

SENEMBAH IN THE VORTEX OF HISTORY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGES IN LOCAL POWER IN EAST SUMATRA (1862-1946)

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical dynamics of *Kejeruan Senembah* as a local power entity in East Sumatra during the period 1862–1946. The main focus is to trace the continuity and transformation of political authority in the context of colonial governance and social change in the region. *Kejeruan Senembah* originated as a traditional institution established with the endorsement of the Aceh Sultanate and later evolved into a crucial component within the political structure of the Deli Sultanate. This research employs the historical method, encompassing four stages: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. The primary sources include colonial archives, local literature, interviews with key informants, and visual documents such as maps and photographs from KITLV and Delpher collections. The findings reveal that *Kejeruan Senembah* played a strategic role in maintaining local stability through a customary Karo-based social structure and served as an intermediary between colonial authorities, the sultanate, and indigenous communities. However, Dutch intervention and the shifting political landscape leading up to and following Indonesian independence triggered changes in the power structure, culminating in territorial fragmentation and the transformation of political legitimacy after 1946. This study concludes that the case of *Kejeruan Senembah* is vital in reconstructing regional historical narratives that have often been marginalized in national historiography.

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INTRODUCTIONS

In the study of Indonesian history, attention to the dynamics of local power is important to complement the grand narrative that is often centered on national history. As Taufik Abdullah emphasized, local history is not just a small reflection of national history, but has its own unique dynamics and context in shaping community identity and local power structures (Abdullah, 2010). One of the distinctive forms of local power in East Sumatra is the *Kejeruan* system. This system has its roots in the political and customary structures formed since the Sultanate of Aceh, and then underwent a transformation when it was in the orbit of the power of the Sultanate of Deli and the intervention of

the Dutch colonial (Pelly & Ratna, 2022). Kejeruan Senembah is one of the most prominent Kejeruan entities in the region.

Kejeruan Senembah has a strategic position in the local political structure. As one of the Datuk of the Four Tribes in the Sultanate of Deli, he played an important role in determining the direction of power, including in the process of appointing the sultan (Perret, 2012). This system of government is hereditary and is carried out based on customary consensus through deliberation (*bronze* / which reflects the traditional democratic roots of the Karo people. The existence of Kejeruan Senembah also reflects the acculturation between Batak Karo elements, Malay influences, and pressures from the colonial system. As noted by Luckman Sinar, the Kejeruan system is a form of synthesis between local customary traditions and adaptation to greater political power (Sinar, 2006).

Anthony Reid said that local entities such as kejeruu have a role as intermediaries between grassroots communities and central power, as well as being active agents in socio-political transformation (Anthony Reid, 2005). In the context of Kejeruan Senembah, this role is not only symbolic, but also practical, especially in managing relations between indigenous peoples, the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang, and the Dutch colonial government. The year 1862 became an important point in the history of Kejeruan Senembah. In this year, through the blessing of the Sultan of Aceh, Kejeruan Senembah was officially established by Si Emblang Pinggol and gained recognition as an autonomous entity (Barus et al., 2021). At the same time, the Dutch began to expand their influence through political and economic agreements with local rulers (Bremen, 1989).

Senembah faced various challenges, both from within such as internal power struggles, and from outside such as Dutch intervention and the expansion of tobacco plantations. According to Karl Pelzer, the change in agrarian structure caused by the influx of plantation capital changed not only the physical landscape, but also the structure of political power in East Sumatra (Karl. J. Pelzer, 1985). The territorial conflict between the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang also complicated the position of Kejeruan Senembah. In the archive "Deli Gids" in 1938, it was stated that Senembah became one of the strategic areas contested by the two kingdoms, due to its high economic potential in the context of the plantation industry (Schadé, 1919).

The role of Kejeruan Senembah as a traditional leader and local government makes him a major actor in local diplomacy. They carry out executive, legislative, and judicial functions on a local scale, while still negotiating with external powers in order to maintain their territorial autonomy. However, since the (Barus et al., 2021) In the 20th century, the position of the Irin was increasingly pressured by Dutch colonial policies. The divide et impera strategy carried out by the Dutch caused the fragmentation of the Senembah Kejeruan area into two parts: Senembah Deli and Senembah Serdang, in an effort to reduce the potential for organized local power (Perret, 2012). This colonial intervention marked a new phase in the transformation of Kejeruan Senembah power. The Kejeruan leader no longer had full sovereignty over his territory, but became an administrative instrument for the colonial government and foreign plantation entrepreneurs. Although officially still recognized by the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang, in practice Kejeruan Senembah has experienced a degradation of authority. During the social revolution of 1946, many prominent figures lost their legitimacy and power due to changes in national politics and pressure from the people's movement (Armani et al., 2020).

