

The Story of Finding Food: Adaptation of Sampan as Living and Working Space in Riau Islands, Indonesia

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Abstract

This article presents the story of finding food carried out by an indigenous community in the Riau Islands, Indonesia, an under-represented way of living within the vernacular traditions. Known as Orang Suku Laut (OSL) or the sea nomads, they use sampans (boats) to move, hunt and gather food, eat and rest, raise a family, and so on. They follow what the sea provides to meet their basic needs. It demonstrates how food becomes an important material that arguably defines their appropriation of sampan as their everyday domestic space. This study emphasizes the crucial roles of sampans for the sea nomads, providing an indigenous perspective of appropriating everyday instruments.

The study employs a qualitative method involving field observations of a semi-nomadic group of OSLs in the Tajur Biru area, Riau Islands, Indonesia. The field study was conducted in 2019 and followed up with a series of long-distance interviews periodically between 2020–2021. Visual documentation and the narratives from the OSLs related to their food-finding practices and the utilization of the sampans were analyzed based on prevailing layers of sampans graphically represented, particularly to emphasize the fluid and dynamic arrangements of their sampans.

The study found the unique adaptation of the sampans by the OSLs based on food-finding activities, suggesting a dynamic spatial domestic arrangement happening within their sampans. Through their food-based practices, the fluid role of sampans is expanded, from a mere vehicle to working and living as domestic arrangements for the community, reflecting a tight relationship between people and Nature as its origin. The findings contribute to the discussion of vernacular architecture, particularly related to sea as a specific site, which could be scarce and easily forgotten these days.

Keywords: finding food, sampan, everyday space, vernacular living, Orang Suku Laut (OSL)

Introduction

This paper discusses the dynamic spatial arrangements in the vernacular living of Orang Suku Laut (OSL), in the Riau Islands, Indonesia. Known also as the sea nomads. OSL means the ‘people of the sea’ or the sea tribe (Orang in Bahasa Indonesia means Man, Suku Laut means sea tribe). This paper illustrates the dynamics that occur spatially, which is rarely highlighted in vernacular architecture. Through such an investigation, it is argued that this paper

expands the discussion of nomadic living and their dynamic spatial organizations. This paper argues that the everyday perspective enriches the meaning of vernacular architecture as elaborated by Rapoport (1997), in particular through the exploration of the minuscule of the everyday (Upton, 2002; Oliver, 2007). It shifts the discussion of vernacular architecture that often emphasizes on its high level of meaning, such as worldview and sacredness, to the micro things of every day.

Furthermore, this paper offers a different perspective of vernacular communities living in water, one having intimate engagements with Nature. So far, vernacular documentation is dominated by the sedentary and landed way of living compared to the nomadic and water-based dwelling, e.g., Glassie (2000), Oliver (1997), Rudofsky (1987) and Rapoport (1969). This makes vernacular architecture perceived as a static phenomenon (Kellet, 2011), rather than a dynamic and mobile one, as studied by Lenhart (2008), Hoare (2006), and Ewing (2002). The idea of being a nomad and mobile dwelling as part of vernacular living tends to be ignored, including how food is one of the important aspects of vernacular dwelling form and spatiality, as mentioned by Lawrence (1997) and Rapoport (1969). Thus, this paper intends to explore the dynamics in vernacular living driven by food-based practices.

It departs from the idea that food becomes one of the triggers to everyday living, composing a unique way of dwelling arrangements. Food becomes a framework to understand dynamic spatial arrangements. It is also argued that there is another way to position mobile architecture as part of vernacular architecture in terms of the spatial practices generated by food. Thus, this article aims to seek further how the practice of food can inform the way of vernacular living, including its spatial arrangements.

Theoretical Framework

Food: Understanding the indigenous way of living

This paper begins from the understanding of food as an essential material for everyday living and being. Therefore it constructs that way of living (Lawrence, 1997). In many cultures, food constitutes the basic needs to perpetuate culture and is practiced as part of everyday life (Vellinga, 2007). To survive, a community needs to regulate and maintain the availability of food in its domestic context (Suryantini, Paramita and Yatmo, 2019). Even though food holds an important role in many aspects of life, it is rarely considered as a framework, particularly in the sophisticated discussions of the indigenous way of living and settings.

