Ruined pondscapes in North Kalimantan, Indonesia

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The Focus

Ruined pondscapes

In recent times, older ponds have started to fall into disuse, and are quickly deteriorating. The mud embankments that encircle them, once laboriously maintained by hard-working men, crumble and leak while the abandoned shacks that once held families are scavenged for building materials. The ponds themselves choke with fast-growing palms and the brightly-leaved saplings of mango tree sprout around the stumps of trees cut down years ago.

Around these ruins are clusters of ponds that are still maintained, restocked and harvested as in the old days, but production is erratic and harvests frequently fail. Sometimes failure can be predicted with the help of subtle signs, such as an overrepresentation of a certain kind of freshwater snail, too much or too little of a certain kind of alga; other times the signs are obvious even to the untrained eye: the water smells rotten, has an unusual color or might be covered by an oily film. But mostly, failure is not evident prior to the pond being emptied into a huge net into the river at low tide. Anticipation turns into disappointment in a matter of hours. These ponds are in a process of continual ruination that ties the choices of the past together with the possibilities of tomorrow.

Explanations for these failures vary. Most of the owners and caretakers I spoke with blame the expanding palm oil plantations upstream. Their herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers foul the water, and the clearing of forests changes drainage dynamics, leading to surges of fresh water through the otherwise brackish river systems during heavy rainfall, which are deadly to the farmed shrimp. Others blame the upstream hydraulic mining, where riverbanks are washed away with high-pressure hoses, and mercury is used in the process of extracting the precious flakes of gold. But take a look at the shelves of any well-stocked pond owner and you will find a collection of products to match the chemical shelf of any plantation: pesticides, herbicides, antibiotics and an assortment of unbalanced relationships (in some cases, even prior to shrimp aquaculture), thereby enforcing the hereditary decay of basins so visible in city geography.

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The frontier of large-scale shrimp aquaculture arrived in North Kalimantan in the early 1990s, boomed during the Asian Financial crisis of 1998-1999 when the ripu was weak, and expanded in the years afterwards. Since then things have changed, as ponds have started dying off. Today, as especially downriver ponds are abandoned, caretakers and businessmen find new ways to extract resources in the ruins, maintaining debt-based patronage relationships that often stretch back generations and span several waves of different resource frontiers and territorializations. Resource frontiers created tension and conflict over land, but so did the following ruination, and struggle for control over new resources.

Shrimp aquaculture is not the first resource frontier to wax and wane on the northeast coast of Borneo, what is now the Indonesian province of North Kalimantan, and it is not the first one to produce ruined, altered landscapes either. For hundreds if not thousands of years, commodities have been extracted, traded and shipped off from forests and coastal reefs, reaching distant destinations. Slaves, rattans, eagleswood and gold dust from land; holothurians and prized shells from the bottom of the sea. Each resource frontier produced its own ruined landscapes: even yesterday's resource frontiers are an integrated part of everyday life of the city. The coral reefs are indicative of where...
powders and mixtures, all extensively used. Others again point to bacterial or viral epidemics that spread through the monocrop shrimp ponds, where the accumulated buildup of waste from billions of shrimp form a hotbed of infection, which easily spreads from pond to pond through the waterways connecting them all. Ruination is an active process co-created by many actors, human and non-human alike. It is not something than is solely thrust upon affected pond-owners from the outside, although that is what pond owners and workers will tell you.

Ruination leads to downriver ponds being abandoned every season. In the remaining ones, owners maintain production. Some because of sheer stubbornness, others because of mounting debts that desperately need repaying (by that windfall harvest that grows ever more unlikely as the ponds further deteriorate). For the owners of the ponds this is critical, as they repay their loans with the value of the catch. Caretakers, many of whom are landless immigrants from neighboring Sulawesi, are paid in percentages, and so failed harvests equal no pay.

