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JOSEPH CONRAD & SARAWAK: HOW IF PATUSAN WERE IN PATUSAN?

Patrick Tourchon

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Conrad, who discovered the shores of Borneo while he was serving at sea, has used them as a setting for at least three novels between 1895 and 1919. This enduring interest explains why, though he never set foot in the white rajahs' territory, he showed in his letters a constant concern about what was going on in Sarawak. Yet, scholars generally assume that the Brookes' State has never been used as a setting by Conrad. This article questions such a position and envisages the possibility for the second part of the most famous of Conrad's books. Lord Jim, to be more than just alluding to Sarawak and some episodes of her history. In particular, it aims at showing that the fictional "Patusan" (the place where Jim becomes "Lord" Jim), might be the actual Patusan (the historical Sarawakian fort on the Batang Lupar River where the HMS Dido led by Captain Henry Keppel had to fight on behalf of James Brooke in 1844). But, by doing so, it will also show Conrad's way of processing the data he could get about Sarawak under a different light.

JOSEPH CONRAD & SARAWAK: HOW IF PATUSAN WERE IN PATUSAN?

by
Patrick Tournon

ABSTRACT

Joseph Conrad, who discovered the shores of Borneo while he was still serving at sea, has used them as a setting for at least three novels between 1895 and 1919. This enduring interest explains why, though he never set foot in the white rajahs' territory, he showed in his letters a constant concern about what was going on in Sarawak. Yet, scholars generally assume that the Brookes' State has never been used as a setting by Conrad. This article questions such a position and envisages the possibility for the second part of the most famous of Conrad's books, *Lord Jim*, to be more than just alluding to Sarawak and some episodes of her history. In particular, it aims at showing that the fictional "Patusan" (the place where Jim becomes "Lord" Jim), might be the actual Patusan (the historical Sarawakian fort on the Batang Lupar River where the HMS *Dido* led by Captain Henry Keppel had to fight on behalf of James Brooke in 1844). But, by doing so, it will also show Conrad's way of processing the data he could get about Sarawak under a different light.

1. ONE CENTURY OF ARGUING OVER PATUSAN

Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) is probably the best-known novel of the English (Polish-born) writer. . . and certainly one of the most controversial. While the doubts its first part can raise about geography are relatively minor (the ship *Patna* still clearly follows the normal route from Singapore to Jeddah), the topography in its second part has been discussed for decades, mainly from two leading theories: Norman Sherry, in his

Conrad's Eastern World (1966), locates *Lord Jim's* "Patusan" on the Berau River, in Kalimantan Timur; while an impressive number of other scholars opt for the north-west coast of Sumatra, around the Teunom River.

As far as Conrad's trilogy (*Almayer's Folly* (1895), *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896) and *The Rescue* (1919)) is concerned, one can easily follow Norman Sherry's Kalimantan hypothesis. Too many facts, ranging from biography to onomastics, converge, and when researchers come to that point again, it is generally to confirm the view, as Jim Warren did in 1977. But nothing indicates that *Lord Jim* has anything to do with the trilogy. At any rate, the connection should be thoroughly argued, in order to prove that the name of Patusan does not refer to the actual place named so until 1844 on the Batang Lupar.

1.1 An overlooked tautology

"Patusan is Patusan" should sound like an obvious statement, a tautology.

Indeed, no scholar has ever dreamt of denying that, say, the Thames (in Conrad's short stories like "Youth" (1898) or "Heart of Darkness" (1899)) is the Thames (the river running through London). Likewise, it is commonly accepted that the Congo is the Congo, that "Bankok" is Bangkok and that "Samarang" is Semarang.

What happened then for the straight forward reader (who, knowing that Jim found refuge in Patusan, would tell himself: "Well. Stein is in touch with Charles Brooke, the second white rajah, and has obtained from him the rights to exploit the site around the destroyed fort of Patusan"), what happened for such a reader to be considered as naïve nowadays?

1.2 The name of Patusan

Conradian critics at any rate cannot hold Patusan for a fully fictitious place, unlike the Costaguana of *Nostromo* (Conrad 1904). As early as in 1846, British readers could enjoy the narrative of Captain Henry Keppel who helped the then governor of Sarawak, James Brooke, destroy the strongholds of local pirates: a narrative sustained by two maps, which showed in detail where Patusan was.

Now, if these maps are still re-published in collected excerpts (see for instance *Rajah Brooke's Borneo* (Tate 1988)), it is because the event they help to locate is far from negligible: the episode has been described at lengths by the chroniclers of the time. So that the name of Patusan is perfectly well known to modern critics, though no trace of it remains on the spot between Bakong and Stirau.

Thus, Henriette Bordenave in her edition of *Lord Jim* (Bordenave 1982, p. 1350, note 5) reminds us that "the name of Patusan might have been borrowed from Henry Keppel, *Expedition to Borneo*, London, 1846, or from Rodney Mundy, *Narrative of Events in Borneo and Celebes*, London, 1848, where the narrative of the assault against a pirate fortress named so can be found, but located in Sarawak, in the north-east of Borneo, whose rajah was James Brooke".

Still, scholars, as well informed as they can be, seem to overlook their own findings. Even John Dozier Gordan or John Batchelor, who insist on Sarawak's history as a source for *Lord Jim* (Batchelor 1988; Gordan 1940: "countless details confirm the probability that the Patusan episode derived from Conrad's reading about the Rajah James Brooke of Sarawak" (p. 64)), never take the decisive step: it is out of the question for the two critics to locate Jim's reign in Patusan.

John Batchelor prefers to underline the proximity between the eponym hero's forename and the first white rajah's, *James*

Brooke (Jim's "real life namesake" (Batchelor 1994, p. 111)), rather than accepting any proximity between Patusan and Patusan.

Such a reluctance is all the more surprising since it has never been expressed by Conrad, though he can sometimes be sensitive on other points: if he refuses for instance to acknowledge any link between the Greenwich bomb outrage of February 15, 1894, and his *Secret Agent* (Conrad 1907), he gives no clue of rejecting the Bornean toponymy. He indeed writes to W. H. Chesson: "The river and the people have nothing true – in the vulgar sense – but their *names*" (Conrad 1894, p. 186). To be sure, at the time, he refers to *Almayer's Folly*, but one still can wonder who suddenly decided that names would become negligible in 1900, though Conrad does not hesitate elsewhere, either to leave a place anonymous (as for the Singapore of "The End of the Tether" (Conrad 1902)), or to mould a convenient name (as Sulaco, Costaguana, Batu Beru, Pangu Bay, etc.).

What decisive argument will then convince us that the choice of so *famous* a name, in its own time, as Patusan, can be made by pure chance?

II. THE KALIMANTAN HYPOTHESIS

The outstanding figure defending the hypothesis that Patusan would be in Kalimantan Timur is Norman Sherry in his *Conrad's Eastern World* (Sherry 1966). After showing the relation between Conrad, *Almayer*, Lingard and the Berau River, he places Patusan on the same location.

2.1 The naming of places

His view is actually based on a creed he expresses at the beginning of his chapter 8 (Sherry 1966, p. 173):