The growing discourse on food as a transgressive material covers a wide range of discussions. Employing food as a framework arguably shifts from seeing vernacular as form-based architecture to a more comprehensive understanding and analysis (Vellinga, 2007; Kellett, 2011). As food transgresses, it takes place, generating trajectories, and constructing the space of food (de Certeau, Giard and Mayol, 1998). Food is discussed not only as material that transgresses the raw, cooked and rotten states, but it can also be perceived as material that transforms through a series of processes, such as production, consumption, and decomposition (Levi-Strauss, 2013). The series of processes do not only suggest cooked food as part of the culture, but also the potential to consider the other state of food and related practice as part of the culture. However, most of the discussions tend to highlight food as the consumed material or relate to the cooking rituals, while the sourcing processes have not been addressed sufficiently (Suryantini, Atmodiwirjo and Yatmo, 2021). Revisiting the sourcing processes through the story of finding food should become an important matter for a discourse. Indeed, the observations of such practices and the generated trajectory becomes a way of revealing the way of indigenous living.

Food practices reflect the relationship between people and Nature, particularly in the way of finding food (Suryantini, Paramita and Yatmo, 2019). Standage (2009) argues that food shapes the human civilization across the world, indicating way of living as a reflection of food-finding practice. Prussin (1997) elaborate the difference of food-finding practices between a sedentary and nomadic group and how they shape their dwellings. A sedentary community provides food for and within their community through farming or agricultural practices,

securing the availability throughout the years by adjusting their environment. They tend to domesticate, exploit and engineer Nature selectively to avoid scarcity. Meanwhile, the hunter-gatherer communities, such as pastoral nomads, sea wanderers, or swidden farmers suggest a contrasting practice and a different approach toward Nature (Lawrence, 1997; Prussin, 1997).

Food determines the existence of living beings and thus the discussion on the quantity of food becomes critical, as it defines the ecological limit of a population (Sadler, 1830). If scarcity becomes a concern for a sedentary community that depends heavily on its landscape, it is not the case for most hunter-gatherers. With the help of the water and innate forces, some sea creatures move and migrate, resulting in variations in food availability across places (Prussin, 1997). They adjust their life to the natural environment by understanding Nature's variability in providing food, immersive with the variety of geographical and seasonal abundance of resources. They move with their mode of transportation from one place to another following the migration of sea creatures or other natural resources for living, operating based on a relatively low supply of food in a broad range of distribution (Prussin, 1997).

Up until now, many discussions on mobile living of indigenous communities have focused on living in the pastoral landscapes, connecting them with symbolic meanings or cosmologies as part of the cultural practices (Rapoport, 1997), their construction process and materials (Ara and Rashid, 2016), as well as the ecological aspects of such ways of living (Suryantini, Saginatari and Yatmo, 2022). Other discussions have addressed the living trajectories and territories throughout mobility (Chou, 2010), the ephemerality of architecture and settlement of the maritime communities (Lenhart, 2008), or how they dwell after they settle on the coastal areas (Ariando and Limjirakan, 2019).

To enrich the discourse, this article starts by looking at the practice of finding food practiced by the mobile community from the everyday perspective to gain insights into how food informs spatial arrangements. Such arrangements can be defined as “manipulation by users who are not its makers” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiii). The users transform the space to adapt to the existing condition based on their interests or rules. The various forms of impermanent and transient arrangements will further show that the mobility in the practice of finding food can be a basis for the spatial arrangements too.

Movable Architecture for a Mobile Way of Living

Mobility becomes the main mode of the nomadic people in responding to the dynamic availability of food in Nature. Deleuze and Guattari posited mobility of the nomadic people as “a consequence of a factual necessity” (2010:44), generating points and paths as the arrangement of their dwelling. From this point of view, the mode of transportation which accommodates the mobile way of living becomes critical. This suggests a different kind of architecture developed by the sedentary people, that consider attachment and fixed location as crucial (Rapoport, 1979).

Documenting the trajectories of food practice becomes an attempt to understand the relations between food, context, and architecture that emerges. In a mobile way of living, finding food means establishing the trajectories to follow food and living in the trajectories. The vehicle is thus utilized for the mobility according to those needs. The vehicle performs as a movable architecture with a particular size and form to respond to the particular contexts and functions, compromising with speed and power (Kronenburg, 2002).

