar* or fort in the town of Manduta itself with 50 soldiers would be enough to 'over awe' the *menteri* and force their cooperation.⁹⁸ Similarly, following Raja Massau's defeat in 1716 after his transfer of the Inderapura court to Ooray on the Manduta border—as recounted in the introduction—the English deputy-governor made clear that his violent removal 'will terrify the Mallays being somuch blood shed'. As the bodies of the sultan and *dupati* were recovered from the rubble of Ooray, Anak Sungai's *peroatins* or district chiefs were summoned and 'told this was don for their sake and it was expected they should plant pepper which they promise'd [on] account of the kill'd & wounded'.⁹⁹

As at Bengkulu in the south, the company's securitisation of its northern borders was clearly about exerting control over those people and commodities living within the new territories of Manduta and Anak Sungai. This sprung mainly from a need to control the labour of the west coast, which, as far as the English were concerned, was almost as precious a commodity as the pepper itself. Indeed, the cultivation of pepper was a labour intensive process. The thousands of vines which made up the average plantation required constant management, pruning and harvesting.¹⁰⁰ And while the region boasted millions of pepper trees, it often struggled to match this volume with the required labour. 'Tho' the soil be very rich', observed one company servant in 1704, 'yet is so thinly peopled that one may travell twenty miles together without seeing either house or plantation'.¹⁰¹ At Bengkulu, the scarcity of labour—the result of the depopulation of the region in response to the company's harsh policies—was partly made up by Chinese migrants and enslaved Africans. In contrast, the vast extent of the northern territories led the company to anticipate such a scarcity by securing

⁹⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/3, consultation at Tryamong, 7 October 1695.

⁹⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/3, consultation at Tryamong, 7 October 1695.

⁹⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 17 July 1716.

¹⁰⁰ Andaya (1995a: 173).

¹⁰¹ Bengkulu to Madras, 7 February 1704 in Records of Fort St. George (1931, 9: 22).

the key population centres themselves, before any flight to the foothills or mountains could take place. By the turn of the 18th century, Moco Moco, Manduta, Bantal, Ippue and Tryamong were all fortified with major paggars with their own network of satellite forts and garrisons in the surrounding countryside. ‘Moco Moco when strengthen’d will secure the Peace of the Countrey that & Ippue being the Keys of the Countrey will prevent any coming in or escaping’, observed the deputy-governor of Bengkulu.¹⁰² The *paggars* not only prevented the free movement of the Malay, but also policed their labour. When the Rajas of Seblat and Cattow—two key river districts in Anak Sungai which produced almost 600 *bahar* of pepper between them—began destroying their peppers plantations in 1690 in protest at the company’s coercive policies, the company responded by building several new *paggars* up and down the rivers to enforce pepper cultivation. ‘Now all is quiet’, observed one company servant when the paggars were completed in 1698, ‘& the whole pepper trade from Indrapoora to Sillebar is secured to the Company’.¹⁰³

The financial and human cost of maintaining a fortified border some 100 miles long was enormous, however, and exposed the significant limitations of securitisation as a colonial strategy rooted firmly in territorial control. Following the completion of the Cattow and Seblat *paggars* chains, the governor of Madras complained to his counterpart at Bengkulu in 1698 that ‘the charge of defending a Paggars with a great Company of Souldiers would so much over ballance the Profit of buying of Pepper and selling of goods’.¹⁰⁴ The situation on the west coast was a classic cyclical dynamic of securitisation, in which the ever increasing burden of militarising and maintaining hard borders far outweighed the economic advantage to controlling the territories being secured. As one pamphlet observed of England’s contemporary occupation of Tangier in North Africa, in which Charles II lavished millions on the territory to secure it against potential Moroccan attack, ‘Whilst we keep onely the Walls of Tangier, we shall onely spend Monday; it will never bring any profit to our King’.¹⁰⁵ In 1684 the Crown abandoned Tangier as the cost of securing the colony had rendered it unprofitable as a free port.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the expenses of the west coast for the month of July 1716 alone exceeded the amount spent on purchasing pepper over the entire preceding 17 months.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, when the company transferred its northern headquarters from Tryamong to Moco Moco, its fortification had cost 10,000 dollars by 1719, and its completion required another 5,000 more—money the deputy-governor

¹⁰² BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 17 July 1716.

¹⁰³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 8 October 1698.

¹⁰⁴ Madras to Bengkulu, 17 May 1698, in Records of Fort St. George (1920, 8: 60).

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Bejjit (2015: 152).

¹⁰⁶ Stein (2011: 1007).