When the Republic of Indonesia was proclaimed, the structure of the conflict slowly lost its function. The Republic government no longer formally recognizes the existence of this traditional system of power. However, the values and cultural heritage of Kejeruan Senembah still survive as part of the local identity of the people of Deli Serdang (Pelly & Ratna, 2022). Unfortunately, although Kejeruan Senembah has a long history and a great contribution to the stability and development of local politics in East Sumatra, studies that examine the specifics of its existence are still very limited. Mainstream historiography highlights more about the Deli Sultanate or colonial dynamics in a macro way (Muhammad Akbar Maulana & Jufri Naldo, 2024). Therefore, this paper seeks to fill a gap in the study of local history by comprehensively examining the role of Kejeruan Senembah in the vortex of power in East Sumatra in the period 1862–1946. The main focus is directed at the processes of continuity and change experienced by these local power structures, including their response and adaptation to colonialism, modernization, and independence. By digging into colonial archives, local literature, and oral sources, this research is expected to

enrich our understanding of the existence of local power that has been marginalized in Indonesia's national historical narrative.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with historical research methods to examine the power dynamics of Kejeruan Senembah in the period 1862 to 1946. This approach was chosen because it is appropriate to systematically reconstruct past events in order to understand the process of continuity and change in the local power structure in East Sumatra.

Research is carried out through four main stages in the historical method, namely:

1. Heuristic (collection of sources)
At this stage, the researcher gathers a variety of relevant primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include Dutch colonial archives, sultanate documents, official letters, as well as old maps and photographs obtained from the KITLV and Delpher collections. Secondary sources include historical books, scientific journals, and previous academic works that discuss Kejeruan Senembah, the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang, as well as the structure of colonial government in East Sumatra.
2. Source Criticism (verification)
Once the data is collected, external and internal criticism of these sources is carried out to test the authenticity, credibility, and relevance of the content. External criticism is used to assess the authenticity of a document, while internal criticism is used to understand the intent, bias, and context of the source content.
3. Interpretation
The verified data are then analyzed and interpreted by considering the socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts that affect the existence and transformation of Kejeruan Senembah. In this process, researchers use the theoretical frameworks of local power, colonialism, and social change to decipher the relationship between local actors and external forces.
4. Historiography (writing history)
The final stage of the research is the preparation of a logical, chronological, and interpretive historical narrative based on the results of interpretation. The narrative is structured to show the process of continuity and change in power of Kejeruan Senembah in three major periods: the phase of establishment and strengthening of Kejeruan (1862–1900), the phase of colonial pressure and adaptation of power (1900–1942), and the phase of post-colonial disintegration (1942–1946).

This method allows researchers not only to record historical events, but also to explain the causes and effects, actors, and structures that shape local power dynamics over long periods of time.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Beginning of the Formation and Legitimacy of Senembah (1862–1900)

The Senembah were formed through a complex process involving migration, political marriage, and the legitimacy of higher royal authorities. The forerunner of this formation came from Si Emblang Pinggol from the Barus Siberas clan, who established a political marriage relationship with the Commander of Polem from Aceh, resulting in a son named Raja Si Pultak Barus. Through this strategic relationship, a political network between the Barus family and the Sultanate of Aceh began to form, which in turn paved the way for the formation of a new hierarchy structure in the Karo-Malay border area (Barus et al., 2021). Etymologically, the name Senembah or *São Paulo* comes from the Karo language which means "to worship" or "to acknowledge the lord." In the historical context, the recognition was directed successively to the power of Aru, then Gojah Pahlawan, and finally the Sultan of Aceh. The process of formal legitimacy was realized when the Sultan of Aceh, Sutan Mangedar Alam, gave permission in 1862 to Si Emblang Pinggol to establish the land of Senembah and pin the title of Senembah (Husny, 1978).

