

Joseph Conrad's 'Lord Jim' and the question 'Where is Patusan ?'

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In Conrad's novel Jim's life ends in a remote village named 'Patusan'. The word Patusan originates from the Malay word 'putus', which means 'disconnected' or 'cut off'. But in Javanese language 'Patusan' means also 'drainage'. Disconnected or drained: We are dealing with the question: Where is Patusan ?

We shall try to find an answer with some profoundness. First of all we have to realise that no town, no village, no place with the name of Patusan exists today (as far as we know).

Okay, there is a river called 'Kali Patusan' in the northern part of Central-Java, roughly 50 kms from Semarang. 'Kali' stands for river; Patusan, as mentioned, for 'drainage'. And it is a river - only a river.¹

But in August 1844 Sir James Brooke (1803 - 1868) and Captain Henry Keppel destroyed a total of four strongholds, built by pirates to protect their refuge. Commander of an army of several thousand pirates was Syarif (or Sherif) Sahap. Sir James Brooke was the first White Rajah of Sarawak (from 1841 on). He was knighted in 1848. It isn't at all obvious that he ruled his kingdom in a sensitive way. Some historians believe he might have been closer to Kurtz (in 'Heart of Darkness') than to Jim.

Keppel reports the name of the settlement with Patusen. In other records the place is called Kampong Pa-Mutus or Patoesan (the Dutch spelling of Patusan). But what they meant and what we can find on historic maps is: Patusan.

1) Information from: Angelika Riyandari; Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang

This ancient town was located at the Batang Lupar river (Sarawak; north-western coast of Borneo). Today we find the town of Sri Aman ('Town of Peace') at this very location. Although Sri Aman is 60 kms away from the coast there are giant tidal waves running up river. In April 1921 William Somerset Maugham almost got killed by such a wave.² Did Conrad have the ancient Patusan in mind ?

Maybe too many years passed since Brooke's days (we remember the year 1844), although Conrad mentions in a letter dated July 15, 1920: *'The first Rajah Brooke has been one of my boyish admirations ...'*.

But when we argue it's too long ago we could stop here for a minute asking 'Where ?' and try to find an answer to 'When did it happen ?'. 'When was the Patna-accident ?'.

The best (possibly only) answer to this question gives us Mr. Stein: Conrad tells us that Stein is threescore (= sixty) when Marlow visits him to find a solution for Jim. But is he exactly 60 or roughly ? He was born in 1826, because he was 22 when the Bavarian revolution took place in 1848 (which led to the resignation of King Ludwig I.) and 38 years later was the year 1886. If he is sixty - exactly sixty ?

More details ? Brierly committed suicide just after the end of the inquiry and before he jumped Brierly recorded the date and time (August 17th, 4 a.m.). If Jim was searching for a chance to redeem his honor for *'more than 3 years'*, so the Patna-accident happened in 1883. Even more precisely in July of this year, because the inquiry took place in August. But Jim tells Marlow after the inquiry *'The monsoon breaks up early this year'*, which doesn't fit with August, because the monsoon with heavy rain normally starts around June in *'an Eastern port'*.

Jim was *'not even 24'* at the time of the inquiry, so he was born in fall or winter 1859. Further on he was 27 when he came to Patusan in September/October 1886 and he was 30 years old (after three years in Patusan) when he died in the fall of 1889. This should be enough about the 'When ?'. Back to the question: 'Where is Patusan ?'.

In the novel are some faint hints regarding the location of Patusan. Maybe we shall take the time to read these hints. We hereby follow the fictive journey of Brown and read in chapter 37:

2) Somerset Maugham's story 'The Yellow Streak' is based on this incident

„...who stole with complete success a Spanish schooner out of a small bay near Zamboanga ...” The next chapter gives us some more information: *“Brown related to me in detail their passage down the Straits of Macassar ...”* and later *“... three days of squally misty weather from the north-east shot the schooner across the Java-Sea ...”,* and *“... in less than a week after clearing the Sunda Straits, he anchored off the Batu Kring mouth ...”.*

We compare this information with the map: Zamboanga is a port at the southwestern tip of Mindanao (Philippines). The 'Strait of Macassar' is situated between the eastern coast of Borneo and the western coast of Sulawesi (Celebes).

