

Banjarmasin: public health and social structure in 1877, as described by a Hungarian medical doctor and geologist

Miklos Kazmer

Department of Palentology, Eotvos University, Budapest Hunary
Corresponding email: mkazmer@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Theodor Posewitz, a Hungarian medical doctor and geologist (1850–1917) spent five years in the Dutch East Indies between 1880 and 1885, serving the colonial Dutch army. During his service assignments he spent all his free time with geological exploration, ultimately yielding the first geological map and monograph of Borneo. Being a citizen of Hungary, a country without any colonial aspirations, he was able to observe, investigate both nature and people of the region without relying on conventional prejudices of colonial officers. His description of Banjarmasin – published originally in Hungarian and provided here in English – is a prime example of objective, impartial, and scientific description of land and people; a valuable source to the geography, public health and social structure of the town back in 1887. A list of scientific publications of Posewitz on the East Indies is added in the Appendix.

Keywords: *Arab, Banjar, Borneo, Chinese, colonial*

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INTRODUCTION

Theodor Posewitz (1850-1917) was a medical doctor and geologist from Hungary, with a strong sense of exploration. His desire to explore unknown lands was accomplished by studying both medicine and geology, one after the other, and seeking employment in faraway lands. Finally he took a position with the KNIL (*Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger*), the Royal Dutch East Indies Army as military doctor from 1880 to 1885. He stayed in Java for a year, followed by three years in Borneo, and finally another year in Java. He also visited the islands of Bangka and Billiton. Serving the needs of the army and the local civilian population at various outposts, he spent his remaining free time with field trips and geological exploration. His *magnum opus*, the *Borneo* volume, subtitled *Entdeckungsreisen und Untersuchungen. Gegenwärtiger Stand der geologischen Kenntnisse. Verbreitung der nutzbaren Mineralien* [Borneo. Discovery Voyages and Investigations. State of the Art of Geological Knowledge] was published in German. in 1889. The contents is based on his scientific experiences he gained during almost three years on the island, for some time in the southern marshlands of Banjarmasin, furthermore a few months in the dry alluvial plans near the central mountain chains in Barabei. Then he lived in the hilly region along the Barito river in Teweh. Before leaving the island he had a chance to visit the workings of the Pengaron coal mines and take an excursion to the Tanah-Laut chain.

Posewitz had a family during his service. His local, Chinese wife died at an early age, leaving their two-year old son, Theodor Ernest, to Posewitz to bring up. Upon their return to Hungary, he was duly raised up as member of the Posewitz family. The main work derived from his Indies stay is the *Borneo* monograph. It contains a detailed history of exploration and studies. Then follows the chapter on geology, starting with geography: physiography of the mountain chains, hydrography of rivers, ports and embayments. Geology is subdivided on the basis of relief: mountain ranges, Tertiary hills, diluvial flatlands and alluvial floodplains. Volcanic rocks, earthquakes, coral reefs and caves each are provided by succinct descriptions. No modern treatment would include further major items beyond these. The longest chapter, 150 pages, is on useful minerals. Four maps complete the volume: routes of travellers, including those by himself, one topographical, one on geology and one sheet on mineral resources. There are very few items in the Borneo book which do not relate directly to geology or mining; that's why his paper on Banjarmasin, published in the Bulletin of the Hungarian Geographical Society (Posewitz, 1882), is so interesting to reveal his approach to the land and people where he lived and worked.

The Dutch scientific community honoured him: he was elected foreign member of the *Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-land en Volkenkunde in Nederlandsch-Indie* in The Hague. Listed between two giants of contemporary learning, Ignaz Goldziher, a Hungarian philologist, the international lead authority of Islamic studies and Ferdinand Richthofen, a German traveller and geographer, who coined the term *Seidenstrasse* (Silk Road), Posewitz was obviously held in high esteem in learned circles.

