The Post-Crisis Indonesian Tin Town

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VOLUME 1
The Post-Crisis Indonesian Tin Town
With Reference to Mentok - Bangka
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Abstract: Bangka, as one of the greatest tin producing islands in the world, experienced large-scale shifts in its socio-cultural and political geography during centuries. By focusing on the former colonial Residency town of Mentok, this study examines the relationship between Indonesian tin mining and urbanization (especially spatial quality of the area). With the island’s reserves of tin nearing exhaustion, this paper addresses the challenge of the future. After 1985’s ‘Big Tin Crash’ in international tin price, which was followed by the 1997’s economic crisis and 1998’s regime change in the Indonesian political arena, the island entered a new phase of development under the Decentralisation programme. In 2001, its geopolitical status was changed from regency to province. At first, the destruction of urban life after the tin crisis affected the spatial image of the town. However, in the next step, the process of recovery, which was supported by private business, gradually improved urban development. For the future, this improvement is challenging, but also worrying. The island has undergone a transition from an old place of ineffective bureaucratic and heritance of the past to a more dynamic economic and business centre. The worry is that this progress has only focused on physical and economic aspects of society, which denied the social and cultural factors (liveability of place). Regarding that, this paper identified four main issues, which need to be addressed carefully by the local government, the tin company and the Bangkanese community in the future: potential land conflict (between traditional and commercial, between native plantations and private companies), environmental destruction, social problems (crime, unemployment, drugs, prostitution), and cultural deterioration (historical heritage). In addition, this paper identifies another aspect of potential development of future Bangka. The positive characteristics of Bangkanese as an open, tolerant, and egalitarian society could become a good model of multicultural society, that can create harmonious relationship among different ethnic groups in other places in Indonesia.

Keywords: History and Identity, Built-environment’s Sustainability, Urbanism, Social and Cultural Deterioration, Regionalism and Multiculturalism

Background

The dramatic fall in the world price of tin in 1985, which coincided with the global economic crisis, badly affected tin-producing countries in the Third World. The International Tin Council (ITC) in London found itself bankrupt. In Indonesia, the Tin company (PT. Tambang Timah Persero) was forced to restructure, reduce the number of workers and hand over most of the company’s assets to the local government. In Bangka, where some of this research took place, many tin mining workers changed their jobs, while others returned to Java, or moved to other towns, hoping for a better future. It was predicted that the productive tin resources of the island would not last beyond the next couple of decades.

Presently, almost two decades after experiencing the crisis, the Indonesian tin areas are starting to wake up. For Bangkanese towns, the future brought about by this change could be either ‘inspiring’ or ‘worrying’. Inspiring, because the future was identified with superiority and the best in modernity, economic development and the historical achievement of a culture or society. Worrying, because the society itself was not ready to undertake such a process. The future spatial liveability of a historic built environment was thus uncertain. Will development bring improvement or will it destroy the traditional order?

In a seminar held in Pangkalpinang - Bangka in 2000, Winarwan, a Bangkanese architectural academician, related the future urban development of Bangka to an appreciation of culture and society. He stressed that building a town also means building a culture. A well-arranged town is one characteristic of a civil society. To support this ideal situation, government, business and community should state a clear vision and mission for the sake of development of the identity and life of the built environment in the future. On an urban level, this included anticipation of the increased pressures of modern development. On a regional scale, it included anticipating possible land conflicts, environmental reclamation, social problems, cultural deterioration and cultural diversity.
Following the above, this paper focuses mainly on spatial aspects (of politics, society and culture) underlying the process of Bangkanese urban recovery, especially that of Mentok, in the post-crisis period. It analyses four main factors: restructuring/reorganization of the Tin Company, decentralisation of authoritative power (from central government to local government), urbanization and Bangkanese multicultural identity.

**Setting and Historical Overview**

Mentok, which was the capital town of the Bangka Residency in the colonial period (until 1913), played a distinctive role in the development of society, politics and the economy in this region. Geographically, Mentok was a harbour and market town, located on the northwest of the island, divided by Mentok Tawar River in the middle and backed by the Menumbing Hill to the north. The town exported tin and white pepper to Southeast Asia and the world. These commodities, especially tin, which were the main reason for making Bangka an object of colonization, also triggered urban developments in Bangka. Also, the intersection of various social and cultural groups (Malay and Chinese) drawn to Bangka resulting from mining activities created a hybrid form in the urban spheres.

![Figure 1: Bangka Island in the 20th century.](image)

Following independence, the Indonesian government took over the Bangka Tin Company (1951). The success in tin continued after this period, and the company became one of units under the management of Indonesian Tin Mining State Enterprise. By various improvements in mining techniques, in 1973, Indonesia regained its former position as the world’s third largest tin producer after Malaysia and Bolivia.  

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2 The Tin Mining State Enterprise had four units: Bangka Tin Mining Unit, Belitung Tin Mining Unit, Singkep Tin Mining Unit, and Tin Smelting Unit in Mentok.
City of the Dead

The 1985 tin crisis ended the era of tin prosperity and left people in shock due to their high dependency on tin. For example, redundancies could not be avoided and PT. Tambang Timah’s employees decreased in number from about 30,000 in 1985 to almost only 6,300 in 1993. Many Bangkanese were forced to move to other islands.

