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### A Tale of Two Centuries: The Globalisation of Maritime Raiding and Piracy in Southeast Asia at the end of the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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## **A Tale of Two Centuries: The Globalisation of Maritime Raiding and Piracy in Southeast Asia at the end of the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries**

*James F. Warren*

### **Introduction: Connections and Problems of Framing and Definition**

Maritime raiding already existed when the Portuguese arrived in Asia in the sixteenth century (Pires 1944). But the incidence of piracy in Southeast Asia (the region encompassing all the countries within a boundary defined by India, China, Australia and New Guinea) only rises dramatically in direct response to colonialism and western enterprise. There is a strong inter-connective relationship between the ascendancy of long-distance maritime raiding or ‘piracy’ on a regional scale and the development of an economic boom in Southeast Asia linked to the China trade at the end of the eighteenth century. In this context, maritime raiding was also closely linked to slaving and slavery as social and economic phenomena that became a crucial part of an emergent global commercial system and economic growth in the region.

The comparative temporal perspectives in this paper, which covers the latter part of two centuries, the late eighteenth and the late twentieth centuries, lends considerable explanatory power to my treatment of the multi-faceted links and changes between Iranun maritime raiding, on the one hand, and on the other, modern day crime on the high seas in Southeast Asia, with the China connection, growing commodity flows, and the fluctuations of the global economy (Warren 1981, 1998a, 2001). Just as maritime raiders and slavers became generally active due to global economic development and disruption(s) in Asia in the 1790s, the incidence of piracy, or crime and terrorism on the high seas in Southeast Asia has steadily increased in a time of desperation at the end of the twentieth century; the final decade marked by widespread ethnic and political conflict and the meltdown of global financial systems and associated regional trade by the late 1990s.

For me, one way to make sense of this extraordinary burst of maritime raiding at the end of the eighteenth century, is by viewing it from the standpoint of the interests, perspectives and conceptual frameworks marking the initial opening of China to the west and the emergence of new global ethnoscaples, such as the Sulu Zone, and then comparing and contrasting that with China’s recent momentous economic transition that has paralleled bouts of trans-national maritime crime and piracy in Southeast Asia at the end of the twentieth century. These Iranun ‘pirates’ were among the first real predators of global commerce in the eyes of the West by the end of the eighteenth century, and, as a new high-seas breed, were well organized, financed and ruthless. And their latter day counterparts of sorts would be on the rise again two centuries later, after 1968 in the Straits of Malacca, the Gulf of Thailand, the South China Sea and in the waters surrounding the Sulu Archipelago.

Central to my notion of late eighteenth century globalisation is the realisation of the inter-connectivity of local day-to-day activities and events either read or construed as maritime raiding or ‘piracy’ on one side of the globe, namely Southeast Asia, with the erasure of the civilisational, societal, ethnic and regional boundaries on the other side of the globe (Giddens 1996). The discovery of the global as a condition for the advent of Iranun maritime raiding, in the 1790s, requires, I would thus argue, a specific shift in subjectivity and framing; it marks, at one level, recognition of the continuing struggle of the reified ‘other’, Iranun, or latter day criminal and terrorist, against the history of modernity and the four centuries of western efforts to gain hegemony over the oceans and seas of Asia. Eric Wolf, in his path-breaking book, *Europe and the People Without History* traces the development and nature of the chains of causes and consequences of the complex relationship between Europe and the rest of the post-1400 world. By emphasizing a common past, he persuasively argues that European expansion created a market of global magnitude, by incorporating pre-existing networks of exchange, and by creating new itineraries and historical trajectories between continents which linked European and non-European populations and societies. This pattern of historical processes and international commodity exchange would also foster regional specialisation and initiate worldwide movements of commodities. This history of connection between Europe and non-European societies also gave rise to long range maritime raiding or ‘piracy’ in Southeast Asia on a hitherto unknown scale at the end of the eighteenth century. Essentially the growth of European trade and dominion – capitalism – would bring about a qualitative change not only in the regnant mode of production, but also in the commercial network connected with it (Wolf 1982:386-9).

The Sulu Zone was an area of great economic vitality at the end of the eighteenth century. This vitality was based on global-local links to the China trade. Commodities – marine and jungle products found within the Zone – were highly desired on the Canton market, and as Sulu chiefs prospered through strict regulation of the redistributive economy, they required more and more labour to collect and process these commodities. It was the Iranun, clients of the Sultan of Sulu, who scoured the shores of the island world in their swift raiding boats, finding slaves to meet this burgeoning labour demand. In the context of the development of the law of international sea piracy, the global economy and the advent of the China trade, it should be understood that the maritime raiding and slaving activities of the Iranun, so readily condemned in blanket terms as acts of ‘piracy’ by European colonial powers and later historians, were a traditional means of consolidating the economic base and political power of the Sultan and coastal chiefs of Sulu, and which functioned as an integral, albeit critical, part of the emerging statecraft and socio-political structure(s) of the Zone. Thus viewed from inside the Sulu world of the late eighteenth century, the term ‘piracy’ is difficult to sustain.

The term ‘piracy’ was essentially a European one. Significantly, Trocki notes that the term appears in the Malay literature as a developing concept and a new terminology only in the latter half of the eighteenth century (Trocki 1988:262). The term subsequently criminalized political or commercial activities in Southeast Asia that indigenous maritime populations had hitherto considered part of their statecraft, cultural-ecological adaptation and social organisation. Trocki, Velthoen and I have demonstrated that it was the dynamic interplay between raiding – *merompak* (Malay) or *magooray* (Iranun) – and investment in the maritime luxury goods trade that was a major feature of the political economies of coastal Malay states. In effect, maritime raiding was an extension of local-regional trade and competition, and a principal mechanism of state formation, tax collection and the processes for the in-gathering – forced and voluntary – and dispersion of populations in the late eighteenth century Southeast Asian world. Wolf’s influential theoretical work shows that European expansion not only transformed the trajectory of societies like Sulu but also reconstituted the historical accounts of their societies after intervention, introducing powerful new concepts, myths and terminologies linked to patterns of dominance, as in the case of the invention of the term ‘piracy’ in the Malay world at the end of the eighteenth century.

Because the way to power in Southeast Asia lay in control over slaves and dependent labour, guns and trade goods, it is not surprising that slaving in the region was bound up with maritime raiding and warfare. Captives were a main source of booty and, not surprisingly, they were also one of the leading items of regional trade (Warren 1998b:80-87; Reid 1983). The trading kingdoms and states in Southeast Asia were continually faced with the problem of a lack of labour power, and they were all, without exception, states that organized and conducted wars and systematic raids both over land and sea to seize labour power (Warren 1998b:80-87, 1998a; J. Scott 1999:3, 45). Their problem of a severe shortage of labour power was most acute in the coastal kingdoms that did not have an irrigated wet-rice core and depended on systems of trading, raiding and slaving for the development and evolution of statecraft and social structure.<sup>1</sup>

One major result of the rise of globalising, cross-cultural commerce and wars of rival empires of trade was a systematic shift to maritime raiding and slaving on a more general scale than before by Southeast Asian coastal states now determined to seize labour power from wherever possible and by whatever means. The accelerated growth of global trade, especially with the Dutch and English, led to the widespread practice of the acquisition of slaves, by way of raiding, warfare or purchase, as a labour force to collect exotic products of the forests and seas as commodities for export to China, and to build and maintain public works and port facilities in the major port cities of Southeast Asia from the seventeenth to the

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<sup>1</sup> Warren 1998b:80-7, 1998a; J. Scott 1999:3, 45; Sears, 1993:3-35.