We find the Java-Sea north of Java and south of Borneo, and the 'Sunda Strait' is located between Java and Sumatra. Brown therefore was on a quite rationally way to his destination Madagascar, where he wanted to sell the stolen ship. First he headed south and he reached the Indian Ocean (passing the 'Sunda Strait'). From there he kept to the north, he was in need for some food and water for him and his men, and he sailed along the coast of Sumatra.

So, Patusan is located at the west-coast of Sumatra. This makes sense. We remember that when Marlow leaves Patusan he is telling us *'... the half-submerged sun faced him'* and *'the western horizon was one great blaze of gold and crimson in which a big detached cloud floated dark and still, casting a slaty shadow on the water beneath ...'* But where ?

Now, we take the likely speed of a sailing-ship, using good winds (Conrad tells us about the help of land and sea breezes) und we simply say that such a ship reaches an average speed of 5 knots (roughly 9.3 km/h). This would lead to a nautical day of 120 nautical miles. The expression *'less than a week'* could mean different things:

A week is seven days and *'less than a week'* could possibly be 6 days. The ship, making 120 nautical miles every day, would sail a distance of 720 miles. We shall take one day off from our calculation (a short act of piracy, or not always good winds ?). So this leads us to 5 days of 120 miles each, this is 600 nautical miles or 1111 kilometers. There is Patusan.

What do we have on the map here ? We are just north of the town of Padang, about the latitude of Pariaman, Tiku and Mandiangin, all of them small towns at the coast of Sumatra. Inland we find Padangpanjang, Singarak and Lake Singarak. Off the coast are the Batu Islands. The land is hilly, partly mountainous, as Conrad described it in his novel. The problem is: There is no evidence Conrad ever visited this part of Sumatra. More than that: It is quite unlikely.

But it is known that he visited the town Tanjung Redeb at the east coast of Borneo. We believe he travelled there four times in 1887 while serving as first mate on the SS Vidar. Today Tanjung Redeb is a town with approximately 50.000 inhabitants and with a small airport. The town is the capital of the province of Berau and is located at the river Berau, about sixty kilometers away from the coast. The area is flat. At the coast there is a small village called Tanjung Batu.

We recall Batu Kring, the fisherman's village at the coast of Patusan. Looks like we are confronted with two Batu's: the Batu islands off the coast of Sumatra, then Tanjung Batu on Borneo. ('Batu' means 'rock' in Malayan language). Where to does Conrad lead us ?

Many scholars are quite sure they have found Patusan when they talk about Tanjung Redeb. I don't want to argue with them. In the opinion of some others Conrad meant the village of Muntok on Bangka-Island. How come ?

Conrad was Second Officer on the ship 'Palestine'. In March 1883 while passing the Bangka-Strait (east of Sumatra) and before the ship reached the Gulf of Siam the coal in the ship's hull began to burn. The ship could not be saved and the crew (with Conrad) had to abandon the ship. The crew had to go into the lifeboats. After about twelve hours in the small lifeboats they finally reached the port of Muntok on Bangka Island. This should become the very first close impression of 'the East' for Conrad.

One has to add that Bangka is a big, flat island off the southeastern coast of Sumatra. At the eastern coast of Bangka-Island is a village called Batu Rusa. Three Batu Kring's ? And now ?

The following (and last) sentence is my explanation and there is absolutely no reason to believe it, but the question remains: Can we locate where the sound of distant drums comes from ? The whereabouts of an ambient noise ? Can we navigate through fog and mist and clearly see where we are ? And - shall we try to do so ?

Conrad might have had the social environment of Tanjung Redeb in mind during his time; for sure he was deeply affected from the extraordinary experience of a ship-disaster and from being saved to the coast of Bangka, he might have taken some geographic facts for his story. But he did not mean Tanjung Redeb or Muntok. He did not mean Sri Aman or Singarak either.

And it doesn't matter if you call it heterotopic or fictional or otherness or what ever. He had put together some memories; this time his memories about different islands, places, towns and villages, added some spices to it and created Patusan. *'He existed for me, and after all it is only through me that he exists for you'*, says Conrad.

Patusan is located, if you really want to know it, at the Catholic part of the Cemetery in Canterbury.

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