In the aftermath of the crash, economic activity in Mentok decreased drastically. The market was less crowded, and the number of sidewalk traders decreased. Big retailers of household goods complained about a lack of customers. The price of land and houses fell as people began to spend less and save more, a fact reflected in the drastic drop in the numbers of Bangkanese wanting to perform the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj), from 428 in 1988 to only 31 in 1990. At the same time, people’s bank deposits increased from only IDR 16,767,565,000 in 1989 to IDR 21,911,770,000 just one year later.
Among those who stayed, many were forced to find alternative jobs, such as in public transportation and farming. According to BPS (Statistic Central Bureau) data, public transportation in Bangka in 1985 - 1992 increased drastically. In 1986, the number of vehicles arriving in Kayu Arang ferry harbour was 2,060, while only 718 departed. According to Willy Siswanto, a teacher in Mentok’s Santa Maria School, during these years, public transportation passing over the roads in Mentok was extremely high, more than before the crisis. However, Mentok was not the main destination of these vehicles. In the farming industry, the pepper plantations organized by local people had increased from just 13,368 hectares in 1987 to 47,439 hectares in 1990. Bank loans to set up new businesses also increased dramatically, from IDR 13 billion in 1989 to more than IDR 54 billion in 1990.

Besides these new phenomena, some social problems, such as fighting between young kampong people, also increased. Many of these cases were not recorded due to the limited number of police officers. Other types of criminality also increased. The data from BPS showed that the number of prisoners in Mentok jail increased by about 30%, from 64 in 1989 to 80 in 1991. The majority of these had been convicted of theft. In addition, the number of patients in Sungailiat Hospital (for the mentally ill) increased from only 88 in 1989 to 357 in 1990, mainly due to a sharp increase in those suffering from stress.

Moreover, the character of the urban kampong also changed. During the tin crisis, it was common to see more elderly people and pensioners than the productive generation (20 – 40 year olds) on the streets of Mentok. Most of these elderly people and pensioners lived in rotting stage houses in the kampong; some were widows accompanied by grandchildren whose parents were working outside of the town. Thus, the old Mentok became identified with the existence of a large number of people from the older generations.

The existence of old citizens in a city is unavoidable. They are sometimes seen as the dead, the impotent, the end of an era. Thus those people who have become unproductive subjects face a struggle to practice their own traditional customs in the midst of unpredictable changes of modernity. However, unlike 20th century Western society, in Eastern societies the care of elderly parents is considered the responsibility of their children and family, rather than of the state. Unfortunately, since many of the younger generation now prefer to work in bigger cities, many old people are left alone living in rotting houses. In this sense, the future could see Mentok become akin to an old people’s home if there are no alternative activities to attract the productive classes back to Mentok.
Moreover, the conditions described above were only a small part of the problems facing Bangka after the tin crisis. The most obvious sign of crisis was the poor maintenance of buildings and various historical assets of the tin company. Many of its official houses were left empty, gradually being dismantled illegally as people took materials to maintain their homes. As a result, Mentok came to resemble a dead and abandoned town.

Restructuring and Reorganisation of the Tin Company

Aware of their responsibility to stop the death of the island – formerly one of the greatest sources of foreign exchange in Indonesia - following the crisis of 1985, the central government has become involved in restoring the island’s condition. The government ordered the company’s management to restructure as soon as possible, and the company began to transfer more authority and responsibility to the local government.

A World Bank report produced in the 1990s blamed PT. Tambang Timah’s management failure to face the world tin price crisis in 1985 on the company’s inefficiency and unproductiveness. The company’s condition was worsened by a lack of education among the employees, a lack of sound financial management, and by the bureaucratic organization and poor coordination. Therefore, as a new team replaced the company’s management, the government (as well as the company itself) took drastic action, not only in relation to technical and administrative problems, but also in relation to the company’s work ethic and the social life of employees.

Firstly, besides restructuring the mining operations, the newly-renamed PT. Timah Tbk reorganized the entire management structure, which was transferred, along with the head office, from Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, to Pangkalpinang, the main municipality in Bangka. At the same time, several company assets were transferred to the local government, professional attitudes among the company’s employees were improved, and former tin mining areas were rehabilitated.

Development also took place in many other towns in Bangka, not only to provide proper facilities for those employees who came from outside the island, but also to provide help to employees who had been made redundant or were pensioners. Together with Perum Perumnas (The Public Utility Company of National Housing), the local government built new houses around the main towns, such as in 1994 in Pangkalpinang, Sungailiat and Belinyu. Public facilities were also improved. The number of hotels and guesthouses increased in order to accommodate the increase in visitors to the island.

Pangkalpinang and Sungailiat underwent an astonishing expansion and rapid developmental growth, which led to the conversion of green belts into retail shopping districts, complete with advertising boards, shops, department stores, banks and governmental offices. However, the most worrying impact was the disappearance of many of the old traditional houses.
The transfer of the company’s assets created another dilemma. Various public institutions, such as hospitals, schools, company offices, telephone facilities, electricity and television relay stations, employee housing (as well as trained staff and other employees) were all transferred to governmental institutions, which were unprepared to receive them. Because of the poor planning and implementation of this sudden transfer, most of these assets were damaged in the handover process.

Due to the lack of regulations regarding the conservation of old buildings, some of these historic buildings were changed by their new owners for commercial reasons. In addition, some historic houses were owned by individuals who did not have any connection with tin mines. So, these mining settlements with their old buildings were transformed into open housing complexes.

As mentioned above, the restructuring also involved the employees’ work ethic. The reign of the ‘little kings’, local managers who ran the mining units like their own kingdom, had to be ended if the company was to survive. The new management introduced the term manusia timah (‘tin man’) to create a new image of a professional employee, who was to be adaptable and competitive in order to meet the challenges of the global market.