late eighteenth centuries. Because much of this activity took place at a time that coincided with the advent of large, standing maritime populations of sea-faring, trading-raiding peoples throughout the Southeast Asian region, the Malay sovereigns, as Pelras, the Andayas and Velthoen have shown, often had recourse to particular Bugis and Bajau people whose skills and energies were cultivated for slave trafficking, the procurement of exotic marine products, particularly tripang, and who, under the sponsorship of various states and local lords, received encouragement to raid coastal shipping or neighbouring shores in the spice islands and the Straits of Malacca.<sup>2</sup>

‘Piracy’ suddenly appears at the end of the eighteenth century because of the economic boom developing across Asia with the greatly increased flow of commodities between Southeast Asia, China and the West. Here I want to resolve an apparent temporal paradox in Southeast Asian history about ‘piracy’ and politics in the Malay world and European imperial policy and expansion in the region. The paradox is that the rise of the Sulu Sultanate increased maritime raiding and the opening and imminent decline of China at the hands of Europe took place at much the same time (the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries) as the introduction of tea, an important commercial plant from China, in Europe (Warren 1998a:15). By the end of the eighteenth century, Britain’s insatiable desire for this commodity was to change the face of Asian history and shape the future destinies of both Sulu and China. The capitalist world economy came to dominate Malay states like the Sulu Sultanate and its environs. Chinese demand for exotic commodities, suddenly of great interest to Europeans, encouraged both the establishment and ‘takeoff’ of sub-regional trade networks and the production of commodity flows. New entrepôts emerged, especially in the area of the Sulu Sea and Borneo. The island of Jolo became a major centre for cross-cultural trade in the recent history of Asia and the Sulu Sultanate flourished. The Taosug became locked into a vast web of trade and exchange involving the exploitation of the rich tropical resources of the area, with producers, distributors and controllers involved in a complex set of relationships and structural dependency. For the Sultan, with his capital located on the seacoast, the entrepôt and neighbouring areas incorporated a set of cultural-institutional practices typical of centralized trading states based on redistribution for the production and acquisition of goods, on the one hand, and kinship, warfare, slavery and other forms of organisation and culture on the other. As the Sultanate and the Malay States organized their economies around the collection and distribution of marine and jungle commodities, there was a greater need for large-scale recruitment of labour to do the intensive work of procurement. An estimated sixty-eight thousand men laboured each year alone in the Sulu Zone’s tripang fisheries to provide the popular Chinese exotica, a standard banquet fare that

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<sup>2</sup> Pelras 1996; L. Andaya 1975; B. Andaya 1993; Velthoen and Acciaioli 1993; Velthoen nd.

appeared on so many menus, sometimes braised with geese's feet or abalone. The Taosug with their retainers and slaves collected about ten thousand piculs of tripang in any one season in the first half of the nineteenth century (one picul is equivalent to 133.33 pounds) (Warren 1981:61-2, 69-75). Birds' nest for the Qing cuisine had to be obtained in the wilderness of Borneo. The Iranun, the slave raiders of the Sulu Zone, met this need for a reliable source of workers. Within three decades (1768-1798) their raids encompassed all of insular Southeast Asia.

Certain lessons and examples from history about global economic-cultural interconnections and interdependencies tend to explain historical processes, patterns and events which have formally been glossed over. For example, sugar 'demanded' slaves and the Atlantic slave trade. Similarly, tea, inextricably bound to sugar as product and fate, would also inadvertently 'demand' slaves in the Sulu-Mindanao region and elsewhere and thus lead to the advent of Iranun maritime slave raiding or, what the British, Dutch and Spanish decried as 'piracy'. Since the British primarily wanted sea cucumber, sharks' fin and birds' nest for the trade in China tea, the issue of the nature of productive relations in Sulu – slavery – suddenly became primary at the end of the eighteenth century. The demand for certain local commodities in return for imports affected the allocation of labour power and the demand for fresh people throughout the Sulu Zone, as well as in other sectors of Southeast Asia. In this globalizing context, tea was more than simply the crucial commodity in the development of trade between China and Britain, it was also a plant that was instrumental in the stunning, systematic development of commerce, power and population in the Sulu Zone; a commerce which changed the regional face and history of Southeast Asia, and inadvertently gave birth in the Malay world to the essentially European term 'piracy'. Past and present historians of the colonial period, in considering the Iranun maritime raids and slaving activity, have uncritically adopted the interpretation perpetrated by interests 'on the right side of the gunboat' (Warren 1981:147). They have relied heavily on sources inherently antagonistic to the nature of the society and values of the Iranun raiders, such as the hostile accounts of the Spanish friars, the printed reports of Dutch and English punitive expeditions, and Sir Stamford Raffles and James Brooke's influential reports on 'Malay piracy'. In these Eurocentric histories, which dwell on the activity of the Iranun at length, the term 'piracy' is conspicuously present in the titles.<sup>3</sup> While there are references to them in earlier histories, travel accounts, and official reports historians have had to burrow deeper and deeper into the fragmented sources in various archives in Europe and Southeast Asia, especially the Philippine National Archive, in order to reconstruct a detailed ethno-historical account of these maritime people. As I have shown in *The Sulu Zone*, particular sources are of critical

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<sup>3</sup> Barrantes 1878; Bernaldez 1857; Montero y Vidal 1888; Tarling 1963.

importance, but they are of little value unless the historian knows what to do with them (Warren 1998a:51–8). The main impetus for fashioning a new understanding of the Iranun past has been the radical change in perspective that some historians have adopted to study the region's recent history and its continuing integration within the world capitalist economy. These changes in perspective attempt to combine the historiographical approaches and ideas of the Annales historians with the conceptual framework of world system theorists and solid ethnography.<sup>4</sup> Here, I again pay particular attention to the well written, stimulating book Eric Wolf wrote in the early 1980s, *Europe and the People Without History* (Wolf 1982:384-91). Wolf argues that no community or nation is or has been an island, and the world, a totality of interconnected processes or systems, is not and never has been a sum of self-contained human groups and cultures. The modern world-system, as it developed, never confined capitalism to the political limitations of single states or empires. Wolf's postulations, if accepted, imply that an analysis of capitalism not limited to the study of single states or empires will be more complete and, in certain ways, less static. The point is that history consists of the interaction of variously structured and geographically distributed social entities which mutually reshape each other. The transformation of the West and China and the rise of the Iranun in modern Southeast Asian history cannot be separated: each is the other's history. In this paper, this ethnohistorical viewpoint is a fundamental frame of reference. No ethnic group, even those as apparently misunderstood as the Iranun, can be studied in isolation from the maritime world(s) around and beyond them (Warren 1978:477-90).

### **The Iranun: A Deadly Force**

The Iranun originally inhabited coastal stretches around the mouth of the Pulangi, Polok (polluc) harbour and further round the eastern shore of Illana Bay. By the start of the seventeenth century, thousands had also migrated inland to the lake and plateau region at the southwest corner of the Tiruray Highlands. The maritime raiders, who, in the nineteenth century were labelled the Illanun (Illanoons), were, according to the Spanish, a distinct people, who inhabited the stretch of coast within the great bight of the Bay of Illana, from which they took their name, distinguishing themselves from other ethnic groups. This coast and bay, whose shorefront constituted a continuous line of impenetrable mangrove and swamps, was readily linked to the great lake behind it, which the Iranun considered their stronghold and home, and hence they were termed by the Spaniards in Zamboanga and Manila a 'distinct race', *los Ilanos de Laguna*, or 'the Illanoons of the lake'.<sup>5</sup> The Iranun

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<sup>4</sup> Burke 1990; Baran 1957; Frank 1978; Wallerstein 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Blake to Maitland, 13 August 1838, Admiralty 125/133 – Sulu Piracy.

burst quite suddenly into Southeast Asian history in the second half of the eighteenth century with a series of terrifying raids and attacks on the coasts and shipping of the Philippines, the Straits of Malacca and the islands beyond Sulawesi. Their primary targets were unprotected coastal settlements and sailing boats that travelled throughout Southeast Asia bringing valuable commodities from China and the West back to the most remote parts of the archipelago. Many of these marauders were sponsored under the authority of rulers from the trading states of Sulu, Magindanao, Siak and Sambas. They were soon described as ‘Lanun’ or ‘Illanoon’ – ‘pirates’ – by those who suffered their depredations, or either travelled with or hunted them, and wrote about their widespread impact on the Southeast Asian World.

