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# BETWEEN FLOORS AND CHAIRS: THE CHANGING ROLE OF SEATS IN THE INDONESIAN ARCHIPELAGO

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**Abstract**

Sitting positions can reveal complex modes of spatial interaction, especially in multi-cultural settings where appropriate modes vary. In the Indonesian archipelago today, *lesehan* (floor-sitting) and chair-sitting occur at different situations. Tracing their history through *longue durée* approach reveals much intricacy in their shifting socio-cultural roles. Everyday sitting was for a long time synonymous with *lesehan*, which was supported by diverse sitting implements such as mats, cushions, and whole structures. Elevated seats are linked with the ancient notion of status-enhancing thrones, which were augmented by cultural layering from Hindu-Buddhist then Islamic influences. Colonial chairs represent the gradual domestication of elevated seating in the archipelago, although existing notions of exclusivity were appropriated and their use were carefully controlled by colonial socio-political norms to exclude most everyday Indonesians. It was through the critique of these norms by 20th century nationalists that chair-sitting became democratized as an everyday alternative to *lesehan*.

**Keywords**: chairs and seats, cultural interaction, Indonesian archipelago, material culture, regional diversity

## Introduction

There is a good chance you are reading this article from a chair.[1] For many people, chairs are an indispensable part of human habitation and may seem so ingrained in everyday life that one hardly need to justify their existence as "a sitting machine," in the words of architect Le Corbusier.[2] Yet for many cultures, the need for chairs may seem excessive as sitting could be accomplished by simply lowering oneself on the floor.[3] For extra comfort, one may instead use mats or carpets, the production of which could entail sophisticated craft rivalling the most meticulously designed chair.[4] But many sentiments[5] that overstate the habits of Western societies[6] have caused a Western chair bias in the study of sitting,[7] overlooking various other modes of sitting in the world and their distinct cultural developments.[8]

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Acknowledging that existing literature of seats often lack robust discussion outside of Western examples,[9] the author here tries to discuss the changing cultural role of seats within a context that has so far receive few attentions: Indonesia. The Indonesian archipelago, having long been a crossroad of cultures, provides an interesting case for the examination of sitting artefacts and their ideoscape—the societal understanding, ideas, terms, and images of seats. How did the materiality and ideoscape of seats reflect everyday interior occupations that went through so many changes in Indonesia? Exploring this question not only enrich the history of chairs and sitting from non-Western perspectives but may also provide new avenues of research in design, cultural, and Southeast Asian studies.

**Sources and Methods**

The author uses the work of Sanjeh Kumar Raman & Safial Aqbar Zakaria as a recent research precedent,[10] although the author employs several methodological differences. While Raman & Zakaria wrote on the experience of a specific group through intimate observation of everyday life, author tries to reconstruct a general understanding shared between multiple groups in Indonesia using the *longue durée* historical approach.[11] As there are limited prior studies specifically focused on seats within Indonesian settings, reconstruction entails critical assembly of "fragmentary evidence from pictures, material objects, and oblique references in writing" that historicise the sensibilities of sitting along with their politics.[12] These were assembled from a variety of scholarly sources discussing archaeological, linguistic, ethnographical, and historical phenomena within the geographic boundary of the Indonesian archipelago. This assembly is admittedly limited to opportunistic finds, the author however has attempted balanced representation by referring to phenomena attested in western (Aceh, Lampung, Nias), central (Java, Kalimantan hinterland), and eastern (Ambon, Manado, Nusa Tenggara) parts of the archipelago. These are then presented as narrative description in mostly chronological order with occasional flash forwards.

The following discussion includes a number of terms from a wide range of language family — Austronesian, Indo-European, Semitic, and Sinitic — which is impossible to be normalized in a single spelling scheme. Authors have used dictionary forms or forms which are used in the referenced sources.[13] A few terms are not originally written in the Latin alphabet and may be inconsistently Romanised between sources. The author has included native scripts for such terms followed by romanisation used in the referenced source.