The determination of the Senembah Gap is not solely based on military power or economic influence, but is supported by symbolic and spiritual power. Kejeruan became an integral part of a structure that combined customary,

genealogical, and religious aspects, which placed it in a strategic position in the local power network in East Sumatra. Territorially, the Kejeruan Senembah area includes fertile areas that stretch from the Karo highlands to the lowlands, including Medan, Patumbak, Telok Geraga, and Si Gara-Gara. This geographical position is very strategic because it is a vital connecting route between the highlands and the east coast trading area. The initial structure of Kejeruan Senembah was autonomous with a leader election system through customary deliberation (*runggu*). This process involves three important parties in the Karo customary system, namely Kalimbubu, Senina, and Anak Beru, as well as community leaders such as Sibayak and Penghulu. This mechanism strengthens local legitimacy and avoids centralizing power to a single clan.

Before 1900, Kejeruan Senembah had had a dynamic political relationship with the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang. Although its territory was under the political influence of the Deli Sultanate, Kejeruan still maintained an independent customary structure and local government. They became part of the "Four Tribal Kings" structure within the Sultanate of Deli, which marked their active involvement in the process of the Sultan's appointment. The role of Kejeruan Senembah in the structure of the "King of the Four Tribes" is not just a formality, because without the consent of the four Kings of the Tribes, including Kejeruan Senembah, the appointment of the Sultan is considered invalid according to the sultanate's qanun. This reflects the significant position of Kejeruan Senembah in the regional power system (Perret, 2012).

From the economic aspect, the position of Kejeruan Senembah is very favorable. The fertile land they control became the center of production of crops such as pepper and tobacco. This strengthened their position in the regional power network and made them important partners for both the Sultanate and the colonials that began to emerge at the end of the 19th century. In the Dutch colonial system, Kejeruan Senembah was still recognized as a local government unit, but with strict supervision. They are given limited autonomy to manage their territory, but must be subject to the authority of the Dutch Resident Assistant. This period shows a transition from full autonomy to semi-autonomy in colonial structures. The period 1862–1900 was a period of fundamental political and cultural consolidation for Kejeruan Senembah. They succeeded in integrating traditional values with royal and colonial legitimacy simultaneously. The success in managing this political transition became a solid foundation for the existence of Kejeruan until the first half of the 20th century.

The Political and Social Role of Senembah in the Sultanate of Deli and Serdang

The Senembah dynasty played a significant role in the power structure of the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang, not only as customary local leaders, but also as part of the kingdom's system of government. This role is manifested in his position as one of the four Tribal Kings who have voting rights in the process of coronating the Sultan of Deli. In the qanun of the Sultanate of Deli, the four Chiefs of the Tribe, including Kejeruan Senembah, must give approval so that a candidate for Sultan can be declared legally and politically legitimate. The involvement of Kejeruan Senembah in the royal system of government did not erase the Karo traditional identity inherent in this institution. On the contrary, Kejeruan became a symbol of acculturation between the Malay-Islamic royal system and the egalitarian and clan-based Karo social system. In practice, Kejeruan continues to lead his customary territory with the *runggu* system, while carrying out ceremonial and administrative duties within the sultanate structure. Kejeruan Senembah also plays a role in tax collection, dispute resolution, and maintaining social stability in the area. It became a link between the people and the Sultanate, as well as bridging the relationship between the Sultanate and the Netherlands. Thus, the position of Kejeruan is not only symbolic, but also functional in the governance of local power.

In the social aspect, Kejeruan is a maintainer of traditional values, organizer of cultural rituals, and mediator in social conflicts. Activities such as traditional festivals, funeral ceremonies, and harvest celebrations always involve the authorities of Kejeruan as a symbol of the social and cultural unity of the community. This function shows that Kinjin not only plays a role in the realm of political power, but also in the formation of the collective identity of society. The interaction between Kejeruan and Kejeruan is symbiotic. Kejeruan needed political recognition from the Sultanate to strengthen the legitimacy of its local power, while the Sultanate needed social support from Kejeruan to secure the loyalty of indigenous peoples, especially in the face of pressure from the colonial side.