Lanun. The name struck fear into the hearts and minds of riverine and coastal populations across Southeast Asia nearly two centuries ago. Recently, ethno-historical research has also shown that where Lanun or Iranun maritime raiding is concerned, old traditions die-hard. The terror of the sudden harsh presence of these well-armed alien raiders lives on in the oral recollections, reminiscences, popular folk epics and drama of the victims’ descendants in the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, to this day.<sup>6</sup> Only in one part of the globe, in the latter part of the eighteenth century, did Europeans find ‘piracy’ flourishing extensively; pursued as a calling, not by individuals, as was the case with most of those who had followed the profession of buccaneering in the West, but by entire communities and states with whom trading and raiding was to be regarded as perfectly normal and the most honourable course of life – a profession. The Iranun were frequently the enemies of every community and nation stretching from the Birds’ Head coast of New Guinea and the Moluccas (among the most productive spice islands of the Netherlands East Indies) to mainland Southeast Asia. Over two centuries ago, a Bugis writer chronicled that ‘Lanun’ in double-decked *prahus* up to ninety or one hundred feet long, rowed by more than one hundred slaves and armed with intricately wrought swivel cannon cast in bronze, were plundering villages and robbing Malay fishers in the Straits of Malacca and the Riau Islands. Among other victims of their marauding were the coastal inhabitants of Thailand and Vietnam (Raja Ali Haji ibn Ahmad, *The Precious Gift of Tuhfat Al-Nafis* (Ahmad 1982). They would also raid in the Philippines, where the central and northern sections of the archipelago were under the control of Spain (Warren 1981:147–56, 165–81). Iranun squadrons regularly plundered villages and captured slaves. Their exploits and conquests had the immediate effect of either disrupting or destroying traditional trade routes. Chinese junks and traders were driven off from states such as Brunei and Cotabato, the erstwhile masters of the Iranun, robbing parts of the archipelago of the traditional trade and exchange of spices, birds’ nests, camphor, rattans and other valuable items (Warren 1981:152-53). The Iranun

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<sup>6</sup> Frake 1998: 41–54; Sandin 1967: 63–5, 127; Velthoen 1997; Warren 1998a.



earned a fearsome reputation in an era of extensive world commerce and economic growth between the West and China.

The migratory maritime raiders spread to the rest of Southeast Asia, establishing major bases in the Philippines, Sumatra, Lombok, Flores and Sulawesi. Forrest noted that some of the Iranun-Maranao migrants and warriors, who had formerly held a lowly rank within the traditional hierarchy of the Magindanao and Taosug involved in the China trade, became men of power and prowess, both a master and a lord, when they became 'Illanun'. A key factor in the late eighteenth century Sulu expansion was global trade which certainly provides the most convincing explanation of the origins of Iranun maritime raiding and slaving to the north and south. These villages were specifically established as forward bases for maritime raiding and the collection of slaves, that the Taosug could use to procure and process natural commodities to supply European traders for the China market.

### **Blood Upon the Sails and Sand**

It is estimated that during the last quarter of this century (1774-1798) of maritime raiding and slaving against the Dutch and Spanish, between one hundred and fifty and two hundred raiding ships set out from the Mindanao-Sulu area each year. The sheer size of the vessels – the largest lanong measuring upward of one hundred and thirty feet in length – and the scale of the expeditions dwarfed most previous efforts, marking a significant turning point in the naval strategy of Malay maritime raiding as it had been traditionally understood. Armed with the latest firearms, the Iranun slave raiders struck fear into the hearts of coastal and riverine people throughout Southeast Asia. Large settlements were targets of fleets of forty to fifty prahus. The boats carried 2,500 to 3,000 men as well as heavy artillery. The regularity of these raiding sweeps for slaves were as predictable as the winds which carried the Iranun boats to their target areas. Customary warnings were issued each year by the Dutch, Spanish and English to coastal towns and small craft on the approach of the 'pirate wind' in August, September and October that brought these fishers of men. Physical evidence of the Iranun raids can still be found in the Philippines today. Scattered along the coastlines of the Philippine archipelago are remnants of the century-long terrifying presence of these raiders. An old stone watchtower, a crumbling church cum garrison, or the remains of a Spanish fort and cemetery can be found along the coasts of Catanduanes, Albay, Leyte and Samar, bearing witness to the advent of sudden affluence in the zone and deep despair throughout the Philippines (Javellana 1997). So notorious were the Iranun slave raiders that they are recalled in the exploits of local heroes, who drove them off, in the folktales of Virac, Catanduanes and the Riau Archipelago and Madura in Indonesia. The number of people plucked by the Iranun from the shores of Southeast Asia in a span of one hundred years was

staggering. Several hundred thousand slaves were moved in Iranun vessels to the Sulu Sultanate in the years between 1768-1848 (Warren 1981:208-11).

The greatest threat to late eighteenth century seaborne trade came from the Iranun who operated from the mangrove-lined inlets, bays and reef strewn islets in the waters round the southern Philippines and Borneo, especially the Sulu and Celebes seas. They preyed on an increasingly rich shipping trade of the Spanish, Dutch and English, and Bugis and Chinese, and seized their cargoes of tin, opium, spices, munitions and slaves as the merchants headed to and from the trading centres of Manila, Makassar, Batavia and Penang.<sup>7</sup> The Iranun had a stranglehold on this trade across Southeast Asia because it was so exposed along its entire course through numerous hazardous straits and channels among countless islands – islands frequented by a fearless sea-going people of predatory tendencies possessed of swift sailing *prahus* – which offered every opportunity for stealth and surprise attack. When small merchant *prahus* and Chinese junks made their halting voyages on the sea's calm waters, the Iranun were never far away, striking at all sized craft. They simply had to wait, sheltered behind a convenient island, headland or bay overlooking strategic sea routes, and sooner or later 'coastwise' targets, never straying out of sight of land, would cross their path. From England, the United States and Europe, other larger sailing ships, laden with arms, opium and textiles for the China market repeatedly ran the gauntlet of these narrow straits which were the hunting ground of the Iranun. By the end of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company had moved to establish trading bases in the Straits of Malacca. While the authorities in Bengal began to exert some influence over the commercial affairs of the Straits Settlements, the Royal Navy did not dominate the seas of the area. Iranun maritime raiding and slaving in this region were complex phenomena confronting several global powers, namely Britain, the Netherlands and Spain, and a number of local Sultanates, Kedah, Riau–Lingga, Jambi, Siak and Palembang, all located in the area of highest risk, within a long narrow rectangle drawn to link Banka Island and Billiton to the Riau Archipelago, Singapore and the Malay Peninsula. According to Dutch and British reports, and figures, between 1800 and 1830, Iranun slave raids and marauding accounted for almost half of all the incidents reported in this region. The West's developing involvement in the China trade and the subsequent founding of Singapore contributed to the Malacca Strait and its environs experiencing one of the highest rates of maritime raiding in Southeast Asia at that time. The annual value of Singapore's entrepot trade in 1833 was estimated at about two million Spanish dollars, but it was in fact worth far more as the settlement acted as the central redistributive point for the circulation of goods throughout Southeast Asia, in every direction.

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<sup>7</sup> For an important study of how Southeast Asia became a crucial part of a global commercial system between the fifteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries, see Reid, 1993.