**When Floor-sitters and Chair-sitters Meet**

How one sits in the presence of a company—whether using certain implements or positions—is a form of bodily comportment reflecting modes of spatial interaction and socio-cultural habits that are deeply seated. When users of differing habits meet, the sitting arrangement can be a complex field of contest. Several historical encounters attest to this very issue. In the 7th century, كتاب فتوح الشام *Kitāb futūḥ al-Shām* relates an encounter between Muslim leader Mu'ādh b. Jabal with a Byzantine patrician. The patrician laid on luxurious couch and provided extras for their meeting, but Mu'ādh opted to sit on the floor as a rejection to what he perceives as Byzantine vanity.[14] Until the late 17th century, royal and

aristocratic residences in Christian Spain had a luxurious space called *estrado* where its occupants, primarily women, sat on carpeted floors in similar manner to Arab practices. This was not controversial in Iberia but contributed to a portrayal of Spain (particularly by the French, who has no parallel in their chair-only spaces) as an antithesis of other European nations.[15] In 1856, Tokugawa officials of Japan, brought up in floor-sitting culture, found themselves compelled to entertain chair-sitting Western diplomats who insisted they could not sit comfortably on the floor. A compromise was devised in which the Western diplomats sat on chairs while the Tokugawa officials sat on 畳 *tatami* mats stacked to equal height.[16]

Taking a step back to the late 1500s, Western seafarers such as Jacob Corneliszoon van Neck and John Davis arrived at Indonesian courts such as Aceh and Banten. They were faced with a culture of floor-sitting, an act called *lesehan* in modern Indonesian,[17] and it was the Indonesian hosts' preference that prevailed at these encounters.[18] As the Dutch became more entrenched in Indonesia, chairs became more common in certain social contexts. Women of mixed descent in Batavia (now Jakarta), for example, were known to sit upon ornately carved chairs in public places or with company but sit on mats in their personal quarters.[19] Indigenous nobles might acquire European-style chairs not because they provided a better way of sitting, but simply because they were novel and could serve as a status symbol.

In modern Indonesia, *lesehan* and chair-sitting both occur at different situations, although they are not allocated to neatly divided spheres such as private-public, rural-urban, or casual-formal.[20] *Lesehan* is the older, more indigenous form of seating, and today one could still find people *lesehan* on the terraces of rural homes and city curbs. *Lesehan* is also common in spaces for Muslims, who constitute the majority population of the country. Public prayer rooms, for example, is ubiquitous, and it is not unusual for people to sit idly on its floors after prayers. Western-style chair-sitting, however, came to dominate in other situations. Conventional homes, schools, offices, restaurants, and other spaces have chairs by default. Interior designers and architects in Indonesia invariably design spaces with Western-style chairs in mind unless specified otherwise.

Considering the country's colonial past and aforementioned historical accounts, one may suspect that chair-sitting in Indonesia is one of many Western habits that are steadily erasing indigenous ways of living, as is happening in other places in the world.[21] This suspicion may be further justified when one learns that most words for seating in the Indonesian language are decidedly foreign in origin (table 1). It is most curious then, in the characteristically "messy" way that cultural influences tend to accumulate in Indonesian subjects, that the basic Indonesian word for chair—*kursi*—did not come from the Dutch *stoel* or any other European language. The word is derived from Arabic كرسي *kursi* presumably first borrowed during the region's rise of Islamic influence and had been noted by the Chinese before Europeans came to the archipelago. How do we make sense of this? We must first step back to the oldest known mode of seating—*lesehan*.

| Term | Gloss | Traced roots | |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Balai-balai* | Sitting platform, bench | PMWP | **balay* |
| *Bangku* | Bench | Portuguese | *banco* |
| *Dingklik* | Low stool | Javanese | ꦢꦶꦁꦏ꧀ꦭꦶꦏ꧀ *dingklik* |
| *Dipan* | Divan, low couch | Persian | ديوان *diwan* |
| *Kadera* | Chair | Portuguese | *cadeira* |
| *Kursi* | Chair | Arabic | كرسي *kursi* |
| *Lantai* | Floor | OJ | *lante* |
| | | PWMP | **lantay* |
| *Lesehan* | To sit on the floor | Javanese | ꦭꦺꦱꦺꦲꦤ꧀ *léséhan* |
| *Mimbar* | Pulpit with seat | Arabic | منبر *minbar* |
| *Singgasana* | Throne | OJ | *siṅhāsana* |
| | | Sanskrit | *siṁhāsana* |

Table 1. Glossary of Indonesian seat terms discussed in this paper. OJ: Old Javanese; PWMP: Proto-Western-Malayo-Polynesian. For other language abbreviations, see endnote 13.