Work quality was also improved somewhat by reducing the number of employees and providing a better salary. However, the role of this professionalism was challenged by some critics, especially as to whether these new professionals would be exclusive figures working in an ‘ivory tower’, or whether they would become caring figures aware of outside society.

The societies affected by the closure of the mining operations also had to be reconstructed because they had to carry the greatest burden. The transfer of assets would not be a solution if people were simply left to carry on as if they were still living in tin’s glorious past. Besides improving the law and its implementation, the government needed to provide information, education and work in these societies, especially in the fields of natural resources (plantations and fisheries) and economic activities (trading, alternative mining activities, industry and tourism). It also had to build an awareness of the importance of environmental and cultural conservation.

PT. Timah was also responsible for the ecosystem in the former tin mining areas. Problems such as land fertility, dryness because of hot weather, disease, flooding, clean water provision etc. related directly to environmental conditions. Therefore, at this time the company carried out many reclamation programs in the tin islands of Bangka, Belitung, Singkep and Karimun, in order to return the greenness of these areas, rehabilitating 2,271.70 ha of land between 1992 and 1996.

Several former tin mining areas (kolong) were utilized to fulfill people’s daily needs, such as the provision of clean water and development of fisheries, using the methods of floating baskets and floating nets. Others were used for recreational purposes, such as in Belinyu, where a Chinese entrepreneur built the 14 hectares Phak Kak Liang recreation park and tourist area, including a temple on the 1 hectare site of a former kolong.
Unfortunately, the reclamation program still did not provide optimal results, especially after 1999 when the government issued a recommendation allowing for smaller-scale-private-mining operations (TI). The work pattern of the TI was very transitory, similar to the traditional *ladang* (slash-burn plantation). Miners moved to a new place whenever the provision of tin ores in one area decreased. The government’s failure to anticipate this situation by implementing clear laws and regulations to control it resulted in the creation of many new illegal *kolong*, complete with temporary huts.

**Centralization versus Decentralisation**

The next main factor which affected the recovery of the tin islands is decentralisation of authority. Historically, the first decentralisation program occurred in 1903, when the Dutch colonial government released the ‘Decentralisatie wet’ policy, which changed radically the colonial policy in the East Indies. This decentralization program ended in 1942. Moreover, in 1956, Emergency Law No. 4 downgraded the status of Bangka-Belitung from ‘Keresidenan’ (Residency) to that of ‘Kabupaten’ (Regency) integrated into the province of South Sumatra. This situation lasted until the fall of the postcolonial political regime in 1998 which opened the possibility of reformation in the Indonesian regional and geopolitical situation through the Decentralization program.

The previous postcolonial government’s practice of full centralization had a negative impact on the development of the region. The decision to place the islands administratively under the province of South Sumatra acted as an obstacle to future development, especially in relation to the development priority. Development could not be focused and integrated because of the different geographic and natural resources, unbalanced development strategy and a lack of development funds. As the result, the ‘cake’ of development was not evenly distributed and the level of society’s welfare remained low. Neither was the tin mining sector a reliable support for development, for one day, tin resources would be completely used up. Therefore, in order to anticipate the post-tin development, the local governmental officers had to be given greater authority and responsibility.

Almost one century after the colonial ‘decentralisatie’ was installed in Bangka, postcolonial decentralisation took place under the new Laws on local autonomy (Laws No. 22 and 25), which were passed in 1999 and came into effect in January 2001. Bangka-Belitung, which because of its maritime and territorial characteristics, differed greatly from South Sumatra with its continental and genealogical characteristics, became the 31st province in Indonesia. Decentralisation changed the map of Indonesia such that in 2004 there were 32 provinces established in Indonesia compared to 27 in the New Order period.

The change of status was followed by a plan to expand the administrative powers and to develop the region’s economy and industry. Firstly, the government chose Pangkalpinang as the provincial capital and divided the region into one municipality and six regencies: City of Pangkalpinang, Bangka, West Bangka, Central Bangka, South Bangka, East Belitung and West Belitung. Secondly, the government considered the geographical and geological characteristics of each area in developing the region’s economy and industry. The south of Bangka, where land is productive, was to specialize in farming and plantation (pepper and rubber). The north of Bangka, where land is poorer, would be developed as an industrial area. In addition, some private oil palm plantations emerged in this part of Bangka. Both the north and south of Bangka had coastal areas that were highly suitable for fishing, offering many varieties of fish, such as white snapper and grouper, seashells, sea slugs, oysters and seaweed. The government encouraged and invited investors to develop these potential industries and business in order to

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4 Together with Lampung, Jambi and Bengkulu. However, except Bangka Belitung, one by one these areas were released to be autonomous provinces. Lampung became a new province under the Law No. 4 in 1964, Jambi under the Law No. 8 in 1967, and Bengkulu under the Law No. 9 in 1967.

5 The 27th province of East Timor separated from Indonesia in 1999 and became an independent country.

6 The governmental officers in a province include a Governor and Vice Governor, supported by ‘Sekwilda (Setwilda)’ with many bureaus, offices and local institutions.
increase provincial incomes, which now mainly come from the investments and tax.