Wong suggests that Iranun marauding in the Straits of Malacca seriously damaged English commerce as losses of cargoes and *prahus* to these sea raiders pushed up local prices and led to an overall decline in Singapore's country trade (Wong Lin Ken 1960:82-3).

At the end of the eighteenth century the Iranun maritime raids had a profound impact on Southeast Asia. The Iranun have been rightly blamed for demographic collapse, loss of agricultural productivity and economic decline as well as the break-up of the Dutch stranglehold on the Straits of Malacca and Eastern Indonesia. But the driving force for this process was still global and economic: the Iranun profited from Spanish, Dutch and English internal colonial problems and expansion, but were not the cause of the problems. In the 1790s, a top-heavy administratively moribund VOC could barely keep the vast archipelago – already fraying at the edges – together. Few parts of eastern Indonesia seemed more prone to Iranun raiding and violence than Buton and neighbouring islands. For the first two decades of the nineteenth century, it was wracked by Iranun-Tobello violence that left thousands of people dead and left tens of thousands of others homeless as they abandoned the coastline and fled to the interior. Rescued captives interrogated by colonial officials had often been traumatized by the violence they had witnessed during the sea attacks and settlement raids along the coastline. The oral traditions of their descendants still speak of ‘the terror’. They tell of the terrifying landing on the beach and the way that the slave raiders ended years, perhaps even several decades of anonymity and a quiet life, that hid their ancestors from the war at sea and the machinations of the global economy. Barnes, in his classic study of Lamalera, a remote community on the south coast of the island of Lembata, near the eastern end of Flores, notes the village is really a ‘twin settlement’, with the lower one (Lamalera Bawah) on the beach and an upper one (Lamalera Atas) on a nearby cliff for protection from earlier Iranun maritime raids. Such villages in eyrie-like settings were usually palisaded, but in this case (as at Tira, the site of Southon’s fieldwork in Buton) the main defence was inaccessibility. Heersink also notes that on Salayer most of the nineteenth century settlements were situated in the interior. Here the northern and southern extremities of the island were the least safe, and suffered most from Iranun ‘piracy’, while the alluvial west coast became the prominent zone of security and trade (Barnes 1996:44; Heersink, 1988:103-4). New evidence has also emerged supporting the widespread fear and dread of the Iranun in the Java Sea. Stenross, researching the traditional sailing boats of Madura, recently accidentally came across people with terrifying memories of the Iranun still intact on the north coast, in a small isolated village. In Tamberu, he found – while discussing photographs of Bajau grave markers shaped like miniature boats – evidence of centuries old oral traditions about the ‘Lanun’ that signify tales of cultural confrontations and conflicts. These confrontations originated in the violent intimacies of the encounter between expansive Iranun and struggling, oppressed coastal people. Obviously, the fear of the Iranun went a long way

since their maritime raiding tracks crossed regional and ethnic boundaries like no other before, not bypassing even a tiny village like Tamberu, reaching extremes of pain and alienation among the Madurese coastal inhabitants there.<sup>8</sup> The memory of the Iranun raiders lingered well into the first half of the twentieth century long after they had ceased to pose an imminent menace. For example, Cullinane and Xenos stress, in their reconstruction of the regional demographic history of Cebu, that the memory and fear of ‘moro depredations’ is embedded in the legends and folk histories of many municipalities and parishes of Cebu to this day (Doeppers and Xenos 1998:89). *Moro* came to symbolize all that was dangerous, dark and cruel about the tragic confrontation, and the Iranun’s adherence to Islam.

But whether the Iranun were really any more wantonly cold-blooded than their colonial adversaries and neighbouring rivals was immaterial because by the end of the eighteenth century, the traditional image of the Iranun warrior, as savagely cruel and destructive had gained widespread acceptance. The complexities of relations in the struggle over power and autonomy on the seas, between the maritime Islamic world of the Iranun and the conflicting interests and machinations of the western powers bent on controlling the oceans and sea lanes, demonstrates how a pathology of physical and cultural violence associated with global macro-contact wars and empire building, particularly with political struggles between the English and Dutch in various parts of Southeast Asia, led to widespread conflicts and regional tragedies. At the same time, the very survival of slavery in different parts of Southeast Asia, as elsewhere in the world, was being called into question. The main slave raiding zones in the South China Sea and the waters of Eastern Indonesia attracted the intense naval pressure of Britain, Spain and the Netherlands for more than a quarter of a century; by the 1880s, the numbers of slaves moving across the region had been reduced to a trickle. Consequently, forced sales into slavery and debt bondage to ensure the survival of the economies of states like Sulu rose in the second half of the nineteenth century as the autonomy of traditional Malay states, and maritime raiding and slaving, both declined under the combined pressure of modern colonial navies (Warren 1981:200.216).

### **Borders, State Power and Crime on the High Seas, 1968-2000**

The Asia-Pacific basin is a major contributor to the world economy and particularly to those Southeast Asian nations that its seas and oceans touch directly. It provides low-cost sea transportation between Asia, especially China, Japan and South Korea, and the West, extensive fishing grounds and offshore oil and gas fields.<sup>9</sup> Southeast Asia, since the 1970s,

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<sup>8</sup> Stenross to Warren, personal correspondence, 8 March 2000.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Intelligence File: Pacific Ocean,’ *MaritimeSecurity.com*, at [http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/pacific\\_ocean.htm](http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/pacific_ocean.htm), 15 July 2000.

has become one of the global ‘hot spots’ of vessel attacks. And, at the end of the twentieth century, more than half of all reported attacks on vessels worldwide occurred in this region.<sup>10</sup> The entire area of Southeast Asia, including the South China Sea, once again has come to be considered a danger zone, as was the case at the end of the eighteenth century. The waters off Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines are the predominant areas of incident occurrences as commercial and wealthy yachting interests are attacked with increasing frequency.

The earlier terrifying days of the lateen square rigged Iranun raiders flying the raven flag are gone, but some of the world’s most murderous and bloodthirsty ‘pirates’ have roamed the waters of Southeast Asia since the 1970s. They have operated in fast motorboats which are often equipped with machine guns, and they have preyed on fishers, barter traders, cruising yachts, Vietnamese refugees and, increasingly, commercial shipping. The one thing about them that they share in common with the Iranun is the area they plunder in the modern manner – the old spice routes in the Straits of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia, the Sulu Sea and the tropical islands in the Gulf of Thailand. The spots pinpointed by the IMB (International Maritime Bureau) as the most vulnerable to attack and hijacking currently include the South China Sea area between the northern Philippines, China, Taiwan and include Hong Kong and Macau; the Gulf of Thailand; the sea north of Java in Indonesia; and the narrow Strait of Malacca off Singapore, where sixty per cent of the world’s merchant tonnage passes (Tan 1996:7). For example, statistics compiled over the seven month period from May to December 1993, showed that forty-two incidents were reported in the East and South China Sea out of sixty-seven world-wide. Most of the attacks took place in international waters and, in many cases, firearms were used.<sup>11</sup> The geographical challenges defy solutions to curb piracy. It was the case at the end of the eighteenth century, and it remains the case at the end of the twentieth, that geography remains a sinister ally of the modern Southeast Asian pirates. In 1996, Mr. Martin, IMB regional manager for Southeast Asia, stated, ‘You look at the Philippines, it has such a long coastline ... you will need at least ten thousand patrol boats. Indonesia is the same, there are thousands of islands for pirates and hijackers to hide’ (Tan 1996:7).