## House and Mats

This section traces domestic floor-sitting, and its material supports. The archipelago's rich vernacular architectural traditions were designed for people to practice *lesehan*. This does not mean that houses are completely bare, as there are often storage containers and built-in features such as hanging *para* racks.[22] However, chairs and furniture in the conventional Western sense are absent, as they are simply not needed.[23] One could imagine that the whole house, very often raised from the grounds by posts, *is* the chair and the floors are the seat. Floor space is often multifunctional, and sitting for certain activities can be demarcated by differing floor levels and relative position within the house.[24] Based on comparative studies, scholars have identified this type of spatial arrangement as part of prehistoric Austronesian architectural traits shared in large areas of Southeast Asia and Oceania.[25] Although ancient examples are lacking due to the use of perishable material in the region, such traits may have already been established in the 3rd century BCE based on house depictions found in ancient bronze kettledrums such as Ngọc Lũ (found in Vietnam, dated 3rd century BCE to 1st century CE) and Makalamau (fig. 1 left) (found in Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, dated 3rd to 4th century CE).[26]

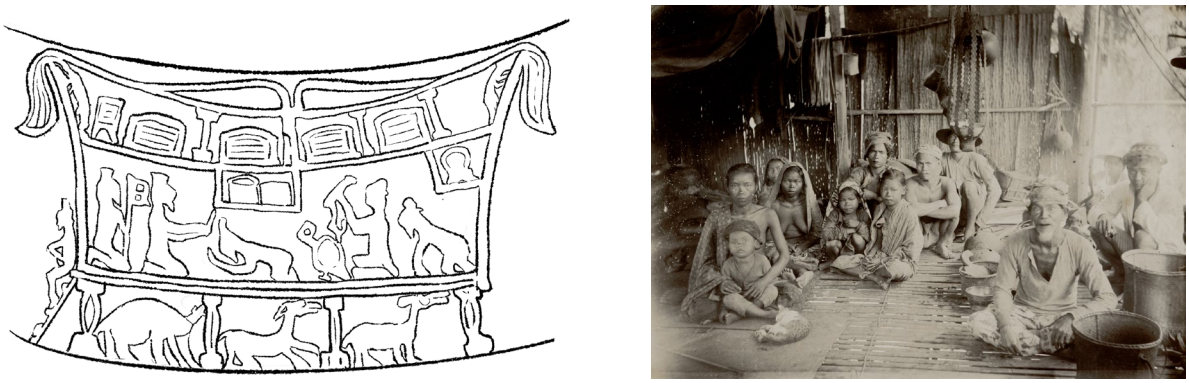

Fig. 1. Left: one of the house depictions in Makalamau kettledrum, c. 3rd to 4th century CE. Note the human figures sitting on floors raised from the ground level. Right: residents of a longhouse in Moearatewe, Kalimantan, photographed c. 1917. Author courtesy of Ghina Amalia Yuhanida; Leiden University Libraries Digital Collection, KITLV 86981. © Public domain.

If the house itself is the chair, then mats could be seen as some sort of upholstery. Plaited mats, from plant fibres such as rattan and palm leaves, and textile mats[27] are used to support a variety of activities that involve sitting as well as sleeping. The oldest written references of such mats in Indonesia can be found in vignettes of Old Javanese literature composed between the 9th and 15th centuries,[28] when the archipelago was experiencing its "Hindu-Buddhist" period. In these texts, a broad range of soft furnishings are already mentioned in elaborate terminology. Mats were most often mentioned in terms with Austronesian roots, such as *baritu* (cf. PPh **barit*), *kalasā* (cf. PWMP **kalasar*), *lamak* (cf. PMP **lamak*), and *lante* (cf. PWMP **lantay*), among others.[29] In 9th century Java, the Kaladi inscription (issued in 873) mentioned that there were professional or semi-professional mat crafters called *palamak*.[30] Unfortunately, the visual appearance of these mats is not well understood, and many terms that have survived until today have undergone semantic shifts. For example, OJ *lamak* denotes a bed mat, but the same term in Balinese today refers to a kind of narrow, rectangular hanging often made from *lontar* palm leaves.[31] While OJ *lante* denotes mats made from rattan, the same term in modern Javanese (cognate with Indonesian *lantai*) means building floor of any kind.[32]

Fig. 2. Left: Rattan sleeping mat, 194 × 84 cm, unclear affiliation. Right: Rattan sitting mat, 25.4 × 26.9 cm, Kanowit affiliation. Wereldmuseum, RV-03-323; British Museum, As1905,498. CC BY-SA 4.0. © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA. 4.0.