However, despite the above benefits, there are still some doubts as to whether decentralization is the right way to sustain Indonesian towns. There is a fear that autonomy will simply move the old practices of corruption, collusion and nepotism to these regions. Another concern is that the lack of a free press will reduce society’s control over corruption, collusion and nepotism. Therefore, the government needs to create a flexible mechanism that allows decentralization to accelerate the growth of a region and give more rights on the freedom of expression to local communities, while also establishing a good coordination between the region and central government in order to maintain the state’s territorial integrity.

It is a challenge for the future to have a government that is willing to implement the law and works in the interests of ordinary people (the fulfilment of civil rights), the environment and the culture of society, and will include urban planners and designers. Improving the quality of people’s lives (through the provision of housing, transport, public facilities and open spaces), and eliminating discrimination, is something that must be seriously undertaken.

**The Urbanization**

The improvement in Bangkanese economic conditions after the tin crisis is indicated by rows of new brick houses, new vehicles and telecommunications. For example, almost every house in Bangka now owns a satellite dish to receive television programs. This economic improvement occurred due to the increased incomes from exporting commodities such as pepper, rubber, fish, and palm oil, which generated the growth of private businesses in towns. For instance, the price of pepper, which before the economic crisis was IDR 3,000/kg, is now around IDR 20,000/kg, having reached IDR 35,000 – 40,000/kg in 1999. In 1999, the income from pepper plantations stood at IDR 1.08 trillion with total export US$ 240 million. The government also gradually provided greater opportunities for private businesses to become involved in mining exploration (tin, kaolin, and quartz).

However, despite this growth, there were still challenges related to the community’s future liveability; especially in those cities which had unique historic and cultural features. For example, road expansion destroyed the facades of many historic buildings. In the urban kampong, new brick and concrete buildings replaced rotting traditional houses. Even, people had to defend their traditional life amongst a lack of hygiene and conditions of poor health.

The population growth caused by this economic growth also put added pressure on future town development. Mentok also faced another urbanization problem in the form of a lack of land to accommodate new economic development. In fact, during the post crisis period, many speculators emerged to grasp new business opportunities, such as swallow-nest entrepreneurs, traders, contractors and ‘inkonvensional’ mining owners. They built big houses and modern shops. As a result, old historical areas were sacrificed, and Mentok underwent a transformation from a soft, natural traditional town into a town of hard and strange concrete buildings. The skyline was changed by the addition of multi-storeyed buildings (known as ‘swallow houses’). These were not for humans but for swallows, whose nests were very highly valued. The old Mentok town, with its many traditional and colonial buildings, now had to compete with society’s new economic demands.

On the one hand, the swallow houses brought economic benefit, but on the other hand, they threatened the harmony of this old town. Built by Chinese contractors, the unregulated construction of these swallow houses, which, despite their studly construction, lacked aesthetic qualities, destroyed the town’s skyline, as they contrasted strongly with the traditional wooden houses and Chinese ‘pise’ houses. These buildings also increased the income of Chinese ‘taoke’ and triggered the building of many new big houses with high iron gates- houses which looked very different to old traditional houses. Whereas previously, people had not felt the need to protect their houses, or had used only natural or simple fences, now it was becoming increasingly common to use more solid boundaries to protect against increased criminality. This increased criminality, which reflected the frustration of the society in trying to survive the tin crisis, could not be managed because of the lack of police officers and the weak legal infrastructure. The frustration and despair of the society arose in part because of the increase in prices of primary goods, which had to be imported from outside the island. There are some questions here that are worthy of note: did the sense of insecurity in society increase; or did the sense of traditional communality start to be removed from

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5 Statistically, the development of rural area in Mentok in the post crisis period, especially in relation to the welfare level, was sufficient. It was based on 1999 data from BPS, which revealed that in Mentok subdistrict there were already 7 ‘swa karya’ villages, and 6 ‘swa sembada’ villages, and only 2 villages were under preparation.

6 The owner of the building provided empty rooms and encouraged swallows to build their nests inside the rooms. The high value of swallow’ nests comes from the fact that the birds use their saliva to produce these nests. The Chinese use this saliva for medicines and healthy foods.
Mentok’s public sphere; or did Mentok change into a more individualistic and exclusive society?

Figure 9: In 1950s. Town center towards market. Photo was taken from the attic in the Jamii’ Mosque. M. Isa Djamaluddin.

Figure 10: In 2002. View towards the market from the Mosque, with an ugly new concrete motel in the foreground and swallows’ houses dominating the skyline. Author.

Figure 11: The road towards the harbour is flanked by swallow houses: on the left is the Chinese Mayor’s houses, with the former Bioskop Bong on the right (2001). Author.
Meanwhile, many aspects of a comfortable urban life had disappeared. Some old cinemas had been demolished and replaced by closed high buildings, which were used as swallow houses.

The idealised historical representation of urban kampongs in Mentok as a place of origin, full of trees and exotic traditional customs (especially for older generations) alter to become places featuring hardships combined with discrimination. Even, sometimes their conditions are worse than kampongs outside towns due to the pollution from urban transportation and commerce. Mentok Tawar River, which had previously contained very clean and clear water, was in a sorry condition, its water brown and dirty due to illegal mining operations and the illegal felling of trees around Menumbing Hill. The authorities, located in the upper part of the town, continued to treat urban kampongs as part of kampong, not part of the town, and therefore the standard facilities referred to the standards found in kampong without consideration of the population density in the urban kampong. For example, many urban kampong dwellers still do not have proper sewage or plumbing facilities and struggle to get fresh water.