The geography of insular Southeast Asia also offers fresh insights into the complex and various ways in which international frontiers have encouraged maritime raiding, slaving and modern day crime on the high seas. Just as maritime borders became barriers against the hot pursuit of raiders and pirates in relation to earlier competing colonial powers, nowadays

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Worldwide Maritime Piracy’, *MaritimeSecurity.com*, ‘1999 Piracy Report,’ at <http://www.maritimesecurity.com/archive.htm>, June 1999, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea,’ *Focus on IMO*, January 2000, p. 4.

the borders of hostile nations in the region, provide similar barriers. Many Southeast Asian states in the worst affected areas – South China Sea, Straits of Malacca, Gulf of Thailand and the Sulu Sea – are not capable of policing a jurisdiction which extends two hundred nautical miles (370 km) from their coasts. In congested areas, these jurisdictions overlap and are often the subject of bitter international legal disputes and boundary squabbles. When a foreign vessel is attacked in these worst-affected areas, other states' navies cannot help because the vessel is within a particular jurisdiction. That Southeast Asian state's jurisdiction cannot always help because, either it has insufficient resources or is aiding and abetting the piracy and crime on the high seas. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, 'piracy' has no longer been linked to the slave trade in a conventional historical sense. But it is directly linked to global traffic in illegal migrants and women and children destined for prostitution, right across Asia. Thus, piracy, or the exercise of extreme violence and theft on the high seas of Southeast Asia, has become a major criminal activity linked up with emergent globalised culture and regional states. The late twentieth century pirates of Southeast Asia, be they Thai fishers, Vietnamese pirates, Indonesian shipjackers or Sulu 'terrorists' are all products of new postcolonial relationships where globalisation, wars, and ethnic-political struggles have enhanced material crime relationships on the sea. A comparison with the sudden emergence of the Iranun at the end of the eighteenth century shows that, in both cases we are dealing with processes of engagement and disengagement from world commerce and economic growth, through which regional states formed, stagnated or fragmented and new groups of 'brokers in violence' could emerge, and rule the seas of Southeast Asia (Schulte Nordholt 2000:3). The Iranun were among the first predators of global commerce in Asia to seriously attract the attention of the West that was bent on expanding economically into China at the beginning of the nineteenth century. But south sea 'piracy' is on the rise again and the new breed is well organized, financed and no less ruthless than the Iranun.

On the one hand, the economic boom of the 1970s and 80s enabled former Indonesian president B.J. Habibie to turn Batam, the island twenty kilometres south of Singapore, into the headquarters of a dark alliance between triad-linked figures, space-age pirate gangs armed with the latest technology and Indonesian marine officials. On the other hand, economic hardship, fuelled by the Asian currency crisis of the late 1990s, a new generation of technology and a lack of law enforcement among governments, especially in the South China Sea and the Sulu Zone, have helped push the extreme violence of a new wave of pirates to unprecedented heights. Piracy and violence in the modern manner with machine guns, grenade launchers, fast boats, rape and death pose a very serious challenge to Asian states and navies. In this context, crime on the high seas must be understood on the same terms as any other major market force, with pirates in the region ranging from opportunistic Thai,

Vietnamese and Taosug fishers, common criminals and rogue elements in various regional naval forces, to members of sophisticated Asian crime syndicates, namely composed of Chinese overseas. Consequently, the current economic and political conditions in both Indonesia and the Philippines throughout the 1990s have left many Indonesians, Filipinos and foreign observers with the impression that both nations have become, in the language of Thomas Friedman, ‘messy states’ – states in very severe difficulties and where corruption is overwhelming (McCarthy 2000). Similarly, in the Netherlands Indies at the end of the eighteenth century, global trade and Iranun maritime raiding and slaving were largely shaped and reinforced by one another. Two centuries ago, in the period just before the VOC fell (1795), the Company was also in a ‘messy state’, governed by a ring of officials united by self-interest and unable to control the maritime raiding and slaving that it had inadvertently helped to create.

The globalising forces emanating from changing scales of production and consumption in Southeast Asia today and this relationship to crime on the high seas, including human traffic or the new slavery, cannot be denied or wished away. Further, by reviewing certain acts of ‘piracy’ occurring after the 1970s, and by contrasting these acts with the Iranun type of incidents occurring two centuries before, it becomes obvious that the conventional articles on piracy now do not apply to many of the acts of crime found in current reports of the IMB and newspaper accounts of the incidents. This was also the case in the 1790s with Iranun maritime raiding in contrast to the western buccaneers and swash bucklers of the seventeenth century Caribbean basin and Spanish Main.

### **On Modern Day Definitions of ‘Piracy’ in Southeast Asia**

The term ‘piracy’ has a narrow definition in the eyes of many modern governing bodies in Asia. The United Nations Law of the Sea defines piracy as: ‘illegal acts of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship and directed on the high seas or in a place outside the jurisdiction of the state’.<sup>12</sup> While for statistical purposes the IMB defines ‘piracy’ as: ‘An act of boarding or attempting to board any ship with the intent to commit theft or any other crime and with the attempt or capability to use force in the furtherance of that act’.<sup>13</sup> This definition, thus, also covers actual or attempted attacks whether the ship is berthed, at anchor, or at sea. However, a review of illegal acts of ‘piracy’ occurring across Southeast Asia between the years 1970

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Worldwide Maritime Piracy’, in *MaritimeSecurity.com*, ‘1999 Piracy Report’, at

<http://www.maritimesecurity.com/archive.htm>, June 1999, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> International Chamber of Commerce, ‘Weekly Piracy Report,’

[http://www.iccwbo.org/home/news\\_archives/1999/weekly\\_piracy\\_report.asp](http://www.iccwbo.org/home/news_archives/1999/weekly_piracy_report.asp), 4-10 July 2000.

and 2000, highlights the fact that the conventional definitions of piracy and the scholarly interpretation of legal issues do not apply to many types of incidents nowadays. I do not wish to dwell here on the semantics of what may actually define an act of piracy. Rather, this paper is concerned with comparing the operational aspects of maritime raiding and slaving with piracy and/or the even narrower definition of maritime terrorism at the tail end of two centuries, namely slaving, sea robbery, vessel hijacking, human traffic and other related maritime crimes.

It is important to distinguish between several forms of piracy in Southeast Asia in the recent period (1970-2000) under consideration. The first type is more mundane, takes place in inshore waters, and is perpetrated by bands of impoverished fishers, ill-organized gangs or idle roustabouts.<sup>14</sup> They opportunistically approach and board larger vessels where the concentrations of shipping are greatest, or where the law enforcement is weakest. Thousands of ships pass each month through the Malacca Straits between Indonesia and Malaysia, or call at Singapore at the southern end of the straits. There is also an extraordinary concentration of ships in the South China Sea plying well-established shipping lanes to Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. These ships, particularly at anchor, are easy prey for the pirates, who board from small speedboats, armed with guns or machetes, threaten the crew, and make off with cash and valuables such as mooring ropes and paint.<sup>15</sup>

Indonesian coastal communities, over the past three decades, have suffered from the emphasis on commercial exploitation for short-term profit making. Indonesia's fishing communities are among the poorest of the poor because of large-scale illegal fishing operations, fish bombing and the destruction of coral reefs. In some cases, even a few thousand dollars worth of stolen goods constitutes a fortune for individuals and coastal communities which rely on traditional fishing methods to subsist. The continual lack of response from the authorities against the practices that have destroyed the resources of these communities (particularly trawling, fish bombing and cyanide poisoning) has ended in unilateral action – raids by local people on illegal fishing boats and merchant vessels.<sup>16</sup> For all its size and mass, a deep draft vessel, like a small tanker or cargo ship, is a vulnerable target because of its own tonnage. When confined to narrow and restrictive channels, and operating at night or times of limited visibility, these vessels are extremely susceptible to hostile boarding. Typically, many of these attacks occur at night with the ship at anchor. In the late 1970s and 1980s, fishing vessels, particularly round the southern Philippines, also received

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<sup>14</sup> 'South sea piracy: Dead men tell no tales,' *The Economist*, 16 Dec 1999.

<sup>15</sup> 'The perils of rising piracy in Asia', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 November 2000.