Like chairs, mats can be utilitarian or highly complex and artistic. In Indonesia today, the various hinterland groups of Kalimantan (a.k.a. Borneo) are arguably crafters of the world's most diverse and aesthetically appealing plaited objects,[33] which include mats.[34] A great deal of examples and their associated traditions have been discussed in the book edited by Bernard Sellato,[35] although scholarly attention to these objects is still wanting.[36] In general, plaited mats are made to serve local needs by groups such as the Iban, Kayan, Kanowit, Ngaju, and Ot Danum, although some are traded away. The largest and most elaborately decorated mats tend to be for sleeping (fig. 2 left) or rituals. Sitting mats (fig. 2 right) tend to be smaller and simpler, but there was also an interesting type that is worn as clothing (fig. 3). These arrow shaped mats are tied around the waist by strings fastened to the center of their triangular portion, with the rest of the mat hanging down behind. They furnished the wearer with a portable, instant seat at all times,[37] somewhat prefiguring contemporary experiments of "wearable interiors."[38] Some of the motifs in these mats carry ritualistic meaning, others are simply decorative. In each community, crafters have at their disposal a portfolio of standard motifs with associated names, meanings, and cultural references that can be adapted into more complex composition. But even plain mats can be valuable as it is their technical excellence, rather than decorative flair, that is principally appreciated. The owner and maker of well-crafted plaited artefacts feels satisfaction in making them, pleasure in possessing them, and pride in displaying them; a beautifully plaited mat can confer personal prestige and status,[39] just like modern homeowners with their chairs.

Fig. 3. Left: A Kayan wearable sitting mat called *tabit*, 48 × 23 cm. Right: A couple of "Kantoeh Dajak" of Kapuas River, photographed c. 1900s. Note the sitting mat worn on the back of the right figure. Wereldmuseum, RV-1219-139; Leiden University Libraries Digital Collections, KITLV 25813. © CC BY-SA 4.0 public domain.

**Thrones**

With floor-sitting briefly reviewed, this section considers elevated seats in pre-colonial Indonesia. Mundane elevated seats, if needed, was perhaps seen more in an architectural sense as a small pavilion or a mobile extension of the building floor. This is reflected in the term for a type of platform-like bench called *balai-balai*.[40] Terms related to *balai* (from PMWP **balay*) is widely attested in the languages of the archipelago, including modern Indonesian, where they generally refer to a certain type of open pavilion or communal building.[41] The reduplication of the term here can be readily understood, at least for Indonesian speakers, as diminutive for *balai*. Thus, they are akin to a small piece of a building where one sits on its floor. Beside this, there are also clues of more prestigious elevated seat in prehistoric Indonesia in the form of natural stone thrones reserved for chiefs, kings, or revered ancestors. In later myths of the archipelago, these were sometimes venerated as *watu gilang* "shining stones," from the belief that personal charisma and power caused the physical appearance of an individual (or object) to glow with radiance.[42] Little is known of these stones beyond fragmentary myths, but their use may underpin the much more recurrent notion that elevated seating is reserved for very select individuals and circumstances, as we shall see.

Like mats, OJ texts also provide attestations of elevated seatings, but unlike mats, they tend to be described under Sanskrit loanwords such as *palaṅka* "palanquin." A Sanskrit loan familiar to most Indonesians today is *singgasana* "throne," from the Sanskrit word *siṁhā* "lion" and *āsana* "seat/sitting postures." Lions have no natural range in Southeast Asia, but they have long held a prominent place in Indic culture. In Hindu mythology, one of the avatars of the god Viṣṇu is the man-lion Narasiṁha. Śiva is compared to the lion in texts such as *Śiva Purāṇa*, and a lion serve as the mount of goddess Durgā. The earliest extant visual depictions of lions in South Asia are found on Mauryan columns, erected by the emperor Aśoka (ca. 304–232 BCE) when he embraced Buddhism. The lion then become closely associated with royal powers, and it is in the early 1st millennium CE that *siṁhāsana* or lion-seat became an emblem for a royal throne in literary and visual arts.[43]