Posewitz's style is very much different from that of the casual visitor. While he is curious about the town of Banjarmasin at large, he is also keen about observing small details. He described the behaviour of locals when seeing a foreign visitor. He recognized how natural sanitation was provided by the ebbing river, flushing all harmful pollution from town. The ways how people keep up with subsidence of roads and houses, reflect the interest of the scientist, who certainly spent longer time in the region. The information he conveyed on the way of life of various local populations, natives, Chinese, and Arab, is almost scientific, mostly lacking any sentiments. His opinion is balanced regarding the Dayaks and the Chinese, as we can read in the translated version of his article below. His less-than-balanced comments on the Banjar and on the Arab traders seem excessive by modern standards. However, these are moderate if compared to the remarks of a compatriot, János Xántus, who visited the island in its northern part under British influence, more or less at the same time as Posewitz stayed in the southern, Dutch-colonized part. Xántus described Dayaks in great detail, appreciating their looks, comparing them favourably to Malays. Considering them primitive, both in accommodation and in language, their subjugation is in good order to the British – wrote Xántus. His unconditional support of British colonization was seen as beneficial for Borneo and her people (as opposed to the Dutch version). Xántus seemingly believed that progress will come to the island by colonization, if native people abandon their customs, traditions and religious beliefs, in this case Mohamed's faith (Venkovits, 2016). No such statements were ever formulated by Posewitz in any of his writings.

Posewitz was the first to publish a monograph on the whole of Borneo (Hutchison, 2007). Considering the high British interest in Borneo island an English translation of the book followed in short time, in 1892. From among his more than seventy publications on the East Indies (for a list see the Appendix) I translated one (see below). It was published only in Hungarian for the benefit of the members of the Hungarian Geographical Society. I think, the text illustrates his sharp eyes dedicated to scientific observation, both regarding nature and people. It is a precise description describing an earlier period of the trading centre of Banjarmasin.

BANJARMASIN, CAPITAL OF SOUTH BORNEO

Translated from Posewitz (1887) by M. Kázmér

Borneo is the largest of the Sunda Islands, being 12,692 square miles, more than 1000 square miles larger than the whole Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy.¹ Its sole connection to Java is the mail boat once a month. It is no better connection than that to the Moluccas.² The steam shipping company of the Dutch Indies sends a steamer from Surabaya, the second largest merchant town of Java to Banjarmasin on the 26th of every month. The Java Sea, to be crossed by the boat, is permanently stormy, causing sea sickness to almost every passenger, even to those who were saved from it during the journey from the Netherlands to Batavia. Halfway during the trip to Banjarmasin we passed a small island, Bavea.³ Its varied morphology indicates complicated geological structure. A higher ranking European official is seated on the island. His sole entertainment is waiting for the monthly boat, bringing him news from Java.

Banjarmassin is only a 48 hours trip from Surabaya, but the trip often lasts longer. There is a growing sand bank at the mouth of the Barito, the largest river of South Borneo, and the boat can pass over it during high tide only. The boat I travelled on had to wait for 24 hours for the high tide to arrive. A benefit of this wait was the possibility to enjoy unhurried and undisturbed view in every direction. The southeastern termination of a mountain chain in Borneo, the Tariah-laut (sea mountain) was visible in the distance at the shore. Gold is washed at the foot of this mountain, and diamond fields attract natives and Europeans alike. Nothing else is visible of Borneo, except a green band in the distance, indicating the jungle and a few palm trees.

When the boat finally passed above the sand bank, we reached the mouth of the Barito, as wide as the river Elbe at its mouth to the North Sea.⁴ Going for a few hours upstream we were surrounded by the jungle only. Upon close observation one can see a major difference between the lush vegetation in Java and the Borneo greenery. There is only marsh vegetation here: rich reed fields in the marsh, singular palms and boume trees, similar to our willow trees. The shore is desolate, abandoned; there are a few inhabited huts built on piles within the surrounding marsh. There is always the most valuable property of the owner, a boat carved out of a single tree trunk. There is some sugar cane around the hut and a few banana (*pisang*) trees. Nearby the ruins of a fortress the boat enters a branch of the Barito. The winding course of the river allows new scenery to appear at every turn. There are more and more huts on both banks and finally we arrive at Banjarmasin.