However, such movable architecture that takes the form of a vehicle is often overlooked in the discussion of architecture due to “its impermanent, transient, less artistic and low-quality built form” (Kronenburg, 2002:9). The ideas of portable, demountable, and collapsible become some forms of adaptations that evolve within the movable architecture concerning the limited space, representing the impermanent and transient characters. The impermanent and transient characteristics potentially open further discussions about spatial adaptation as the negotiation among speed, functions, and space.

The impermanent and transient character of everyday architecture is reflected in its spatial appropriation or adaptation (de Certeau, Giard and Mayol, 1998), which further calls for

arrangements and rearrangements. Spatial adaptation can be observed through the movement of objects and the activities practiced every day, which essentially reflect the basic techniques developed within such cultures. Adaptations within a certain time range and physical boundaries can be captured and represented through the idea of layers (Brand, 1995)—layers of site, skin, structure, service, space, and stuff that could dynamically be adapted depending on the situations (Karimah and Paramita, 2020).

In this study, the ‘sampan’ becomes the vehicle that accommodates the mobile living of sea nomads. The exploration of the layers with the sampan will arguably reveal how the arrangements and rearrangements of activities and stuff occur within the sampans throughout mobility. In the following section, the spatial adaptations of sampans based on the food practices of the OSLs are discussed, exploring their acts of appropriating the sampan as a working and living space at the same time.

Research Method

Food-finding Practice: Investigation of the Indigenous Living arrangement

This study was carried out qualitatively through a case study approach, based on food-finding practice as a framework. Apart from primary data from the field, it also gathered information from literature regarding the OSLs in the Riau Islands. Primary data was collected by exploring the food-based spatial practices in the everyday of OSLs in Air Bingkai, Riau Islands within their sampan (Fig 1). This research was conducted through the macro inquiry of spatial practice by identifying the variations of activities in the sampan followed by a micro inquiry by scrutinizing the spatial arrangements in each of these operations.



Fig. 1: Visual documentation of the food-finding activities OSLs in the Riau Islands.

Source: Author

The field study was conducted in July–August 2019 and followed up during the pandemic with a series of long-distance interviews periodically between 2020–2021. The field study was employed to observe how the OSLs practice hunting and gathering sea creatures as their food and other domestic activities in the sampan during a journey. During the observations, visual documentation (i.e. photographs, video, and visual notes) was also undertaken during gathering, hunting, and other activities to identify possible arrangements of the sampan.

The chief of the OSL group, his wife, and their children, who are still practicing hunting and gathering and making long journeys with their sampan, were interviewed to understand the particular use of the sampan during different times of a day, seasons, or climates, and at the same time to ascertain the consistencies of their stories. Afterwards, the data is analyzed to reveal the important layers and thus the spatial arrangements in relation to hunting, gathering, and other domestic activities.

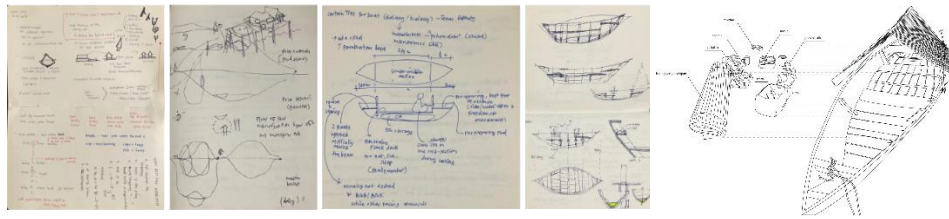


Fig. 2: Visual notes taken during the field observation and the visual analysis of sampan utilization.
Source: Author

Findings and the Discussion

Orang Suku Lout and Their Mobile Way of Living

As one of the indigenous communities, life of OSLs are attached to the sea. According to Lenhart (2008), they wander with their sampans (small boats) in relatively shallow seas and narrow straits between islands, and moor in the area with reefs or near the shores of a mainland. They maneuver where food is available in abundance (Suryantini, Saginatari and Yatmo, 2022). The OSLs are known for their excellent sea navigation and powerful rowing skills. They move relentlessly from one area to another within the region to hunt and gather food from the sea. They spend their time wandering, moving and following potentially edible sea creatures as food, such as fish, cuttlefish, crabs, shrimps, barnacles, and many more (Fig. 1).