The oldest attestation of the word *siṁhāsana* in Indonesia comes, once again, from OJ texts in the form of *siṅhāsana*. Similar to the original Sanskrit and later Indonesian sources, OJ texts consistently described it as the seat of royalties, holy priests, and divine beings.[44] The 14th century eulogy *Deśawarṇana* described a *siṅhāsana* acting as the ritual centre in the Majapahit court's *śrāddha* (posthumous) ceremonies, where effigies representing deceased royal ancestors were enthroned and venerated.[45] The salient form of ancient *siṅhāsana,* however, are more difficult to pin down. Among the Buddhist arts of Java (principally the rich reliefs of Borobudur[46] but also bronze and stone statues), there are depictions which can be tentatively identified as *siṅhāsana*—either because they have *siṅhā* decorations[47] or are occupied by royalties and religious figures. The base for these seatings is elevated either by short legs or a solid architectural podium,[48] and is wide enough for the user to sit cross legged or in the *mahārājalilāsana* "royal ease" pose (fig. 4, far right). The backrest consists of shoulder height beam with floriate *makara*-like ends,[49] often holding a decorated headrest which could frame the sitter's head as if a *prabha* halo. This type of backrest originates from South Asia's

Pāla period (8th to 12th century), while the overall seat form goes further back than Pāla.[50]

From a modern design perspective, these seats (fig. 4, 5) certainly do not inspire much confidence in comfort, judging from their stiff angles and hard materials. This is possibly why the sitters are often depicted with complementary implements such as a *yogapaṭṭa* leg strap (fig. 4, far right),[51] textile coverings, and square cushions, the latter probably corresponding to OJ *kasur* filled with *kapuk* (fibre of the *Bombax* genus).[52] However, comfort would have come second when we consider the main purpose of thrones, which was to exalt the status of the sitter. When the norm is *lesehan*, the effect of stand-alone elevated seating (even a comparatively low one) certainly raises the position of the sitter in the most literal sense. Backrests, if present, perhaps function less as a resting place and more as a canvas of opulence, decked in intricate carvings, jewels, and gold, as suggested in OJ excerpts.[53] However, *Deśawarṇana* (canto 63.4) suggests that *siṅhāsana* could also been made of humbler materials, as the *sthāna siṅhā* (synonym for *siṅhāsana*) in the aforementioned royal *śrāddha* was apparently fashioned from plaited bamboo work. Nevertheless, the resulting *siṅhāsana* offered a splendid sight for the audience of the ceremonies.[54] It is clear that this type of seat would have been reserved for special occasions and not extended to everyday life, where *lesehan* prevailed in all levels of society.

Fig. 4. Various throne-like seating in 9th century Borobudur reliefs with their narratives, panel numbers, and sitters, photographed c. 1910. From left to right: Lalitavistara 113 (Throne for Gautama Buddha), Gaṇḍavyūha 27 (Indriyeśvara), Gaṇḍavyūha 65 (Queen Māyā), Avadāna 94 (King Bhallāṭiya). Leiden University Libraries Digital Collection, KITLV 101471, KITLV 102363, KITLV 102401, KITLV 101573). © public domain.

Fig. 5. Left: The seated Dhyani Buddha Vairocana in the 9th century Mendut temple, photographed c. 1910. Right: Several ancient Javanese bronze statuettes depicting seats, the far right occupied by Kubera, photographed c. 1901-11. Leiden University Libraries Digital.

The 14th century marks the rise of Islamic material culture in Southeast Asia.[55] Archipelagic products, like camphor,[56] have long been traded by merchants in the Islamic world, and it was primarily through these trade relations that Islamic kingdoms began to rise as new regional powers. The era also saw the rise of the classical Malay language. Old Malay has been attested earlier in Hindu-Buddhist inscriptions, but it was around the 14th century that it began to absorb Arabic and Persian vocabulary, adopted Arabic script, integrated Islamic themes in its literature, and become *de rigueur* in inter-kingdom diplomacy and trade.[57] We do not know exactly when the term كرسي *kursi* was introduced, but it must have been commonplace by the 16th century. The word is attested in perhaps the oldest known Malay word list, written in Chinese. It was compiled in Melaka by 楊林 Yáng Lín, an interpreter working for the imperial 四譯館 *Sìyìguǎn* "College of All Foreigners" before 1511. Among the 482 entries is 椅 "chair," glossed as 孤路西 *gūlùxī* as the nearest approximation to the Malay pronunciation.[58]