The Urban Spatial Plan of Mentok

As mentioned before, the north of Bangka will be developed for industry and trade. This area faces the new economic triangle of Sijori (Singapore - Johor – Riau), and so becomes part of the economic growth of the Pacific Rim region, with its rapidly growing trans-shipment container activities. Coincidentally, the main harbours in Bangka (Mentok, Belinyu and Pangkalpinang) are also located in the north. This condition will affect the planning of town growth in Bangka.

According to Mentok’s Urban Spatial Plan (RDTRK) 1999 – 2008, the town’s primary function relates to its position in the regional constellation of the development of West Bangka, and its secondary function relates to the town’s inhabitants and the daily managerial activities. To support its primary function, Mentok is divided into several sub-functions, which include the development of sub-urbanization, transportation (sea and inland), trade (local and regional) and general and social service (health and education). In this RDTRK, the tin industry was not identified as being a main priority or a motor of the economy, even though the tin industry still existed in the eastern part of the town (Metallurgy Centre).
Sub Urbanization

The centre of economic activities and urban growth was historically focused on the crowded old town area and the east of the city (‘Pusat Metalurgi’). Following Mentok’s new status as the capital city of West Bangka Regency (2004), Bangka’s local government revised the 1999 urban plan and prepared several new actions. Some areas can be developed, especially in the north (Air Belo) and in the west (Tanjung Kalian). A large site in Kelurahan Air Belo has been allocated for the main office of the West Bangka Regency. This means that Mentok town will be expanded to the north, especially for the concentration of governmental offices and public facilities.

This new status has also led to a rapid increase in the demand for new land for settlements around the new administrative locations. Therefore, the local government has prepared a masterplan for the town’s development over the next 10 years, especially in relation to public facilities and infrastructure (for electricity, water, sewerage, drainage, landfill sites and telecommunications) to serve these new areas. However, this masterplan needs further clarification to produce the details of its implementation, such as an awareness of the need to increase the quality of street furniture, parks and green belts, playgrounds, pedestrian access, bus stops, advertising boards and parking.

According to this plan, the old Mentok town area will be revitalized. However, there are still concerns with regard to the balance of development. If the revitalization program does not work as expected, the old town will be drawn into competition with the new settlements. It is also possible that cultural and social identities will be lost because the extreme development of the old town ignores the uniqueness of its cultural and historical heritage.

The Increase of Transportation Facilities

Public transportation increased dramatically after the tin crisis, as some new local businessmen entered the public transportation sector as a logical consequence of Mentok’s location at the west end of the island and directly facing the city area of Palembang. Medium-sized public transportation vehicles that were owned by individuals crowded the roads and the town’s open spaces, especially in the market, harbour and in front of the Jami’ Mosque. This created chaos and danger for the town’s pedestrians and cyclists.

Therefore, the provision of parking spaces became one of the developmental priorities. In the 1990s, the government built a new bus terminal, complete with kiosks and passenger waiting rooms, on a large site between Mentok Harbour and the Mayor’s House. Unfortunately, it was poorly designed and constructed. The asphalt on the road quickly started to peel, creating big puddles of water during the wet season. As a result, many public transportation vehicles, especially the smaller ones, still used the open spaces near the Mosque and Chinese temple as an unlicensed terminal.

Moreover, the government did not include cyclists and pedestrians in its plan. As a result, the broadening of Mentok’s roads involved the sacrifice of many old historical buildings and did not leave any room for pedestrians, who now had to walk carefully on
the street in order to avoid vehicles. In addition, there were no bus stops at all in this town so public transportation vehicles could stop anywhere they wanted.

In the maritime transportation sector, the government planned to expand the town to the West (Tanjung Kelian) because Mentok Harbour was already very old and unsuitable as a strategic harbour, especially because of silting and the crowding of buildings around it. Therefore, after 2003, the government built a sea harbour and a bigger crossing in the west, to serve as the main harbour for large ships in the future, while old Mentok harbour will still accommodate smaller vessels.

![Figure 14: Foot vendors and traffic block access to the harbour and bus terminal (2002). Author.](image)

**Market and Commercial Trading**

The rapid increase in local and regional trade in Mentok around 2000, especially for agricultural products (pepper, fruits, rubber), food and household appliances, created a lack of suitable retailing space. The sprawl of new shop-houses and swallow houses threatened the town’s position in relation to the economic sector, especially with regard to the culture and atmosphere of the town. Another threat was the domination of Chinese entrepreneurs over the lands in the centre of economy. In a corner of old Mentok market, which used to be a meat and fish market, one Chinese merchant (Acai) had built an ugly fourth-class motel to accommodate people who arrived in Mentok’s harbour. This motel was unsuccessful, and was suspected of being a centre of prostitution and drug taking, which increased the level of crime in the area.

The new meat and fish market near Mentok River and the harbour’s entrance created difficulties in managing the flow of traffic. The increased numbers of sidewalk vendors, especially after 1995, could not be accommodated, leading to problems as they used the access roads to Mentok Harbour.

Therefore, in the new plan, the government planned to expand Mentok Market to a new seafront site in Kampung Teluk Rubiyah. For this reason, the local government started to prepare an old road on the bank of Mentok River, in front of Menseng Hotel, as the access for this new market. Here too, there are grounds for concern. Along with the growth in trade, there is a fear that, without government action, this expansion will threaten the form and condition of the town, particularly the old buildings, many of which have already been displaced by swallow houses. There is also a concern that it will have a profound psychological effect on the Malay settlements, whose existence and comfort will be threatened. In addition, the demand from business for land near the market will increase the prices of land and buildings in these settlements.