Fig. 3: The food-finding trajectories of Orang Suku Lout in Riau Islands.
Source: Author

For the OSLs, sea means not only a place to find food but also a place to live and perpetuate their culture and tradition. According to the interview, even though nowadays, some of them additionally build more permanent structures on the shores of Air Bingkai as a homeport and have an address for administrative requirements by the government, they cannot separate themselves from the sea (Fig. 3). Throughout the years, they spend most of their time in a sampan, visiting particular spots in the region where food is known to be seasonally available.

For their food-finding, the OSLs develop survival strategies during various seasons throughout the years. While they are in search of food, they keep performing their everyday activities, such as resting, sleeping, gathering, raising children, eating, storing tools and stuff, and many others, hence transforming the sampan as the container of their mobile way of living. They can decide to reside and pause temporarily if food is enough or to take refuge and take shelter when the weather cannot be negotiated. Such indigenous arrangements imply not only

a way of inhabiting the world but also demonstrate the indigenous technology and local wisdom towards Nature.

In the next section, how the dynamic arrangement of living takes place within the sampan during the mobility of food-finding is discussed further. It is assumed that a particular spatial arrangement of living indicates the shifting idea of sampan from a means of transportation to a container of mobile living.

Sampan as a Working and Living Arrangement

Sampan or a boat structure is an essential property for people who live with the sea (Lenhart, 2008; Chou, 2010; Devendra, 2011; Andal, 2023). For OSL, a sampan reflects the practice of working and living in the sea. It varies in size, ranging from fourteen to twenty-eight feet, depending on the function of the sampan for the family. Every OSL family has at least one sampan as their key property, usually a larger one and it is often equipped with an engine (Bestari *et al.*, 2020). Compared to the stories of the chief, his family usually owns an additional sampan, which is smaller (ten feet) and without any engine, so it is lighter and agile in moving, advantageous for short-range mobility and spearfishing at night.

Fig. 4 shows the anatomy of the sampan owned by the third son of the chief that is usually used for the night time spearfishing and making a relatively long journey. The inner part of the sampan itself consists of three layers of flooring—upper, middle, and lower level—constructed from removable wooden planks above the keel. As it is usually equipped with a set of long oars, mast or rig and sail, rudder, and *kajang* (a portable roof made from pandanus leaf), some parts of the boat are modified, i.e., hooks for storing the oars, fishing gear, rig and sails, and also for mounting the *kajang* when it is used.

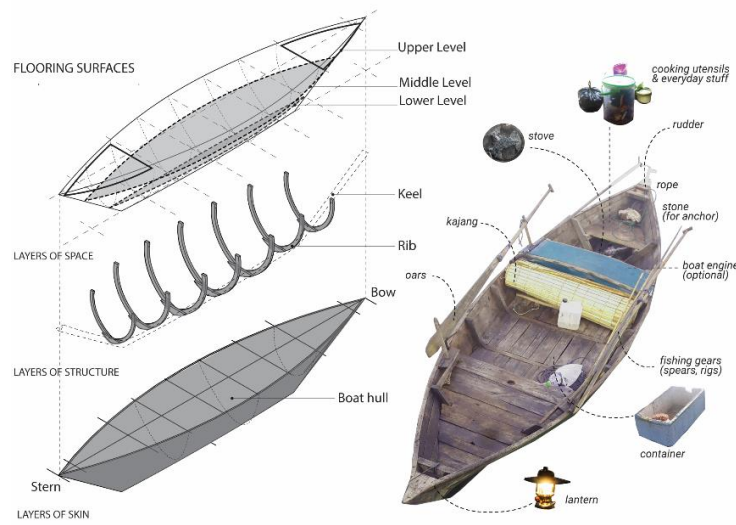


Fig. 4: The anatomy of the sampan of the OSL.

Source: Author

To explore further the multiple roles of sampan and its spatial arrangement, it is important to understand the various activities occurring in a sampan—the food-finding as well as everyday domestic activities that occur in between. Thus, following the story of the chief's family, two modes of operations in finding food can be identified.

First is the hunting mode—acquiring food by moving, following the movement of sea creatures that are fast-moving and escaping, such as fish, cuttlefish, crabs, octopus, turtles, etc. They move within a relatively wide range either by a sampan or wandering on foot in the coastal area. It is conducted usually when the water recedes and the weather is fine, either at night or early morning.

The second mode is the gathering—acquiring food by mooring at a particular place, getting off the sampan, moving slowly, searching and collecting the sea plants or animals that are attached to the host plant, coral reef, or rocks, such as seaweed, agar, mussels, clams, scallops, sea cucumber, etc. Currently, the OSL practices both modes, depending on the seasons and availability of the human resources among them.