The introduction of the new term *kursi*, however, does not necessarily mean drastic change in sitting practices themselves. Plenty of the archipelago's material and literary culture shows that Islamic influences often did not remove pre-existing cultural constructions but rather enveloped them in new layers.[59] Muslim traders were floor-sitters like Indonesians and only use chairs on limited occasions. The Arabic term كرسي *kursi* itself (according to the 13th century lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr) originally means anything that supports sitting,[60] not a particular piece of sitting furniture like ديوان *diwan* "divan,"[61] or منبر *minbar* "pulpit seat."[62] The term, however, is understood as a throne or seat of divine authority in the آية ٱلكرسي *Ayāt al-Kursī* "throne verse." This is a well-known excerpt of the Holy Qur'an (al-Baqara 2: 255) often used in calligraphic works in the Islamic world—including Indonesia.[63] It is likely this extraordinary sense that

Fig. 6. A *sesako*, the back rest of *pepadun*, from Panaragan, Lampung, c. 1800-1850. 141,5 × 240 cm. Gift of Michael Abbott AO QC, Justice John Mansfield, David Urry, Dick Whitington QC and Frances Gerard through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation Collectors Club 2006. Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), 20068A90. © courtesy of AGSA.

was first understood when the term was absorbed into Malay, as demonstrated in classical Malay texts. In the *Sulalatus Salatin*,[64] the word *kursi* appears as the throne of the King of India and the King of Maluku.[65] In *Hikayat Indraputra*, *kursi yang keemasan bertatahkan ratna mutu manikam* "golden *kursi* studded with gleaming gems" is often mentioned but only used by the king and a few members of the royal household.[66] The term *kursi* served as a new synonym to existing *siṅhāsana*, and Islamic influences further augmented their status as extraordinary objects that are not meant to be seated by ordinary humans on daily basis.

This complex layering is perhaps best exemplified by the *pepadun* throne of Lampung, recently discussed in detail by James Bennett.[67] This is a type of precious *pusaka* "heirloom" to the Abung communities native to central and east coast of Lampung, South Sumatra. It consists of a low seat and an ornately carved backrest called *sesako*, once a package but now often separated. Several elaborate pieces (e.g. fig 6) can be found at various museum collections.[68] The piece held by National Gallery of Australia (inventory no. 1985-1982) is the oldest example known thus far, radiocarbon dated to 1415-1455. Lampung traditions identify an intimate link between ancient tree veneration, Islam, and *pepadun*. One narrative records that the people of the legendary Skala Brak Kingdom worshipped deities that dwell in a sacred tree. Following the people's conversion to Islam in the 15th century, the tree was cut down to create the first *pepadun,* which was subsequently used to enthrone Skala Brak kings and their descendants, including the Abung people. Another Abung story relates *pepadun*'s origin to an encounter between a Lampung delegation and the sultan of Banten, who received the delegation while sitting on a large stone beneath a banyan tree. The Lampung delegation was so impressed with the meeting that they created the first *pepadun* when they returned home. Bennett discussed how these connections were further amplified by the ornate carvings of the *sesako*, where combinations of arboreal motifs with Indic *naga* serpents and profiles of the *meru* cosmic mountain "signal potent locations in the landscape where mystical consciousness and social identity are united."

As we circle back to 16th century European accounts of Indonesia, we find that *lesehan* was still the predominant mode of seating, seemingly preferred even by kings. A *kursi* might have very well served as a tangible projection of a king's material wealth and prestige, which was an important aspect of kingship in the Malay world. But with so many things that a king can display (such as sumptuous textiles),[69] a bulky *kursi* might not have been the most attractive to maintain. Alternatively, these kings may have had *kursi* but did not feel obliged to present them to early European seafarers who had nothing interesting to offer. The latter seems likely when we consider the one recorded exception. When Jacob van Heemskerck visited Ambon in 1599, the senior military captain of Ambon unexpectedly provided chairs for Van Heemskerck and himself to sit. This courtesy was probably extended because the Dutch then could provide something of interest to the captain: military support to expel the Portuguese from the island. It was likely also that the provided chairs were taken from Portuguese outposts.[70]