**Social and Public Service**

Most of the financial and social services in this area, especially banking, were handled by the private sector. For public health service, Mentok only had one ‘Puskesmas’ (local government clinic) and a second-class hospital, which was located in the ‘Pusat Methalugi Timah’ complex. The old TTB hospital, which had been damaged during the handover to the local government, had not been replaced. This created some difficulties, especially for people living in urban kampong areas. In the meantime, education facilities were slightly better as the town was furnished with schools up to Senior High School and STM level. However, this will not be sufficient in the future. To fulfil its role as a regency, Mentok needs a college-level school so that its inhabitants do not have to study outside Mentok. There is room for such a school, which can be developed as a research center for ecology and the environment, fishery and tin craft industries.

**Future Regional Development Concerns**

We can identify at least four future threats to the Bangkanese region. If not properly handled, these problems - land conflicts, environmental destruction, social problems and cultural deterioration - could damage the order, sustainability and liveability of the town. These four problems can only be offset by the provision of good laws and the creation of good governance committed to the welfare of all inhabitants.
**Land Conflicts**

Increasing land prices, particularly in the crowded settlements of the coastal areas, have had an important impact, especially in respect to the competition between traditional and natural areas and business. For example, public green belts have disappeared, while the town’s traditional face has been replaced by modern retail buildings. Land conflicts have also been triggered by the competing interests of traditional and native plantations and private companies. Since 1995, oil palm plantations have started to appear in Bangka, becoming a new competitor for pepper, clove and rubber plantations. At first, the investments coming from outside the island were very welcome because people thought these would increase the welfare of the island’s inhabitants. However, in practice, these plantations threatened the existence of traditional plantations. As a result, conflicts between companies that owned plantations and kampong inhabitants. For example, the inhabitants of the village of Kundi on the island of Bangka came into conflict with PT. Gunung Sawit Bina Lestari, which held an oil palm concession there, because local people lost their rights to their lands and access to the forest resources. 

In addition, the decision in 2000 of PT. Timah and the local government to permit the activities of ‘inkonvensional’ tin mines, which increased the number of small ‘kolong’, led to a reduction in the area of forest available for conservation and for people’s farming. However, the most serious concern was with the status of ex-kolong lands which were previously managed by PT. Tambang Timah. Even though these lands had undergone a reclamation programme, there were still fears that they would trigger future conflicts because the previous owners of these lands had not received sufficient compensation.

**Environmental Destruction**

Along with the reclamation programmes in former tin mining sites, we should remember the recommendation of a UN adviser, Vlado Antholic, 40 years ago, to conserve the forest areas around Menumbing Hill. Antholic recommended changing this area into a regional and national park with a historic hill resort complex at its top. The aim was not only to overcome the problems of flooding, disease and very hot weather around Mentok, but also to support scientific research in the future.

This conservation effort became a challenge for the local government, especially in relation to illegal miners and private tin diggers, who secretly stole the natural resources around Menumbing Hill. This situation has been worsened by the exploitation of other natural deposits, such as ‘kuarsa’ sand and granite. If the government does not quickly deal with these problems, in the future the damage to nature will greatly affect people’s lives in the urban and rural areas, especially with regard to the provision of clean water, land fertility for farming and an increase in temperature.

In Mentok, after 2000, the local government intensified the control of security officers in these locations. However, the government did little to raise people’s awareness of these problems. Besides the illegal mining operations, the uncontrolled expansion of Mentok to the north can also endanger the green belts and affect water preservation. On one hand, this expansion benefits coastal areas, but on the other hand, it has severe negative impacts. Bangka Island, which is relatively small in size, depends on its hilly areas in the middle of the island for its water. If the forests as the barriers to these areas are damaged, the clean water will easily run into the sea, making it difficult for the towns and villages in Bangka to gain a source of clean water. Therefore, there needs to be a balance in development between coastal and inland areas.

**Social Problems**

In general, people in Bangka recovered from the tin crisis quite quickly. This was made possible because of the rise in agricultural activities (pepper, rubber and oil palm). However, even though, on one hand, the increase of income had a positive effect in that it improved the economic status of Bangkanese society generally, on the other hand it also had negative effects in the form of the increased price of primary goods and land, as well as other social problems associated with a rise in individualism and consumerism.

One example is the increased use of pornographic VCDs. The easy availability of pornography at this time meant that it had become common even among younger generations. According to one local source of information, in his area, 6 out of 10 children aged 12 years old in one town had watched pornographic VCDs.

There are also indications that prostitution is increasing due to the arrival of sex workers attracted by Mentok’s improving economy. The social fabric is further threatened by a rise in crime, which can be attributed to two sources; a growing trade in narcotics.

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and other drugs, and a widening gap between rich and poor.

The growth in individualism has served to undermine people's sense of community as a growing sense of insecurity has led the rich to try to fence themselves off from society's problem. This condition, in fact, represents a worry about the quality of future society; whether coming generations of Bangkanese will be able to maintain their dignity and discipline (obedience to the law) in order to develop the future identity of the area or whether the reverse is true.

Moreover, the polarising issue of 'native' and 'non-native', which has become a problem in most towns in Indonesia, may pose a future threat. Despite the very high levels of integration in Bangka, conflicts may still occur in the future if the pressure of living becomes too high and people perceive that there are injustices. Therefore, the government has to respond and bridge the gap between different ethnic groups (Malay and Chinese). Everybody, rather than just one ethnic group, has the right to enjoy the increase in standards of welfare. The government has to support society so that its integrity will be maintained.