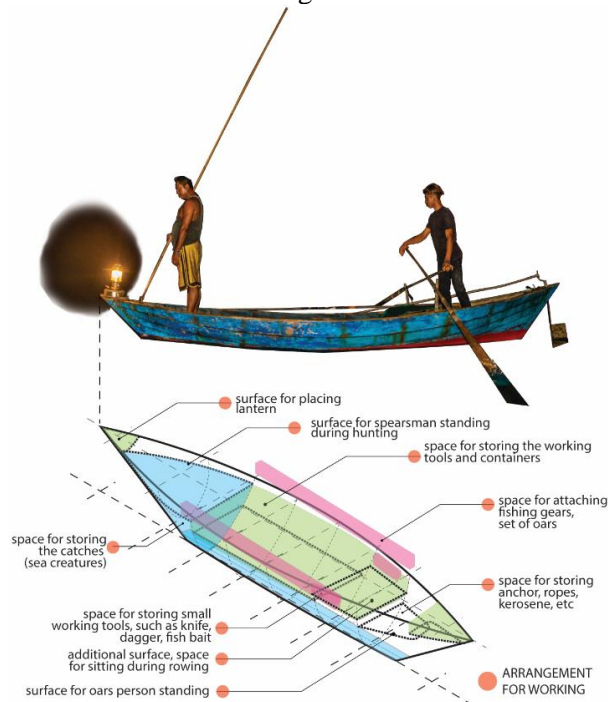


Fig. 5: The spatial arrangement of sampan for hunting the food.

Source: Author

Hunting is conducted mostly at night time, as the sky darkens and the tide is low. During the observation of night time spearfishing, two persons—the second and third sons of the chief—in a sampan are the ideal number for hunting: one at the bow acts as the spearman and the other at the end as the oars person. They bring along their tools—a set of spears and rods for different kinds of food, a set of oars, a lantern, rope, and food containers. If the spears and oars are positioned at both sides of the sampan within the reach of the hands of the spearman or oars person, the lantern is put at the tip of the bow to help the spearman at the front look for prey and navigate between the rocks. The rope and the food container are placed in the middle of a sampan as they serve trivial yet multiple functions. The spearman stands at the upper part of the sampan's bow, holding a spear, and being ready to throw it at any moment (Fig. 5). If any sea creature is caught, the spearman directly opens a wood plank, inserting the catch into the lower part of the hull underneath the surface where he stands. Meanwhile, the oarsman stands at the stern's upper part, following the instruction of the spearman, rowing quietly, as they said, no sound can be made to disturb the other sea creatures.

Another variation of hunting is spearfishing using a shorter rod, which is usually done for a short time when the sky is slightly bright, and the tide is still low. This activity can be a continuation of spearfishing before reaching their homeport, usually in areas with sand and coral reef. After getting off the sampan, the spearman wanders around the area looking for fish and other edible sea creatures. As this activity requires only a few tools and equipment, a smaller sampan can be used. In this variation, the sampan performs only to support the working activity—carrying and keeping the food within the sampan.