<sup>16</sup> 'Indonesia's coastal resources in crisis,' *Down to Earth – International Campaign for Ecological Justice in Indonesia*, Newsletter 47, November 2000.



the attention of pirates and armed robbers. The bandits operated swiftly and accurately from faster boats, taking the fish catch, boat engines, fuel, personal effects, or worse, the boat itself.<sup>17</sup> The single linking factor was that many were driven to piracy by poverty and the coastal resource crisis facing Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, particularly in times of thin fishing or poor harvests (Eames 1998).

During the 1970s and 1980s, attacks on merchant ships began to increase in a general climate of growing commodity flows and patterns of Japanese investment and shipping. It was at this time that ship owners and their crews became increasingly alarmed about a relatively new and far more sophisticated, well organized type of crime: the high seas – hijacking of ships and cargoes by international crime syndicates based across the Asian region. Over the past three decades, the actions of these syndicates, which are comparable to the Iranun in operational terms, argues Arthur Bowring, director of the Hong Kong Shipowners' Association, are nothing less than 'high seas terrorism'.<sup>18</sup> This far more serious type of piracy in Southeast Asia usually targeted small tankers or larger vessels and stole the entire cargo. In such incidents, it was not unusual, after hijacking a ship, for a second pirate-directed vessel to move alongside the hijacked vessel to siphon off the oil, to collect the bulk cargo, or both. This type of operation required a far higher degree of organisation than the piracy conducted by bands of impoverished fishers, and was/is orchestrated by gangs who follow shipping schedules on the Internet.<sup>19</sup> International Maritime Organisation (IMO) reports say that most of the attacks occurred at night, with armed gangs boarding the ships while they were usually anchored or berthed. Regardless of where these strikes happen in the region, nearly all attackers of high-tonnage vessels have intimate knowledge of vessel design and layout, being able to make their way through a ship quickly. After the late 1970s, the lack of effective watch – on targeted vessels standing at anchor or pier side – often further increased vulnerability in many incidents. In addition to the hijacking of ships and the theft of cargo, the main targets of Southeast Asian attackers appear to be cash in the ship's safe, crew possessions and any other portable ship's stores, even including coils of rope.<sup>20</sup>

### **Dangerous Areas within the Region**

In this period between 1970 and 2000, the most pitiful victims of Southeast Asia's pirates were the defenceless boat people in the Gulf of Thailand. For those who headed across the

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<sup>17</sup> 'Piracy and armed robbery at sea,' *Focus on IMO*, January 2000, p.4.

<sup>18</sup> 'South sea piracy: Dead men tell no tales,' *The Economist*, 16 December 1999.

<sup>19</sup> 'The perils of rising piracy in Asia,' *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 November 2000.

<sup>20</sup> 'Guidance to ship owners and ship operators, ship masters and crews for preventing and suppressing acts of piracy and armed robbery against ships,' IMO, MSC/Circ.623, 16 June, 1999, p. 1.

gulf to Thailand the journey could be a nightmare if they found Thai fishing boats in their path. The attacking fishers were often part-timers, pirates of opportunity, who could make up for a bad catch by stealing the passengers' valuables. The attacking fishers were also capable of extreme brutality, murdering scores of people heading for southern Thailand. Women were systematically taken off refugee boats and raped by the crew of a fishing boat and then passed to another fishing boat and then on to another. After 1987, Thailand began to crack down on the pirates who robbed and terrorised refugees fleeing Vietnam with some success (Hanlon 1987).

Refugees fleeing from Indochina, the boat people, were the pirates' easiest targets. But pirates were preying with growing frequency on ships in the sea-lanes of Southeast Asia, especially in the Sulu Zone, with authorities in the region largely unable to cope with them. In the late 1970s, the most pirate-infested waters were those around the southern Philippines and Borneo, the Sulu and Celebes seas. Armed with heavy weapons left over from the Indochina war, the pirates were halting fishing boats, yachts, coastal steamers and even small ocean-going freighters on the high seas and taking their cargo and other possessions. Often there were violent clashes as the Taosug and Samal pirates fired heavy machine guns, grenade launchers, recoilless rifles and mortars at their victims, and casualties increased. The vessels themselves were frequently taken as prizes by the pirates, and the hapless crews and passengers were left to swim for shore. Sometimes, reminiscent of the Iranun, the victims were held for ransom. The Malaysian authorities accused these pirates of also sabotaging navigation buoys and lights so that ships would go aground on the numerous reefs of the Sulu Sea – making them sitting ducks for plunder. The pirates' stratagem of shooting up navigation beacons in the Sulu Sea in apparent attempts to force ships aground was partially successful. In December 1978, Philippine Air Force aircraft were forced into action to rescue a grounded Panamanian freighter from the armed raiders. More than one hundred pirates attacked and seized the ship, holding it until the Philippine Air Force drove them away.<sup>21</sup> Japanese shipping lines now considered southern Philippine waters so dangerous that the majority of their vessels bound for Indonesian ports began to detour westward into the South China Sea.

The 1980s was to see a major increase in piracy around Southeast Asia. But the Gulf of Thailand and the Sulu Zone were still considered two areas where it was most prevalent. However, by the late 1980s attacks on merchants ships began to increase sharply in the Straits of Malacca, the Strait of Singapore and the Phillips Channel, major shipping lanes that connect the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean. In 1986, armed pirates used grappling hooks to board large freighters off Indonesia and Singapore and strip them of their cargoes.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Piracy resurgence on the high seas,' *The Australian*, 8 November, 1978.

In addition, Taosug pirates cum Muslim insurgents, who could not find a ship to plunder, took over the east coast town of Semporna (where I lived from 1967-1969), locked the inhabitants in the community hall and looted its banks and all the shops. The daylight raid was the second on the remote town in six weeks. The incidents had shaken the state of Sabah, and the town's residents in particular. The raids highlighted the inadequacy of the Malaysian Navy and police who lacked the staff to effectively patrol Sabah's long east coast. The deadly trail of these ominous incidents, at opposite ends of the region, would set the tone for the late 1980s: a decade which would be wracked by violence and crime on the high seas of Southeast Asia on a scale hitherto unprecedented, except for the scope and magnitude of the freewheeling Iranun operations in the 1780s when they burst from the Bay of Illana to prey upon the China trade and coastal villages across the region.

Pirate attacks against large ships have tripled during the 1990s, to three hundred a year. Nearly three quarters of all the world's pirate attacks now take place in Southeast Asia. The waters and ports around Indonesia alone accounted for a third of all attacks.<sup>22</sup> The International Chamber of Commerce has designated Indonesia as 'the most piracy prone country in the world'.<sup>23</sup> This is not surprising as, under the New Order, problems were solved by using violence and corruption in a state where those who held the economic reins of power were loath to surrender them. In fact, by 2000, pirate attacks in Indonesia's sea-lanes alone outnumbered all attacks in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America combined (Brandon 2000). More than three hundred incidents of pirate attacks on shipping in South and Southeast Asia took place in 2000, making it the worst year on record. The most dangerous waters were around Indonesia where well-armed gangs were responsible for forty-three percent of the total number of attacks.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the statistics, it is also not unrealistic to project that less than half of all incidents in Indonesian waters are actually being reported. Hence, these already damning figures can only serve as nominally reliable regional indicators of piratical activity, particularly in Indonesia, where most ports experience robbery and hostile boardings of vessels at berth and anchor. Ships calling at the Indonesian ports of Belawan, Jakarta, Merak Panjang, Samarinda and Tanjung Priok have reported numerous attacks while at anchor and berth.<sup>25</sup> Local government and law enforcement agencies within Indonesia have had little or no ability to respond in an appropriate manner to such attacks

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<sup>22</sup> 'South sea piracy: Dead men tell no tales,' *The Economist*, 16 December 1999.