Most of the town is on an island in the river, the rest is on both sides of the narrower branch, about half an hour long if walking. The town is literally nested in the marsh. All the apparent characters of the town are dependent on its riverine location. The first: houses are mostly on piles, surrounded by canals or trenches. Public roads and buildings must be built on landfill, which can be kept dry even during the highest flood. Therefore part of the soil is dug up and transported to fill the roads and parcels. Every house is surrounded by bushes and trees, but there are no flower gardens, as soil is marshy. Houses are made of wood. Rooms are separated by wooden walls. These are used for sleeping only, as the verandah is used during the day (each house has two verandahs). There is fresh air moving there. Roofs are made of palm leaves, keeping the rooms relatively cool. Tile-covered houses are unbearably hot. The ground surface is permanently sinking, therefore roads must be filled up repeatedly, otherwise would be under water during high flood, making them unpassable. Also the houses are sinking, so the piles must be extended upwards.

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¹ The Monarchy was 677 thousand square kilometres, Borneo is 743 thousand square kilometres.

² Banjarmasin is 450 km to Surabaya, while Ambon, the main town in the Moluccas is 1750 km from Surabaya.

³ Pulau Bawean.

⁴ The Elbe estuary at Hamburg is 6 km wide.

The riverside row of houses is broken by a small open place only, used for military drills. There is a large wooden fortress, inhabited by most of the soldiers. Inhabitants flee here during eventual raids of natives. This 'fortification' is protected by four large-caliber cannons.

Opposite the European quarter, on the opposite bank of the river, there is the Chinese row of houses. There are a large number of Chinese in India⁵ everywhere, taking exactly the same role as Jews in Europe. They can be found not only in major towns but also in the smallest settlements, mostly engaged in trading and in the crafts. Their houses are built of wood, standing on piles, too. But they do not do anything to surround them with anything pleasant to the eyes, like trees and shrubs. Seems their mind revolves around business all the time, they have neither inclination nor time to decorate. In a similar way do their competitors, the Arabs live. One cannot imagine a more dirty and repugnant population. All of them are merchants, surpassing the Chinese in exploiting the natives. The former are mostly polite and intelligent, and often have pleasant looks. However, the Arabs are rude, dressed ugly, their impolite Semitic racial character is clearly visible on their complexion. Some of them undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. Upon return these are highly revered by other Arabs.

The natives dominate the population. They live in their villages (kampong) scattered along the river. Their houses, built mostly of palm trunks and palm leaves, are standing separate from each other, surrounded by never-missing banana or pisang trees, coconut palms and other fruit trees. It is not very easy to access such a house. Standing in the marsh, there is only a narrow plank leading to them, swinging above the water under the steps of the incomer.

The most interesting parts of the native town, of Banjarmasin in general, are the two suburbs (if I can use this word): Queens and Kalajan. Both extend along branches of the Barito of these names. Kalajan is an interesting example of the not very frequent water town. There is a double row of houses along the banks for about half an hour walking distance. Each house is built on a raft or float, attached to the bank. The float is made of two rows of timbers, arranged across each other, wide enough to carry a wooden house covered by palm leaves. It is the permanent residence of many families, who prefer to live on water, even if the land is only a few steps away. The remaining part of the float is the kitchen. Travelling along the water street during meal times, one can see the inhabitants sitting around the fire, curiously staring at the passing 'white man'.

There are Chinese and Arab shops on these floats, and various workshops. There is the indispensable boat carved of a single trunk. Inhabitants go to work and to visits by these. There is always bustling traffic on the water street, fast boats passing each other skilfully. No wonder, these people spend most of their life on water.

Banjarmasin is one of the second-rate Indian towns. The main personality here is the 'resident', the highest-ranking civilian officer in all the south and east of Borneo. He rules a province as large as Hungary.⁶ He is assisted by several officers: one of them is the deputy resident, who is the police chief. There are two schools: an elementary school for the Europeans and the Chinese, and another, so-called 'seed-sower' school, established recently by the Indian government at several places to educate native youth for teaching in elementary schools. During six years of studies they learn reading and writing in Malay and Dutch, and elements of sciences. After taking the appropriate examinations they return to their homeland to open government-supported schools for the local children. These students are mostly from illustrious, respected families. They are polite, honest people, with good comprehension, studying rapidly. The military force comprises of ca. 300 soldiers, commanded by a colonel, who is the military commander of all southern and eastern Borneo. There are two warships and three further, smaller ships for the government, used to travel the various rivers visiting the settlements to display the Dutch flag for the natives, and to cruise the seas of Borneo.