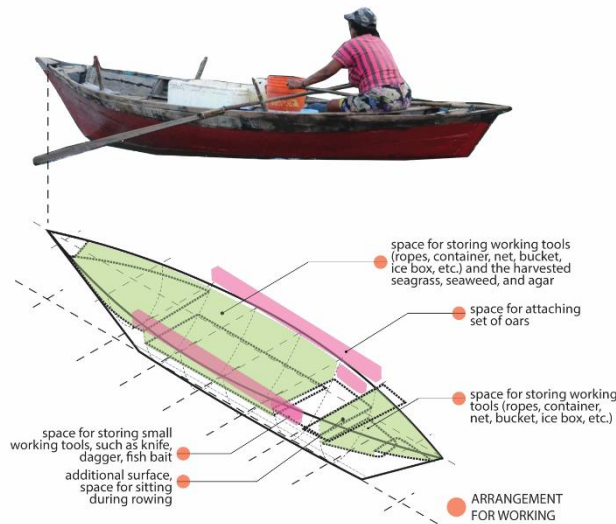


Fig. 6: The spatial arrangement of sampan for gathering food.
Source: Author

Meanwhile, the gathering mode is usually performed when the sky is brighter, ranging from dusk to dawn. Usually gathering food is conducted at a relatively close range with the mooring area or their homeport. They use the sampan to go to a sandy or muddy shoreline to collect sea creatures, such as clams, scallops, mussels, crabs, and sea cucumbers. When the tide is low, they also visit seagrass meadows to harvest seagrass, seaweed, or agar; or mangrove areas to collect barnacles that live off the trees. They also catch fish using a fishing line or net within an anchored sampan in a particular area. All of these activities can be conducted by one person to many, as long as they fit within the sampan (Fig. 6). They bring along their working tools and equipment and place them in the sampan within the hand's reach. In this mode, a sampan shows its flexibility for accommodating various food-finding modes through different arrangements of stuff.

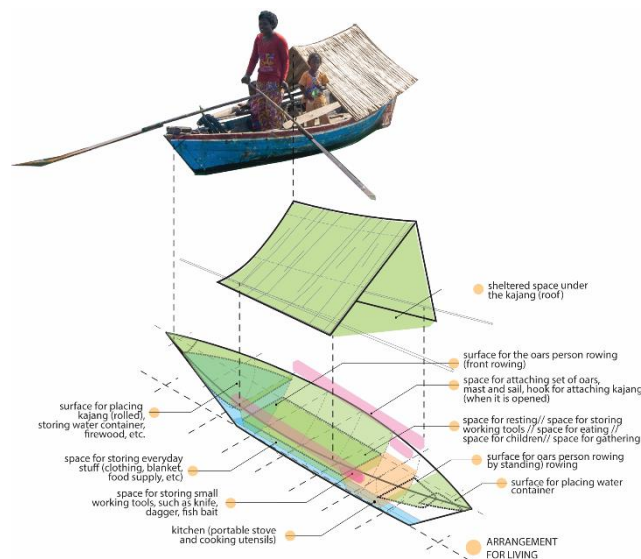


Fig. 7: Arrangements of a sampan for living.
Source: Author

As they wander farther to the sea, they spend more than a day floating in the sea, away from the land. The use of sampan is intensified through the arrangement and rearrangement of the layers of activities. They perform their everyday activities by taking turns or negotiating the areas of the sampan. In between food hunting and gathering activities, they use the upper and middle surfaces of the sampan for resting, cooking, eating, gathering, and many others. In case they move the sampan, the oars person usually stands at the stern navigating and rowing by hand using ca. two-meter-long oars. However, if cooking is performed at the stern, the oars person consequently moves to the bow, rowing the sampan forward (Fig. 7). If more family members join the sampan, they will sit and perform their activities in the middle area.

The longer the journey, the more material is brought for their everyday needs. They bring a self-made portable stove, pans and cauldron, food supply, seasoning and spices, freshwater, aside blankets, clothing, and *kajang*. If the weather is unfriendly, they unroll and assemble the *kajang*, constructing a tent-like shelter and at the same time, creating enclosed spaces for everyday living. If they are set for night fishing, they most likely collapse the *kajang*, roll and place it at the bow to provide a better view and avoid any visual obstruction while navigating the sampan. The sampan becomes the space of everyday living of the OSL and it is to be rearranged so it can perform as a shelter due to climatic variations, greater comfort and improved service.

The OSLs keep moving to different places, either for a short or long journey, looking for food or only moving, with their family or alone. This dynamic pattern of food availability arguably becomes the basis of the OSLs' every day in conducting their way of finding food. Due to the long trajectories, the sampan could accommodate not only spaces for navigating, moving and transporting from one place to another but also spaces for living and performing everyday domestic activities. As finding food becomes the main practice of OSLs within the sampan, space within will be presumably arranged according to the working activities. Based on the exploration above, it can be shown that when the other functions are added, space rearrangement becomes necessary to accommodate additional activities. The overlapping and everchanging arrangements become the strategy that occur within the sampan.

The OSLs actively rearrange the horizontal surfaces of the sampan, by demounting the wooden planks, stacking them at the stern or bow area, or mounting them back, depending on the activity performed. To have a larger space, the stuff is then stored in the lower level of the sampan. For example, they place the stove and cooking utensils on the lower level of the hull and cover it with wooden planks after cooking. By placing the planks back in place, the OSL can use the entire upper and middle levels of the sampan for other activities, such as rowing the sampan or storing stuff. Such dynamic and flexible arrangements of activities within the sampan demonstrate the adaptation by users based on their interests or rules, which in this case would be their way of finding food. This suggests the conformable perspective of the everyday, as theorized by de Certeau (1984).