Productive ruins

In the downriver patchwork of ruins and struggling ponds, all caretakers I met supplemented their income by collecting and selling mangrove crab, the common name for what is actually at least four different species (Scylla spp). A prized delicacy, sold alive in the metropolises of Asia. Naturally occurring in the brackish waters of estuaries and mangroves in the Indo-Pacific, the crabs have adapted and proliferated in the pondscape. The sheltered ponds, stocked with feed and free of some of their natural predators, are near perfect environments for the crabs, who can better tolerate variations in salinity, and levels of ammonia and oxygen than farmed shrimp can. They even thrive in some of the ruined ponds where the shrimp have died off from pollution. Productive ruins in ruins.

Mangrove crabs hide during the day in tunnels dug in the intertidal zone, and forage during night. In the wild, this helps soil aeration and increases soil turnover rate in the mangrove to the extent that biologists have labelled them ecosystem engineers. However, in the ponds the burrowing crabs undermine the embankments, leading to leaks and accelerating the ruination. Sometimes a serious look caused by burrowing crabs will be the final straw if reconstruction of the embankment is unfeasible, and thus they are considered pests by pond owners. Maintaining embankments is backbreaking work, done with hoe and shovel; but repairing a collapsed embankment is expensive and requires heavy machinery, something the owner would consider twice in an already degraded pond. For the caretakers, however, the mangrove crabs constitute an opportunity for a relatively stable income; in struggling ponds the sale of crabs often exceeds the salaries they are paid by the owners, and in failed ponds crabs are their only source of revenue. At night when the crabs are active, caretakers don headlamps and rubber boots, and stalk the pond embankments with large nets. The presence of ruined and abandoned ponds increases the area the caretaker can cover at night and the number of crabs he can catch. Among the overgrown ruins, however, one has to be careful. Not only crabs but saltwater crocodiles too are attracted by the abandoned ponds, only visited occasionally by a caretaker on the hunt for crab. Downstream the large majority of them are juvenile, but occasionally a caretaker goes missing, save for a foot or disgorged sandal. I am told, as long as you don't swear or throw things at them, the ibu ibu [grandmothers], as they are called, will not attack you, but in the ruined landscapes you never know. Several times a week, a speeds boat with a collector of crabs will visit the caretaker’s shack, buying any live crabs he might have to offer. Collectors also peddle in everyday items such as cigarettes and instant noodles, and some in more clandestine wares such as methamphetamine, a relatively common drug among the young men working in the isolated ponds for months at a time. The countless rivers and streams, nooks and crannies of North Kalimantan, are some of the main entry points of Filipino and Cambodian drugs into Indonesia. Some collectors also bring crab banner, while daring or desperate caretakers plant in the ponds, to further increase the number of crabs they can collect, to the benefit of their collector and caretaker. This is not without any risk though, as the crabs feed on the valuable shrimp larvae and thus burrowing undermine the pond. If the owner learns of this practice, the caretaker in question will surely be fired.

Thus, the crabs thrive in pondscape, even in those that are ruined and abandoned. But the crabs are also active co-creators of ruin, presenting opportunity in the ruins of monocrop pond aquaculture for the people working at the bottom of the supply chain. When the crab ends up on the plate in a Singaporean restaurant, it has become an object of luxury, of desire. Its past as a pest is now used as treats for business contacts, officials or senior colleagues, people from whom you want favors. They are offered on big plates, whole in their carapaces. It is said that crabmeat is an aphrodisiac, and eating it definitely is a multi-sensory experience. Breaking the tough shell, dismembering the claws, sucking the meat and juice out of hard-to-get places, is a messy business. Both crab and shrimp are not only shredded by the crabs from their carapaces when they reach their destinations. They are also shredded from the history, the ethnic conflict, the ruined landscapes and the unequal and destitute lives of the people handling them along the supply chain of luxury commodities. The cycle repeats itself, but the commodity changes according to taste and availability. Finding new objects of desire in the ruins of old extractions, retaining and solidifying systems of immense inequality that sometimes span centuries, but also presenting possibilities for the astute worker, and thus the cycle begins anew.

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Notes

1 Technically, this only gives three years of usage, until you apply for ownership with the district government, but in practice it lasts indefinitely. The man I spoke with had inherited 15 ponds from his father, who had migrated from Tarakan in the 1970s, and the sole document showing his ownership was a sure getpass for each.