## Chairs

The arrival of Europeans and their colonial venture brought notable shift to pre-existing practices of elevated seats, which will be reviewed in this section. The Portuguese were the first chair-sitting Europeans to arrive in the Indonesian archipelago. Although Portuguese activities in the archipelago were short-lived—already ousted by the Dutch in the early 1600s—their conquest of Melaka in 1512 and establishment of an Ambon outpost in 1513 profoundly disrupted the region's trade network. The Portuguese language became an important auxiliary trade language besides Malay up to the 19th century.[71] At least one Portuguese word for seat furniture is now common: *banco,* which became Indonesian *bangku* "bench." Another Portuguese term *cadeira* "chair" was absorbed in some Indonesian languages as the common term for chair, for example, Central Lembata Lamaholot *kédéra.*[72] In Malay and Indonesian, however, the derived term *kadera* saw little use except in eastern Malay varieties—such as Ternate and Manado Malay.[73] Portuguese presence very likely influenced the first distinct Indo-European furniture style in the region, what is now sometimes called 'coastal ebony.' Although the exact origin of this style is unclear, three production centers have been proposed: the Coromandel Coast, Sri Lanka, and Batavia or Ambon.[74]

In 1619, the Dutch East Indies Company established Batavia (now Jakarta) atop the razed settlement of Jayakarta. Batavia was perhaps the first major settlement in the archipelago where chair-sitting was treated as mundane.[75] The subsequent development of chair designs and the associated furniture industry in Batavia has been covered by several authors.[76] The European elites of Batavia generated steady demands for chairs, and the Chinese (themselves chair-sitters[77] and able to adapt European styles) became the biggest supplier. The various styles used throughout 17th to 19th century Batavia (fig. 7)—coastal Ebony, French Classicism (or Louis XIV style), Louis Quinze (or Louis XV style), Chinese, Neoclassic, and hybrids—reflect the growing diversity of the city's inhabitants as well as the lavish taste of Batavian elites.

Fig. 7. Several European-style chairs made in colonial Indonesia from the collection of Wereldmuseum. From left to right: Mid 17th to early 18th century coastal ebony chair; 18th century Baroque/rococo *burgomaster* chair; 19 th century Neoclassic Raffles chair. Wereldmuseum, TM-112-2, TM-1954-4, TM-1524-5. © CC BY-SA 4.0.

Moreover, Company officials in their diplomatic capacity often deployed the *praacht en praal* "pomp and splendour" strategy to impress indigenous kingdoms and garner prestige. This entailed lavish displays of material wealth—the strategy used by existing kingdoms themselves—which extended to furniture.[78] Company officials perhaps found it convenient that there were already pre-existing prestige surrounding elevated seats among Indonesians while they used chairs, stools, and benches on a daily basis.[79] Thus, by partly aligning the mundane Dutch *stoel* to the Malay *kursi*, along with other *pronkstukken* "prestige pieces" at their disposal, the Dutch were able to portray themselves as quasi-royalties instead of mere merchants.[80]

Despite this alignment, however, the extraordinary throne sense of *kursi* must have begun to erode due to the sheer number of chairs produced in Batavia. Examining various 18th century household registers, art historian Titus M. Eliëns estimates that Batavia needed a yearly supply of more than 4000 chairs, where each household might have owned 100 on average and some owning up to 400 chairs.[81] In the 1780 *Nieuwe Woordenschat* trilingual dictionary published in Batavia,[82] the chair is glossed as *ſtoel* in Dutch, *kroeſie* in Malay, and *kadëra* in Portuguese under the section *Derie Pada Barang Njang Kena Pada Roema* "on things that are at home." A *kursi* in a mundane home may seem incredulous under the throne sense that we have seen in literary Malay, but here it is aligned with many other ordinary household items. It was also in the 18th century that chairs with curved (as opposed to straight) backrests began to appear in Indonesia such as the *burgomaster* chair (fig. 7, center)—indicating some consideration of practical comfort as opposed to a purely decorative backrest. The precedent, however, likely did not come from Europe but from the Chinese Lohan or "Grand Tutor" chairs.[83]