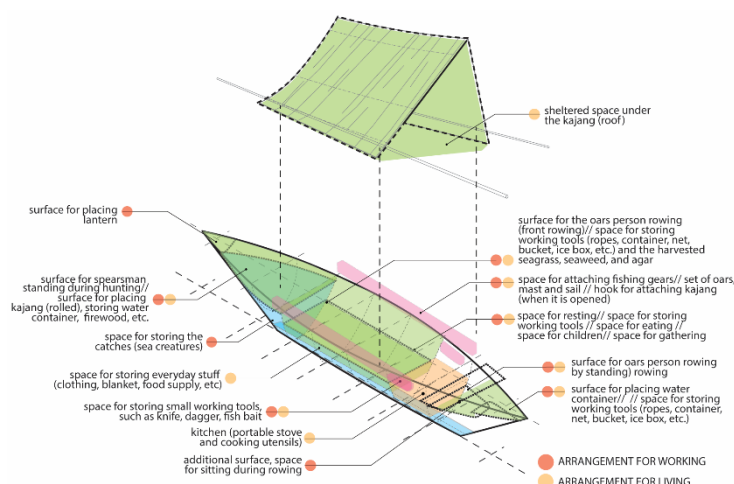


Fig. 8: A sampan as working and living arrangement.

Source: Author

The need for space within a sampan is accommodated through portable, demountable, and collapsible mechanisms, instead of altering the main structure (the keel and the bow) and the skin of the sampan (the wooden planks that shape the boat hull). They also rearrange their stuff in the sampan, taking advantage of having many levels of surfaces within the sampan's interior. The adaptations of sampan thus become evident through the shifting and changes of spaces for activities and stuff on the sampan during food-finding and the in-between activities (Fig. 8).

Above descriptions insinuate the multiple roles of a sampan beyond the means of transportation. The OSLs traditionally construct their own sampan and calculate the dimension of the sampan and construct it by themselves based on their experience and know-how passed down from their elders using the local materials. Regardless of the size, it can accommodate finding of food, storing, and processing of food, as well as providing space for everyday domestic activities, indicated by the arrangement of activities and stuff. Although the sampan may seem rudimentarily built, the way they rearrange a sampan based on their needs and habits demonstrates perfectly how a sampan could perform as an appropriate working and living arrangement for the OSL's mobile way of living.

Conclusions

The story of finding food by the OSLs conveys a lesson about a particular way of living and how food as a framework captures the uniqueness of the spatial arrangement of everyday space. Starting with the identification of food-finding practice variations, the discussion captures how the dynamic spatial arrangement of nomadic living enriches the discourse of vernacular architecture. The OSLs' mobile way of living establishes a tight relationship between people and Nature, as they hunt and gather food from the sea sufficiently, adjusting the dynamic nature of their food.

The findings on the multiple roles of the sampan generated by food-finding practices demonstrate the importance of the mode of transport for the nomadic community. The dynamic arrangements of layers that constitute the sampan suggest the indigenous mechanism of the sampan as a mobile architecture. The adaptations of the sampan are particularly adaptable and flexible, not only to cater for mobility within the archipelago but also for various working and living activities. The way of mobile living is fundamental for this indigenous community, establishing the idea of sampan as movable architecture instead of mere transportation. Such a living adds new insights to the way we perceive the idea of living and settling commonly seen from the landed and static perspective, through a fluid spatial domestic arrangement.

Furthermore, this paper expands the idea of nomadism by articulating the role of food and its potential to reveal more about the spatial dynamics of vernacular living comprehensively as mentioned by Kellet (2011) and Vellinga (2007). This study highlights the current understanding of food as a framework by showing the relation of food performativity with other aspects of material culture, in this case, architecture. Food becomes the material that is not only essential for the existence of a community but also a material that informs the OSL's way of living and thus their particular way of arranging their sampan for working and living. By scrutinizing the practice of finding food, we could comprehend the process of shifting and changing the arrangement within a sampan as an entity of domestic architecture, which is arguably unique for this particular culture. It would be fascinating to see how other cultures establish different ways of life in relation to food. This would also raise further questions on how food as a framework can be a trigger for various methods of inquiry and different ways of revealing stories within various indigenous community contexts.

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