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⁵ Posewitz uses the word 'India' for the Dutch East Indies only.

⁶ Territory of Hungary was 325.000 sq kilometres at that time.

There are more than forty families living here⁷, but life is monotone, as they are isolated from the rest of the world. The only variation is the monthly arrival of the mail boat. Everyone rushes to the landing place to greet those arriving. The boat stays for two days, making everyone very busy during this period. Letters and newspapers gathered in Java during the past month are delivered. It is a lot of pressure to reply the mail before the ship leaves, and to read novelties in the newspapers, which are old news for everyone else, but still very interesting here. When the mailboat departs from Banjarmasin for Java, the population is crowded again at the riverside, watching the boat slowly leaving while music plays. Quiet, monotonous life starts again until the next boat wakes up the community in four weeks.

Climatically Banjarmasin is clearly one of the hottest places in India. There are two kinds of climate in India, the 'cold' in the mountainous regions and the 'warm' at the coast and in the plains. The lowest temperature observed by myself and others is 23 C°, here, called 'pleasantly cool' by locals. This 'Indian coolness' appears only by night and in the early morning hours. Heat starts at 7 in the morning, rising mostly to 28-30 C°. This is still tolerable all day. Frequently, the thermometer shows 32-34 C°, lasting all day, which is barely bearable. In these hot days the temperature is still 30 C° at 8 in the evening, starting to decrease after 9. Daily fluctuation of temperature is 6-10 C°; such a drop occurs on hot days right after heavy rain. It is not easy to enjoy cool weather in the evenings and mornings, as mosquitoes attack from the bushes towards all human habitation right at this time. These flies are often caught and killed, but only after one is bitten, draining blood. This suffering is mostly for the newcomers from Europe, as mosquitoes are thirsty after their fresh blood. Older arrivals are less disturbed, as their skin has already hardened. Under these conditions it is understandable that one is not eager to work much. The great heat and the presence of mosquitoes act against any occupation, there remaining nothing better to do than to retreat to one's bed protected by a mosquito net.

Sanitary conditions in Banjarmasin are quite good. One would expect dangerous fevers to rule in a town built on marsh. However, there are not many feverish diseases here. This is due to the spring and ebb of the tides, reaching from the sea here and even above upstream. Every 24 hours the water rises more than 2 m in the river and in canals, retreating the same, washing out all putrefying material blocking the flow. Therefore these never accumulate, and never become the source of marsh fevers.

The most busy traffic and life are on the river. People are practically born on water, grow up there, spend all their life on water, and they are not eager to get separated from water. Women wear a conspicuous hat, made of palm leave, of hemispherical form, larger than two feet in diameter. It serves as parasol and umbrella, covering the face in full. When a woman goes by boat, only the paddle and the large palm hat is visible.

Banjarmasin is the trading centre of South Borneo. Therefore many sailboats are stationed on the river, dropping their load, then leave towards various directions, mostly to Java and Singapore. Arriving and departing boats provide a very pleasing view. Natives are Malays, although not a clean race, but Banjars, blended from Javanese, Malays, and Dayaks, the natives of Borneo. They are of unpleasant appearance, slow and ugly people. This difference is all the more apparent when one arrives from Java, where polite and cultured inhabitants are met. Banjars often wear a large knife (*klebang*), which they are ready to brandish.

Although Banjarmasin is one of the most important Indian settlements, no one is happy to live here. The reason is that one is enclosed by the marshes, and except for a few roads for walking nearby the town, there is no place for entertainment. One feels like an exile here. The countryside is marshy plain, covered by jungle in part, and by marsh vegetation on other parts. Excursions can be made by boat only, to see the same, monotonous landscape everywhere. Solid land can be found after 8-10 hours continuous rowing, nearby the distant hills.

⁷ Posewitz means the European families.

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