**Cultural Deterioration**

In development planning, the liveability of the town has not yet been seriously considered. A town is not only a collection of buildings and functions, but, most importantly, it has to accommodate its inhabitants in an atmosphere that allows all parts of society to express their cultural identity.

Liveable cities have local identity. They are characterized by beautiful architecture, which makes people [and] enterprises feel at home, by public spaces, which lend themselves to various uses, and by a wealth of culture. They are a place where history [is] brought to life. (*Urban 21, 2000, p. 38*)

In a workshop in 2003, the local government identified the threat of degradation from the rapid development in economic and transportation sectors. This was signified by the disappearance of the traditional and colonial identities of many local towns. For example, the widening of roads had damaged the façades of a number of historic Chinese shop houses. The development of Mentok will therefore only succeed if it manages to preserve the fabric of historic buildings, squares and streets, and at the same time pave the way for contemporary urban development and high quality modern architecture. (*Urban 21, 2000, p. 38*)

Along with the formation of Bangka-Belitung province, rules on how to design a town have to be prepared. If society is not ready to face the complex aspects of town development, the result will be unplanned expansion, which will occur only as a spontaneous response to new pressures. This will result in further complications, such as increased social inequality, lack of public space, the growth of slum areas and the disappearance of historical heritage.

**Reformulating Identity: Towards a Multicultural Society**

In general, there is little evidence of inter-ethnic friction in Bangka. According to Heidhues,

> [p]eople on Bangka say the presence of a large Chinese minority is “just normal” (biasa saja). [...] Perhaps consideration of Bangka’s situation can illuminate ethnic tension elsewhere. (Heidhues, 1992, p. 225)

Nevertheless, behind this apparent harmony, the Bangkanese people felt overshadowed in the history of their island, since the island has predominantly been perceived as a place of Chinese sanctuary rather than as being a Malay place. This is confirmed by Heidhues, who noticed that in the colonial history, ‘ethical considerations seem to have been focused exclusively on improving the welfare of the Chinese miners, not on the local people.’

This perception was, however, ignored by the postcolonial political authority as many of the elite came from outside of the island (mainly from Java) and so did not care about what Bangkanese people felt. Thus, although Bangka became a good model for people living harmoniously in an urban condition, the Bangkanese people also had a hidden expectation that one day their culture would be appreciated and not just overshadowed by the history of Chinese tin mining workers.

Using the six categories of Peter J.M. Nas’s classification of Indonesian towns (1986), Mentok and other Bangkanese towns fall into the fourth category, namely the Chinese town, together with Pontianak (in West Kalimantan), and Tebing Tinggi (in North Sumatra). According to Nas, these towns ‘have a relatively high percentage of Chinese population,’ which, especially in Bangka, ‘consists of descendants

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of the coolies who came to Indonesia during the past century to work [...] in the mines of Bangka and Billiton (Pangkal Pinang). However, it is not clear why he decided to reduce society to an abstract model of ethnic representation, as this denies the true conditions of Bangkanese towns. Statistically, in 1990, the ratio between Indonesian and Foreign Citizens (Chinese) in Mentok was 44,516 : 305, while the ratio between ‘pribumi’ (native) and ‘non-pribumi’ (Chinese descendants) citizens was 36,395 : 8,121.

This part of the paper identifies two characteristics of Bangka-Belitung (ba-bel) for the future. The first one is as a new ‘ba-bel’ society, created by leaving behind some of the negative aspects of old traditions. The second one is building a new region, large enough to accommodate diversity but without ignoring its historical traditions. Since the pre-colonial period, Mentok has been a melting pot of cultures. Although the colonial regime segregated the ethnic settlements, the initial hybridization had occurred in the form of a limited relationship in society, architecture and urban form.

Figure 15: From melting pot to multiculturalism; The Chinese Temple and the Jami’ Mosque in Mentok (2003).

In this transitional period, after experiencing the tin crisis and passing through the pressures of postcolonial regimes, Bangkanese society (as well as Belitung) is currently believed to be temporarily going through a stage of recovery and vibrancy. In reality, Bangkanese society is strengthening its identity. In recent years, racial sentiments (as well as a sense of regionalism) are beginning to reappear. This is understandable, especially for the Malay society, who for a long time did not have a proper place in which to express their identity, and which could now recover symbols of Malay identity in Bangka.

The international media was also used to spread cultural awareness, such as the participation of a Bangkanese delegation at the Persidangan Dunia Melayu (Malay World Conference) on 12 – 14 October 2001 in Kuala Lumpur. The mission of this delegation, which presented an issue about Bangka Dalam Lintas Imperium Melayu (Bangka in the Route of the Malay Imperium), was to return the historical genealogy of Bangka to the Malay state. To follow up this seminar, in 2004, Bangka was chosen as the host for International Festival of the Malay Islamic World. The geographical divisions created by the colonialism that had separated three Malay countries in South East Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam) and the formation of the trans-Malay nationality network now inspired the ba-bel province to participate in these Festival activities.

However, this growing sentiment may threaten the harmony of Bangka’s relationships with Indonesia’s other ethnic groups. For example, the Bangkanese’s disproportionate pride over their region drove them to blame their neighbour (Palembang, in Sumatra) for creating poverty and committing crime in their area. This pride also generated their dislike of being called the subsidiary of Sumatra or Palembang. According to some Bangkanese, Bangka only became Palembang’s economic plantation for the benefit of Palembang and Jakarta, rather than for the Bangkanese. This was a strong factor in the drive for the separation of Bangka-Belitung society from South Sumatra Province in 2001.