<sup>23</sup> 'The perils of rising piracy in Asia', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 November 2000.

<sup>24</sup> 'Indonesia's dangerous waters: Pirate attacks at record high,' *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 4 January 2001.

<sup>25</sup> International Chamber of Commerce, (ICC), 'Weekly Piracy Report', 4-10 July 2000.

against shipping or yachts and other pleasure craft.<sup>26</sup> Nor are there any signs that the number of attacks will drop unless Indonesia takes serious steps, according to the IMB (Alford 2001).

Singapore, located between Malaysia and Indonesia, is a global centre for transnational capital and regional trade, with strong service and manufacturing sectors, and international trading links that allowed the port city to weather the effects of the Asian financial crisis better than its neighbours. Singapore in the 1990s, according to regional security analysts, also became the prime transit point for all sorts of contraband going to the United States, Western Europe and the third world.<sup>27</sup> Ship attack and piracy activity has become a regular occurrence in the Singapore Strait in a decade of growing commodity flows of drugs, arms, fauna and human beings. In the waters around Singapore, teams of pirates with high powered rifles, operating from speedboats, began to attack slow moving cargo ships in a series of hit and run robberies in the early and mid 1990s. Piracy against ships in these waters rose sharply over the next five years. One of the main reasons for this, apart from Singapore's obvious economic success and globalised culture, was the disastrous economic and political situation in Indonesia after 1997.

The Malacca Strait, at five hundred miles long, is the world's longest strait, and it is the main seaway connecting the Indian Ocean to the China Sea. It varies in width from eleven to two hundred miles and the entire strait is peppered with wrecks and shifting shoal banks.<sup>28</sup> The strait, in some stretches, is shallow and narrow and requires precise navigation. Prior to 1989, the Malacca Strait was considered to be relatively safe, with seven cases of piracy and armed robbery being reported annually from the area. But, in 1989 the figure rose to twenty-eight and by 1991, it had gone up to fifty a year.<sup>29</sup> The Malacca Strait, the gateway to Singapore, is located between Indonesia and Malaysia, and is one of the world's busiest shipping lanes now used by over six hundred vessels a day. It has become the most pirate-infested channel in the world, which was also the case during the Iranun age at the height of the China trade. In the Malacca Strait, in terms of the political economy of crime and globalisation, piracy is one of the thriving trades, alongside industrial development, slick resorts and prostitution.

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<sup>26</sup> 'Intelligence File: Indonesia', *MaritimeSecurity.com*, [http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/intel\\_file\\_indonesia.htm](http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/intel_file_indonesia.htm), 2001, 20 May, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> 'Intelligence File: Singapore,' *MaritimeSecurity.com*, [http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/intel\\_file\\_singapore.htm](http://www.maritimesecurity.com/research/intel_file_singapore.htm), 2001.

<sup>28</sup> 'Worldwide Maritime Piracy,' in *MaritimeSecurity.com*, '1999 Piracy Report', at <http://www.maritimesecurity.com/archive.htm>, June 1999, p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> 'Piracy and armed robbery at sea,' in *Focus on IMO*, January 2000, p. 3.

In the Straits region as a whole, most of the attacks have occurred in the Phillip Channel in the Malacca Strait or the Singapore Strait. In these areas, ships generally have to slow down to avoid collisions in the crowded sea-lanes. At the beginning of 2000, the Malacca Straits recorded the second highest number of attacks, after the waters around Indonesia, followed by the area around Chittagong Port in Bangladesh.<sup>30</sup> The IMB, which monitors piracy attacks globally, said in a study published in 2000 that ongoing political and economic turmoil in Indonesia has made the Straits of Malacca and surrounding waters more risky than ever for ships.<sup>31</sup>

Another factor that often did not receive the recognition it deserved, was the effect these attacks had on the seafarers involved. The annual reports of the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre in Kuala Lumpur highlight that modern piracy, particularly in the three decades under consideration, has become more violent, bloody and ruthless. For ship owners, and the staff and fishers who crew their ships and trawlers, maritime crime is a serious and dangerous business. According to Captain Jayant Abhyanker, the IMB Deputy Director, it is made all the more fearsome because its victims know they are usually alone and defenceless. He said, 'It is impossible for those of us here to fully appreciate the trauma pirate attacks cause, both physically and mentally' (Ellen 1997:29). Hapless seafarers in the Gulf of Thailand, the Straits of Malacca and the Sulu Sea were often threatened with guns, knives, machetes or other weapons, were tied up, beaten, and stripped of all their possessions. In some cases, crewmembers were murdered. In others, whole crews were cast adrift in lifeboats. Many victims have never fully recovered from the trauma they experienced and have not gone to sea again. The greatest violence in maritime crime attacks has related to the seizing of refugee boats and 'phantom ships.' In the recent hijacking of a Panamanian cargo vessel, the *MV Cheung San*, the pirates confessed to the Chinese authorities that they gathered the twenty-three crew on deck and shot them. In a similar bloody incident, a hijacked Japanese-owned cargo vessel, *MV Tenyu*, was found in China with a new crew. The fate of the original fourteen crew-members is still unknown, although they too are feared to have been murdered.

The impact of widespread environmental disaster and pollution is another potential by-product of maritime crime that is often overlooked – and waiting to happen – in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Malacca Straits, where the cost implications of environmental pollution are huge. Tankers, bulk carriers and cargo ships have often been left unmanned during attacks. In the 1990s, pirates have, on several occasions, endangered navigation by leaving vessels, including fully laden tankers, underway and without command, dramatically increasing the risk of collision or grounding in the narrow congested shipping lanes. The

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<sup>30</sup> 'Indonesia's dangerous waters: Pirate attacks at record high,' in *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, 4 January 2001.

<sup>31</sup> 'Pirates attack ships near southern Malaysian port,' *Associated Press*, 4 January 2001.

resulting ecological and navigation implications of such reckless behaviour are enormous. Such a nightmare had almost come to pass seven years earlier. In 1992, an ecological disaster was only narrowly averted, after pirates boarded a Panamanian registered ship, carrying 240,000 tons of crude oil. They tied up its twenty-four crew and left. Fortunately, one of the crew members managed to break free fifteen minutes after the raiders had gone and took control of the thousand foot ship, which had been steaming unguided at night through one of the most crowded channels in the world – Phillip Strait off Singapore. The risk of a collision or grounding was very real and it was a matter of pure luck that the hulking super-tanker did not run aground, creating a worse oil spill than that of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster off Alaska. The near fatal incident became a closely kept secret by the Straits Authorities and the ship-owner, but it galvanised the local maritime world into action against Indonesia where the pirates had sought a safe haven.

Four Asian syndicates with Mafia-style dons in Indonesia, the Philippines, Hong Kong and mainland China, seem to have had the right amount of transnational sophistication to make money from crime on the high seas during the 1980s and 1990s. The leaders of these syndicates, whose working vessels are equipped with satellite dishes, computers and automatic weapons, can control dangerous region-wide operations from a great distance – for example from an office building in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Manila, or from a flashy brothel or resort golf course on the Indonesian island of Batam. Other branches are based in Johore Bahru in Malaysia and Taipei in Taiwan. The syndicates robbed the crews and stole their ships. In this way they direct the criminal operations that hijack ships heading for Singapore, which is the world's busiest harbour. At the end of the twentieth century, the act of hijacking ships in Southeast Asia crossed all boundaries and involved all nationalities. The modern day masterminds of crime on the high seas are well-suited businessmen, sitting in plush offices hidden behind ghost companies, stealing ships and goods, sometimes via the Internet. The same Hong Kong and Singapore-based syndicates were also already heavily involved in illegal immigration based on using stolen ships. The syndicate in Indonesia, which is believed to be linked to former President Suharto's closest business associates, was almost certainly behind the surge in Indonesian and especially, Chinese stowaways transported on 'phantom ships' that over the past seven or eight years have turned up in Canada, the United States and Australia.<sup>32</sup>