¹⁰⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/3/99, court of directors to Bengkulu, 14 March 1717.

at Bengkulu simply could not find.¹⁰⁸ The company's financial weakness meant that most of the *paggars* were more impressive on paper than they were on the ground. Rarely built of stone, the majority of *paggars*—especially inland—were turf or timber structures hastily erected, with on average a garrison of one or two Bugis or Malay soldiers fit for duty due to sickness or desertion. In 1700, for instance, one of the upriver *paggars* at Cattow was robbed of its pepper as it was poorly secured and garrisoned by a single soldier.¹⁰⁹

The company's transformation of Bengkulu, Anak Sungai and Manduta into highly regulated and militarised territories proved too disruptive to the interconnected *alam Minangkabau* which had been formed over centuries through open borders, shared customs and the fluid movement and exchange of people and goods. Almost from the moment the company began to throw up borders, the Malay sought to undermine and resist them. One popular tactic was for upstream and highland polities to abandon the Bengkulu River and travel down or trade along neighbouring rivers. When the company first acquired Bengkulu in 1685, Nagarakiddal, 'a great Man' of the foothills where the Bengkulu River spilled out from the mountains, stopped all shipments of pepper downstream in protest at the English acquisition of the port, preventing the company from shipping any pepper at all in its first few months there.¹¹⁰ Similarly, as all pepper coming to Bengkulu from the southward had to cross the Silebar River in Jangallo, its *pengeran* began diverting the pepper downriver to his own port—an act which largely contributed to the company's invasion of the country in 1711.¹¹¹ Below the great chiefs, individual Malay families almost all the way through this period resisted the coercive pepper quotas expected of them by the colonial government. Sungai Itam, which had become an English vassal by the early 18th century, failed to provide Bengkulu with more than 18 *bahar* of pepper in 1716, a catastrophic drop from its usual yield of 200 *bahar*. The company, suspecting disobedience, forced the *pengeran* to accept *Dupati Bentering* as 'Prime Minister' of Sungai Itam, who, with a small force of company soldiers, toured the state to enforce the cultivation of pepper. But it wasn't long before he reported back that the Malay were refusing to plant pepper 'as they could not get salt' due to the company's monopoly. Instead, they had allowed the pepper vines of Sungai Itam to rot in favour of paddy farming.¹¹²

Less common, though ultimately far more effective, was the use of force by Malay states and communities against the company's securitisation of the

¹⁰⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 10 January 1719.

¹⁰⁹ Bengkulu to Madras, 22 July 1700 in Records of Fort St. George (1921, 7: 127).

¹¹⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Madras, 29 September 1685.

¹¹¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/6, Bengkulu to court of directors, 14 November 1710.

¹¹² BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 30 July 1716.

Bengkulu region. This came in two forms: the invitation of outside actors to help contest the company's presence, or the armed uprising of those living within and around Bengkulu. The former tended to be less successful. The plurality of west coast sovereignty, in which states drew on a variety of simultaneous, overlapping sources of authority to sustain their political structures—Minangkabau legitimacy, Inderapura kingship, Bantamese suzerainty—allowed threatened communities to call upon several external forces. After the *pengerans* of Sungai Itam and Sungai Lemau conceded to the company far more than they had intended in the Bengkulu grant of 1685, they invoked the loose suzerainty of the Sultan of Bantam, who sent an army of 4,000 Dutch and Javanese troops to Silebar to dislodge the English. At first, this overwhelming force scared the company into preparing to abandon Bengkulu and withdraw to Inderapura in the north. But when the Sultan's ambassador summoned the *pengerans* to Silebar and ordered them to return with him to Bantam to pay obedience to the Sultan, they worried that the Bantamese cure might be worse than the English disease, and fled back to Bengkulu. 'Being quite forsaken and ye forces bro't over much impaired by sickness', observed the deputy-governor, the Dutch-Javanese army returned to Bantam.¹¹³ Having narrowly avoided destruction at the hands of the Sultan of Bantam, just a few years later the company faced tougher odds as it miraculously suppressed a coup in 1689 by a visiting Minangkabau prince, Ahmad Shah ibn Iskandar. The prince had settled in Bengkulu following an alliance with the English after being driven out of south Sumatra by the Dutch. For the suffering Malay, the arrival of Minangkabau royalty was universally welcomed as a powerful alternative to the increasingly oppressive company: 'he is admitted as Sovereign who laid claim to all the Countrey as heir to Minangcabou', the deputy-governor reported to Madras.¹¹⁴ Once ensconced in the port, ibn Iskandar had 1,000 of his retinue launch a surprise attack on York Fort in an attempt to seize power, in which 'much blood he spiltt thereby'. Although they succeeded in repulsing the Minangkabau forces, the English garrison was decimated in the 'rising' of 'bloody designe', with barely ten soldiers of an entirely new batch of reinforcements left alive.¹¹⁵

The more successful use of force in response to the company's securitisation of the west coast was that exercised by the Malay themselves, and especially those who now found themselves displaced or economically and politically disenfranchised by the English settlement of the country. Sultan Gulemat's popularity amongst the people of Anak Sungai had plummeted by the beginning of the 18th century because of too readily conceding to all of the company's sweeping and oppressive demands. Had his

¹¹³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/1, Bengkulu to Madras, 26 January 1686.