For the moment this kind of sentiment can still be tolerated because it reflects only an awareness of collective identity rather than a narrow fanaticism. Nevertheless, it is critical that the government prevents this awareness from growing into anarchism and conflict. The government’s ignorance of the needs of society in the future can threaten the tradition of living peacefully together. An old town whose development is not planned well can grow to be unfriendly, and so lose its old traditions. The urban kampong society famous for its communal living can change into an individualistic and selfish society,

as older generations are replaced by those who ignore and disrespect history and tradition. In this modern period, urbanization is intensifying due to the pressures of population growth, education, job opportunities and the capitalist economy. This can create competition that threatens inter-ethnic living. Today, Malay inhabitants and Chinese merchants alike can become strong assets for urban development. However, the government must not repeat the mistakes of the past by focusing on economic growth purely for the benefit of specific elites.

Bangkanese society is basically composed of a strong mixture of several different cultures, rather than a single-rooted culture. Today, centuries of interaction and migration have created a pluralistic Bangkanese society. Therefore, it is important to raise people’s awareness of their pluralistic identity, and so challenge the societies of Bangka-Belitung to interpret this plurality positively in their town development. The government also needs to act fairly in accommodating the needs of all societies. People are entitled to expect the same rights to live in their town and enjoy public facilities, infrastructure and legal protection. In addition, the government needs to consider the active participation of the public and individuals because building a town is not only the responsibility of the government or urban planner. Therefore, Bangkanese societies have to be given the opportunity to express their ideas for urban welfare. They have to be a powerful motor to control the government’s activities in order to build good governance, justice and welfare for all.

**Conclusion**

In 1975 Professor M.T. Zen (a technocrat born in Mentok)\(^\text{12}\) addressed a conference in Jakarta by asserting that:

> I, the son of a country which had a history of 300 years of colonial rule can state that: “Between the profusion of matter and the stars, and within the confines of the Pacific Basin, the people of SE Asia can now choose their own destiny, whether to enter the year 2000 as a dy- ing breed of nice people or march through the gate of the 21st century with heads up, proud of their heritage, confident of their destiny. (Zen, 1975, p. 7)

This assertion corresponds with the objective of this paper which challenges the possible future of the tin island. This paper examines the Bangkanese struggle against the exhaustion of tin on the island and pressures of modernity.

The world tin crisis raised concerns for the future of Bangka, making it very clear that Bangkanese societies could not rely on tin to survive. After the tin crisis, which was followed by regime change in the Indonesian political arena, the island entered a new phase of development - decentralisation. At first, when the crisis first struck, Bangka’s towns suffered psychological shock and chaotic conditions, as society seemed to be immature and destabilized from their regular dependence on the tin. However, the government, the company and society gradually recovered from the crisis and formulated a new phase of life prepared for future development without tin.

On one hand, this future will provide opportunities, but on the other hand it contains several challenges. Following its change of status from a regency to a province, the island is becoming a dynamic economic and business centre. However, problems will arise if this progress only focuses on the physical and economic aspects of society at the expense of social and cultural factors – the liveability of place. “Space of place” is here superimposed with ‘space of flow’ (capital, information and people), represented in profitable ‘swallow houses’ and crowded retail buildings, new illegal private mining operations, pornography and consumerism, as well as traffic jams and pollution. This paper identifies four main issues, which need to be responded to carefully by the authoritative power and the Bangkanese community in the future: potential land conflict (between traditional and commercial, and between native plantations and private companies), environmental destruction, ethics and social problems (crime, unemployment, drugs and prostitution), and cultural deterioration (a loss of Bangka’s historical heritage). Can the Bangkanese, as said by Zen, “march through the gate of the 21st century with heads up, proud of their heritage, confident of their destiny”? The answer certainly depends on society and the local government themselves, whether they are consistent in implementing the vision and mission of their town development or not.

This paper also demonstrates another aspect of potential development of Bangka’s future from an ex-colonial tin mining island to part of a network of trans-national Malay society, as well as from a hybrid heritage to a model of a multicultural society. The challenge for the future is for the Bangkanese to become involved in the network of international Malay society and thus to strengthen its resistive identity amidst the dynamic changes of global modernity. However, this manifestation of resistive identity should be balanced with a mutual understanding with other ethnic groups in Indonesia. Although there is a Malay vibrancy after the change of status to become a province, the Bangkanese must defend their

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\(^{12}\) He was a professor in Geology Department, Institute Technology Bandung, and one of the Head Deputy in BPPT Jakarta.
unique identity as a mixture of various cultures. The centuries-old positive characteristics of the Bangkanese as an open, tolerant, and egalitarian society can become a model for a multicultural society, and help create a harmonious relationship between different ethnic groups in other places in Indonesia.

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Kurniawan graduated from the Bartlett University College London (UCL) where he took Ph.D in Architecture program. His research topic is about architecture and urbanism of Indonesian tin mining, especially during colonial and postcolonial times. The paper, he submits here is part of his research related on the possible future of Bangka island. Besides this such research, he also had carried out other research related to Indonesian traditional architecture, and attended seminars and workshop national and international on such topics. He also had been educated in architectural history at the same university (UCL), where he took part in the Master taught programme. In University of Indonesia, he teaches architectural design and architectural history courses. His academic experiences were also combined with professional practices in several architectural bureaus in Jakarta.
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