In a sense, these pirates and criminals are obviously being used as pawns in the struggle for power in Jakarta and elsewhere across the region. This is not new given the close links between the New Order regime (particularly the generals), capital and the globalisation of crime that has occurred over the past two decades. Military personnel like Suharto's son-

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<sup>32</sup> 'South sea piracy: Dead men tell no tales,' in *The Economist*, 16 December 1999.

in-law, Prabowo Subianto, allegedly have found it in their interest to cultivate crime on the high seas in all its manifest forms – shipjacking, traffic in illegal aliens, the arms trade – to serve their political interests in the context of both national and global transition. This new wave of pirates, who rule the waters of the South China Sea, have turned Batam, a small Indonesian island across the strait from Singapore, developed by B.J. Habibie, into the headquarters of pirate gangs with links to the Indonesian navy. The island of about half a million people is only an hour by ferry from Singapore. In the late 1970s, Dr. Habibie, as the young protégé of President Suharto, was appointed head of the Batam autonomous area and he boldly drafted liberal legislation inviting foreign investors, mostly from Singapore, Taiwan and Japan, to build golf course resorts, electronics and other middle size factories in Batam. What Habibie had not planned for was the growing sex industry. Rapid industrial development and the influx of foreign tourists, particularly Singaporean Chinese and Japanese looking for young girls, have made Batam a strategic location for doing business. One of the thriving businesses on the island, home to manufacturing, ship repair and prostitution, has become piracy in the Malacca Strait. The region's authorities have learnt from interviews with seamen, shipping agents, coast guard officers and prostitutes that this modern piracy or crime on the high seas is controlled from Batam by a murky alliance between pirates, the Indonesian coastal patrol and other marine officials (Harsono 1999).

Like the case of the Iranun at the end of the eighteenth century, due in part to the technology transfer, maritime security forces increasingly proved to be no match for well organised pirates in the Malacca Straits, the Gulf of Thailand, the South China Sea and Sulu Sea. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, these space-age raiders have used computers and the Internet to select vessels and itineraries; they have relied on radar to locate targeted vessels; they have gathered intelligence from radio transmissions and informers and carried out night attacks using swift, small motorised boats and automatic weapons. These raiders have easily escaped in boats that are simply too fast or that blend in with hundreds of other small ships in Southeast Asian waters (Brandon 2000). On board some of these vessels, ASEAN naval forces have found sets of handcuffs, face masks, fake immigration stamps, paint of various colours, welding equipment and ship stamps with which the pirates could turn hijacked vessels into phantom ships. Theoretically, a ship stolen in the region could simply turn up in another part of Asia, with a different name and flags, as faraway as southern China or Chittagong (Harsono 1999). While they have not been ignored, between the late 1970s and 2000 and as a major feature of an emergent globalised culture, the pirates and criminals on the high seas of Southeast Asia have become more numerous, more dangerous and equipped with more sophisticated crime technology.

### **Containing Modern Piracy**

At the end of the twentieth century, forms of consumerism and significant market forces in China and the West, and the rhythm of Chinese history, have continued to affect development and modernity in Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, China was repeatedly accused of being soft on piracy and has been identified as the country in which the majority of pirates and criminals in Southeast Asia sell hijacked cargoes and vessels. Most of the missing ships were registered in Honduras and Panama and conveyed bulk cargoes such as timber, fuel and minerals that were easy to dispose of in China's booming economy. However, as the Chinese authorities have reluctantly started to crack down on the pirates, criminal syndicates in Southeast Asia have recently begun to go further afield to dispose of hijacked cargoes, with India and Iran being favoured destinations.<sup>33</sup>

Maritime raiding, slaving and modern crime on the high seas, if we frame it from this angle and context, was/is part of a larger globalising process of a sub-region engulfed by an economic boom (1768-1800) and a financial crisis (1997-2000), and widely understood as also encompassing the first and second openings of China with global, albeit predominantly western, financial systems and trans-national trade. Emphasising this fact, that Southeast Asia in its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial pasts has experienced unhindered flows of commodities, capital and labour, especially in productive zones like Sulu, allows us, on the one hand, to understand the economic-political relationships between maritime raiding, slaving and state formation at the end of the eighteenth century. On the other hand, it highlights the link between modern piracy and crime, as agents of social change, in the context of the stark reality of economic crisis and global transition with its social and political consequences for re-structuring the new order in Southeast Asia.

But, in global comparative terms, the problem of piracy resurgence on the high seas of Southeast Asia can also be represented as one of the historical imagination – of the ability to imagine alternative interpretations and futures. This creative shift in perspective shows that between 1768 and 1800 and 1968 to 2000, Iranun maritime raiding and slaving and space-age piracy and criminally related matters on the high-seas of Southeast Asia, were as much forces of engagement with world commerce and economic growth then as globalisation is a force for maritime crime in Southeast Asia now. I am also suggesting that the shaping of economic and political violence associated with maritime raiding, slaving and the criminalisation of piracy in Southeast Asia in both the past and present contexts belonged to a new moment(s) (1768-1800 and 1968-2000) in history. There is a strong continuity in certain respects between late eighteenth century Malay trade-based states like the Sulu Sultanate and the post

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<sup>33</sup> 'Weekly Piracy Report', International Chamber of Commerce, [http://www.iccwbo.org/home/news\\_archives/1999/weekly\\_piracy\\_report.asp](http://www.iccwbo.org/home/news_archives/1999/weekly_piracy_report.asp), 4-10 July 2000.



1970s new order state of Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, using ‘pirates’ and criminals on the high seas to galvanise their economies and get things done in a region beset by political and economic instability. International pressure has not been able to force Indonesia to act against piracy. Indonesia continues to suffer severe political and economic turmoil, and the Indonesian navy, tainted by allegations of corruption and crime on the high seas, is understaffed and short of resources.<sup>34</sup> Operations, such as human traffic in illegal migrants, illegal fishing by trans-national trawlers and attacks on vessels and shipjacking in the Malacca Straits, have relied on the collusion of local naval authorities and regional crime syndicates. By the late 1990s, the most obvious obstacles preventing effective anti-piracy activities in Indonesian waters have been the impact of regional autonomy, especially in the Riau-Bantam region, and the devastating effects of the economic crisis and increased communal tension and political violence across the archipelago.

Regional cooperation in Southeast Asia under these circumstances remains untenable, as Indonesia continues to be wracked by political and economic turmoil and real law enforcement in China remains an abstract concept, when it comes to prosecuting piracy and crime in Asian waters. Globalisation and emergent globalised culture continues to enhance material crime relationships linked to piracy in Southeast Asia. As was the case at the end of the eighteenth century, with respect to Iranun maritime raiding and slaving, space-age piracy and crime on the high seas is on the increase in Southeast Asia at the dawn of the twenty-first century. And so too is the cost to industry, trade, local fishers, coastal inhabitants and regional consumers, which now tops billions of dollars. Estimates of losses from piracy and related criminal activity in Southeast Asia reach as high as twenty-five billion dollars annually. Most cargo insurers and shipping companies are helpless in the face of this criminal trend in the context of regional change and global transition. In the 1780s and 1790s, there appeared to be little prospect of a solution within the foreseeable future to what had become a major problem in Southeast Asia’s sea-lanes when the Iranun launched their large-scale operations, carried out by well-organised fleets of large raiding *prahus*, that ushered in a major transformation of regional history. Nowadays, as the world contracts through ever-increasing connected ventures, a somewhat different mirror image has appeared on the horizon once again, as new-wave pirates and ship thieves rule the seas of Asia.

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<sup>34</sup> ‘The perils of rising piracy in Asia,’ *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 15 November 2000.

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