¹¹⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 20 July 1688.

¹¹⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/21/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 11 April 1689.

rule not been upheld by the company, Minangkabau *adat* or customary law would have almost certainly have meant his removal by then and the election or appointment of a new ruler in his place. ‘The Natives have been injuriously treated’, noted one company servant, ‘and consequently discouraged from improving their pepper plantations’.¹¹⁶ As a result, several contenders with immense popularity amongst the people began to actively undermine Sultan Gulemat’s rule, including his step-father Raja Macoota, and his own son Raja Suleman. In 1711, the rajas crossed the border with four hundred men and peacefully took possession of the key port of Moco Moco and most of the region upriver from both Ippue and Bantal, largely with the support of the *dupatis* and people. But Manduta, garrisoned by a large company force, was taken after a siege in which the company’s chief surrendered once his Malay and Bugis force abandoned him in favour of Raja Suleman.¹¹⁷ By 1713 their position was so strong that the rajas, along with the 14 *menteri* of Manduta, were able to elect Raja Mansore as the new Sultan—a figure with a strong claim to the throne who enjoyed a high level of popularity across the country.¹¹⁸

The company’s crippling financial situation and lack of manpower had prevented it from intervening, confined to defending the few *paggars* left under their control. In fact the burden of supporting Sultan Gulemat’s rule with force had become so burdensome that the deputy-governor forced Gulemat to agree not to wage war against the rebels, as the cost had become too great.¹¹⁹ The destruction of the company’s entire presence in the north was only saved when an attack on its headquarters at Bantal in 1713 was narrowly defeated.¹²⁰ ‘It has been our Unhappyness hitherto not to have a sufficient force to back our admonitions’, lamented the deputy-governor, and as a consequence ‘the Pepper trade in those parts [are] in danger of being utterly lost’.¹²¹ Later that year a small expeditionary force did succeed in restoring Sultan Gulemat to Manduta and in coercing the *menteri* there to declare for him again.¹²² But while Raja Suleman was caught and beheaded in 1715 by Sultan Gulemat, Raja Macoota remained elusive. His popularity was such that in 1716 Sultan Gulemat himself threw in his lot with the raja and joined his coalition in driving the British out of Anak Sungai. Although they succeeded in bringing the rest of the sultanate under Malay control for the first time in decades, a further siege of Bantal in 1717 similarly failed to dislodge the company entirely.¹²³ Nonetheless the uprising did succeed in dismantling

¹¹⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, Bengkulu to court of directors, 27 February 1713.

¹¹⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, Daniel Evans to Bengkulu, 11 September 1711.

¹¹⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/8, Bengkulu to court of directors, 27 February 1713.

¹¹⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, Sultan Gulemat’s obligation to the Company, April 1711.

¹²⁰ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 22 October 1713.

¹²¹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 22 October 1713.

¹²² BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 10 November 1713.

¹²³ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 10 January 1719.

the company's securitisation of Anak Sungai. A newly arrived company servant in 1718 was shocked to find 'all in Confusion and all the Settlements near destruction and in trouble'.¹²⁴ The *paggars* had been destroyed, Ippue and Tryamong burnt to the ground, Manduta was lost forever, 250,000 pepper trees had been torn up, and a majority of the Malay fled upriver to the foothills away from British interference. 'The country has been almost Depopulated', noted the company's chief of Bantal, discovering just four families left plying their wares in the market there.¹²⁵

In the Bengkulu territory to the south, the Malay managed to not only deliver a knockout blow to the company's border making, but they also succeeded in decisively destroying the company's presence there altogether. Raja Cutcheel, the *dupati* of Jangallo, had been displaced from his homeland after the country was annexed by the Company in 1711. Expelled with the remnants of his people beyond the Silebar River which comprised the company's new border, Raja Cutchell eventually petitioned a new deputy-governor about the hardships his people had since faced, and succeeded in gaining permission to resettle along the company's border by the river. But the company's conditions of resettlement were harsh, including confinement to a small reservation and the imposition of unrealistically high pepper quotas.¹²⁶ The disenfranchisement inflicted on the dispossessed people of Jangallo by the company's arbitrary border making was too much to bear, and the *dupati* seized an opportunity to build a coalition of disaffected Malay in an effort to run the company out of Bengkulu entirely.