In its heyday, Kejeruan Senembah became the center of local economic and political activity. Its fertile and strategic territory made Kejeruan an important partner for the economic development of the Sultanate. The existence of trade routes and distribution of agricultural products from the Karo area to the ports on the east coast strengthened Kejeru's economic position in the regional structure. However, the existence of Kejeruan in the Sultanate structure also faces internal challenges. Sometimes there was friction between the elite of Kejeruan and the bureaucrats of the Sultanate, especially in terms of territorial boundaries and administrative authority. In some cases, the Dutch colonial side also muddy the situation by using the conflict to weaken local sovereignty. This condition shows that Kejeruan is in a complex position: as a holder of local authority who must maintain a balance between customary, royal, and colonial interests. Kejeruan Senembah's ability to maintain this position reflects the skill of local diplomacy in the face of pressure from various directions. Until the beginning of the 20th century, Kejeruan Senembah remained an important actor in the social and political structure of East Sumatra. Its resilience to internal and external pressures demonstrated a strong social and cultural base, as well as the ability to adapt to changing times.⁹ The multifunctional role of Kejeruan Senembah made an important contribution to the survival of local kingdom structures before colonial intervention reached its peak. Its political and social role became an important foundation before entering the phase of territorial fragmentation due to Dutch colonial politics.

The Fragmentation of the Senembah Region by Dutch Colonial Politics

Entering the early 20th century, the position of Kejeruan Senembah as an institution of local power began to face pressure from Dutch colonial policies that strengthened its administrative control in the East Sumatra region. The Dutch intervention in the Senembah Conflict stemmed from their desire to streamline the local government structure for the sake of economic exploitation efficiency, especially in the management of tobacco and rubber plantations. One of the main strategies used by the Dutch was the politics of *divide et impera* or the politics of division. In the context of Kejeruan Senembah, this strategy is manifested in the form of regional fragmentation. At first, Kejeruan Senembah had a large area including Patumbak, Telok Geraga, Medan Senembah, and its surroundings. But in the second decade of the 20th century, the Dutch split the region into two: Senembah Deli and Senembah Serdang.

This fragmentation was not just an administrative separation, but also a systematic attempt to weaken the authority of the Kremlin politically. By dividing power, the Dutch created internal rivalry among the Kejeruan elite, making it easier for the colonial government to exercise control over the indigenous people through controller officials or resident assistants. The impact of this fragmentation is significant. Not only weakening solidarity between customary territories, but also worsening power coordination between Kejeruan and the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang. The Ukrainians, who previously had the full right to decide local policies, now had to submit to the orders of Dutch officials stationed in each subdivision.

The Dutch used internal conflicts and the blurring of customary boundaries as a legitimacy for intervention. They formed new administrative institutions such as the Onderdistrict and replaced the term Kejeruan with the position of ruler at the level of district head who worked under the colonial government. This action reduced the status of Kejeru from an autonomous indigenous leader to a colonial administrator. Although the Sultanate was still given titles and symbolic recognition by the Sultanate, they were structurally integrated into the bureaucratic system of the Dutch East Indies. In many cases, Kejeruan decisions must first obtain approval from Dutch officials, including in terms of the appointment of chiefs, land management, and the handling of community disputes.

The existence of private plantations also exacerbates the situation. Dutch companies such as Deli Maatschappij began to control strategic lands previously managed by indigenous peoples under the coordination of Kejeruan. This process is often carried out without the full consent of the Orange, which indicates that the local authority is no longer sovereign over its own territory.

In addition, colonial education that entered the Kejeruan area slowly shifted traditional authority. The younger generation began to adopt new values and systems that were not always in line with the traditional structure, causing tensions between the old elite and the new elite born from the colonial education system. In a larger framework, the fragmentation of Kejeruan Senembah reflects a colonial strategy to dismantle traditional power structures that have the potential to threaten colonial stability. The Dutch did not destroy the Irishman frontally, but

eroded its authority slowly and systematically through territorial fragmentation and bureaucratization of power. This condition laid the foundation for the collapse of the structure of the Communist Party during the Social Revolution of 1946, where the previous fragmentation had created a base of internal instability that could be easily exploited by the new postcolonial powers. Therefore, regional fragmentation not only has an administrative impact, but is also one of the main factors in the weakening of customary-based local power systems in East Sumatra.