This opportunity came in 1717, when the *orang gunung* or Kerenci tribes of the foothills descended on the Bengkulu border with 400 men in protest at having their access to the salt trade severed. At first, the company succeeded in driving them off with 'a glorious victory', bringing 'twenty of the Enemy's heads' back to Bengkulu as trophies.¹²⁷ But rather than securing the border, this punitive action merely exposed the shallow foundations of the company's borderland, uniting the Malay within and without the border in a concerted effort to expel the English. After their defeat, the *orang gunung* were sheltered by the *pengerans* of Sungai Itam and Sungai Lemau, where they were joined by Raja Cutcheel and 80 of his followers.¹²⁸ The *dupati* of Jangallo's arrival created a swell of popular support for the uprising, and even the company's puppet 'prime minister' *Dupati* Bentering threw in his lot with the insurrection. Over the next two years, this coalition turned the company's border making in on itself, constructing a chain of *dusans* or fortified compounds along Sungai Itam's and Sungai Lemau's borders with Bengkulu, strangling all land routes into the

¹²⁴ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/7, Bengkulu to Madras, 10 January 1719.

¹²⁵ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, consultation at Bengkulu, 10 November 1713.

¹²⁶ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/57, Dupati Jangallo to Bengkulu, December 1712.

¹²⁷ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/58, consultation at Bengkulu, 3 December 1717.

¹²⁸ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/58, consultation at Bengkulu, 2 December 1717.

port.¹²⁹ In the meantime, the *dupatis* of Bentering and Jangallo gradually succeeded in coordinating with the Malay in the port itself, even those living immediately outside of Fort Marlborough's walls. In 1719 'a General combination of Malays' crossed the border and set up camp five miles from the port, setting fire to all of the region's major pepper plantations and detaching the company's remaining Malay and Bugis supporters from them, one by one. Weak and isolated, the 600 or so English, Chinese and enslaved Africans crowded in Fort Marlborough tried to flee to a company ship anchored offshore. But as they made their way to the beach, almost 300 were killed by the forces of Raja Cutcheel and Bentering, who then set fire to Fort Marlborough and expelled the remaining English presence from Bengkulu.¹³⁰

Conclusion

The story of the company on the west coast of Sumatra is one of the failure to securitise the territory it sought to control in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Unlike on the subcontinent, where the balance of power was so heavily tilted towards India's major powers that the company's success lay in subordinating itself politically and pursuing its commercial and jurisdictional ambitions diplomatically, on the west coast of Sumatra the absence of a hegemonic power provided an opportunity for the Company to extend its authority over what it perceived to be a collection of geographically divided and politically weak polities. Through the lens of Securitisation Studies, we are able to understand the resultant colonial expansion—easily enough achieved through the establishment of the Bengkulu territory in 1685 and the puppet sultanate of Anak Sungai in 1695—as the result of the company's need to control the production of pepper and regulate sources of labour. This desire was in many respects an emotional one, driven by an emerging colonial mentality based on English fear and vulnerability of more powerful neighbours, than a specific security threat. But it also emerged through preconceptions of West Sumatra as a land of geographic and political borders, easily divided and dominated by external actors. By 1700, the resultant securitisation meant that the company was not only in control of most of the 200-mile territorial strip which comprised the west coast of Sumatra, but it had developed a heavily militarised and fortified border that sought to exclude several key interlocutors—Inderapura, Bantam, the VOC—while maintaining control of others, namely suppliant Malay rulers and the pools of labour they commanded.

Yet in establishing its political dominance through an articulation of its authority as essentially territorial, the company failed to accommodate or reconcile its border

¹²⁹ BL, APAC, IOR/G/35/58, consultation at Bengkulu, 4 January 1718.

¹³⁰ For a narrative of the English expulsion from Bengkulu, see [Veevers \(2020: 239–240\)](#).

making with the *alam Minangkabau* which determined the political, cultural and economic structures of Malay life on the west coast. Here, where the conceptualisation and practice of political authority was essentially deterritorialised, borders were politically porous and served as much to connect different polities as to delineate territorial boundaries. A shared political culture and intense circuits of migration, exchange, and trade between highland and coast and along rivers and over mountain passes, created a world of constant movement and shared borderlands. When the company severed coastal plains from their upriver and foothill networks, and discarded Minangkabau *adat* or customary laws in favour of colonial policies of extraction, regulation, and exploitation, the entire edifice of colonial rule became unstable and locked in a perpetual cycle of securitisation which the perennially cash strapped and militarily weak company struggled to maintain. Ultimately the English were unable to suppress the ability of the Malay to undermine the company's arbitrary border making by either isolating company territory and rendering it depopulated or commercially unviable, or indeed through the use of force to destroy fortifications and overthrow Company settlements. In that sense, the British imposed a chaotic and violent system of securitisation on a land that was, by and large, desecuritized and borderless.

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