The Decline and End of Senembah Power in 1946

After the Proclamation of Indonesian Independence on August 17, 1945, the kingdom's territories such as the Sultanate of Deli, Langkat, Serdang, and the Simalungun area still maintained their existence as traditional entities. They have not necessarily recognized the authority of the newly proclaimed Republic of Indonesia. The sultans and nobles of the region tended to hold local power and delayed integration into the republican system (Maulimardewa et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, socio-political conditions in East Sumatra are experiencing tension. The increasing number of immigrants from Java, the result of colonial transmigration policies, triggered demographic changes. The sharp social inequality between the aristocratic elite and the peasants, workers, and the poor creates a sense of injustice. People's groups began to form laskars with a revolutionary spirit to overthrow the feudal order that was considered oppressive. The peak of these tensions occurred on March 4, 1946, which is known as the Social Revolution in East Sumatra. The masses of the people attacked the palaces of the sultanate, confiscated property, and executed nobles who were considered colonial collaborators. Tragic events befell figures such as Amir Hamzah from the Langkat Sultanate and Datuk Hafiz Haberham from Deli (Aini et al., 2021). This violence reflects the people's anger over structural injustice.

In the Senembah region, the social revolution had a major impact on the customary power structure. People's militias consisting of plantation workers, peasants, and youth attacked local power centers. Traditional houses were burned, traditional leaders were arrested, and even killed. The traditional structure of Senembah was systematically destroyed as part of a widespread anti-feudalism movement. As a result of the revolution, Kejeruan Senembah lost its political and administrative authority. The Republic of Indonesia, which is building a modern government structure, no longer recognizes the customary power system as part of state administration. Senembah, which previously had legal and social power, now only performs a symbolic function as a customary institution.

However, the cultural identity of Kejeruan Senembah is still maintained by the descendants of nobles and indigenous peoples. Ceremonial functions such as traditional ceremonies and village deliberations are still carried out. Some descendants of Datuk Senembah, such as Datuk Adil Freddy Haberham in Hamparan Perak, are still respected as traditional leaders, even though they do not have formal power. The transformation from political power to customary symbols shows the dynamics of post-revolutionary local adaptation. The Senembah slumber did not completely disappear, but it turned into part of a cultural structure that coexisted with the modern state system. The role of customary remains important in maintaining traditional values and social harmony.

Thus, the Social Revolution of 1946 became a turning point that ended the era of formal power of Kejeruan Senembah and opened a new phase in which local power was integrated into the system of government of the Republic of Indonesia. Even though they were politically eliminated, culturally Kejeruan remains a symbol of identity and a guardian of the historical heritage of the Deli Serdang people. closing the historical phase of Kejeruan Senembah as an autonomous local power entity, and opening a new chapter of the social structure that is increasingly integrated in the nation-state system of the Republic of Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals the power dynamics of Kejeruan Senembah as a local political entity that underwent continuity and transformation throughout the years 1862 to 1946. Since its inception with the blessing of the Aceh Sultanate, Kejeruan Senembah has grown as a customary government structure that has strong legitimacy both genealogically and spiritually. Its existence is not only a cultural symbol, but also has an administrative and political function that is integrated with the Sultanates of Deli and Serdang, as well as bridging the relationship between indigenous peoples, kingdoms, and colonial power.

The heyday of Kejeruan Senembah was marked by social stability, solid customary power, and influence in the regional power system, including his role as the King of the Four Tribes in the structure of the Deli Sultanate. However, Dutch colonial policies that implemented the divide et impera strategy had reduced the autonomy of the Ukrainians through territorial fragmentation and bureaucratization of power. This has slowly weakened the traditional power structure and shifted the role of the ruling from local rulers to mere administrative symbols.

The peak of the decline in power of Kejeruan Senembah occurred during the Social Revolution in 1946. In the context of the struggle for anti-feudalism and post-independence power restructuring, the structure of the feudal system was de facto dissolved by the people's power. Since then, Kejeruan Senembah is no longer recognized as a political entity in the modern state system, although it still exists as a guardian of customary and cultural values. Thus, this study confirms that Kejeruan Senembah is an important example in understanding the shift in local power in East Sumatra, as well as enriching regional historical narratives that are often marginalized in national historiography. Its existence represents a dynamic local power that is responsive to internal and external pressures, while showing that the legacy of indigenous power remains meaningful in the socio-cultural configuration of contemporary society.

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