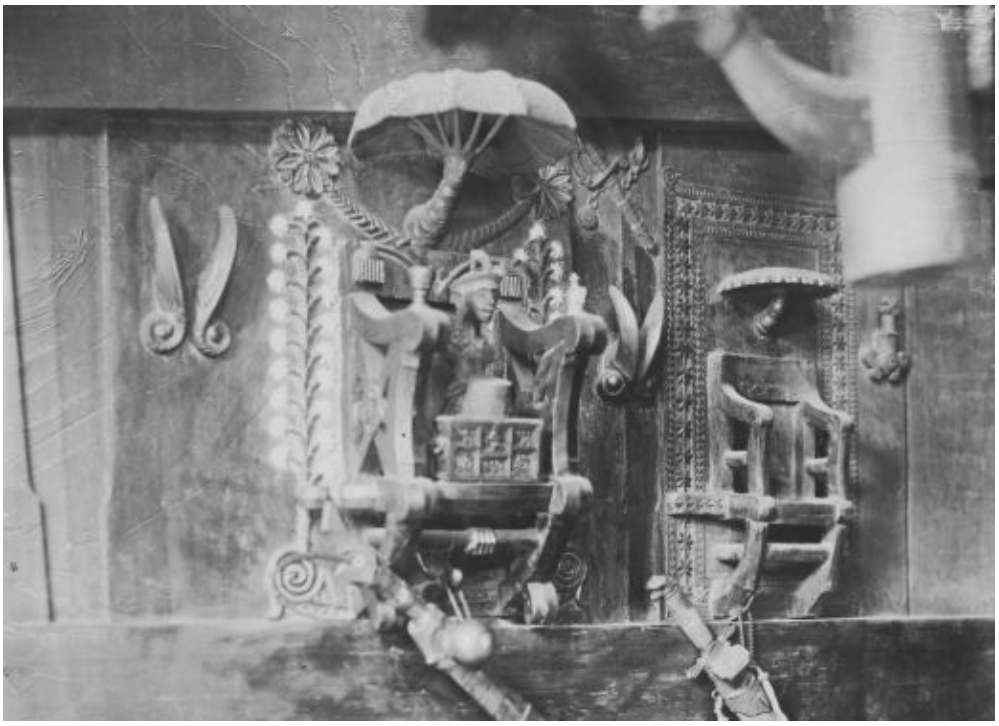

Fig. 8. Throne carvings for ancestor image, somewhat similar in form to Raffles chairs, in a house in Bawömataluo, Nias island, photographed 1930. Wereldmuseum, TM-60045301. © CC BY-SA 3.0.

Photographs from 1800s Java began to show lower-class indigenous workers squat-sitting on low stools called *dingklik* (originally a Javanese term, with uncertain etymology),[84] and by the second half of the 19th century major furniture suppliers emerged outside of Batavia—such as in Jepara and Pekalongan.[85] Although conventional chairs remained rare outside colonial settlements, chair-sitting was increasingly emulated by indigenous elites as European hegemony grew. European officials sometimes gifted chairs and furniture to Javanese nobles to curry favours, and these pieces were copied and emulated as an expression of social status further into Javanese territories.[86] A similar process might have occurred elsewhere in the archipelago,[87] so that a *kursi* was no longer understood as a sovereign throne of the highest order but a domestic throne used by richer neighbours. In many other places such as Nias, Kalimantan hinterlands, and Yamdena, however, it seems that the ancient meaning persisted so that the forms of a European chair can be borrowed for throne carvings that held ancestor figures (fig 8)[88] or depictions of mythical houses,[89] but chairs remain practically unused by human beings in all levels of society.

Arguably, chair-sitting is one issue with a cascading effect on Indonesian independence. Over time, Western-style chair-sitting and its association with reigning Dutch colonials created a hierarchical disparity that enforced unequal power relations, like in *landraad* court trials. *Landraad* was a mixed law court where Indonesian, Dutch, Chinese, and Indo-European men held judicial positions over the non-European population of the archipelago. In many photos of such trials, one could immediately see the contrast between floor-sitting suspects and chair-sitting court members, along with the presiding Dutch judge. While the author has not found an official regulation that mandated floor sitting for the accused, accounts of court sessions show that this was nevertheless enforced.[90] Such enforcement can be read in the same way that sartorial decorum in *landraad* sessions were used to upheld colonial hierarchy where non-Europeans were defaulted to lower positions.[91] Gone were the days when Indonesians could ask European visitors to *lesehan* and expect them to comply. Although *lesehan* was probably preferred at home by Indonesians, colonial enforcement of such behaviour was a source of resentment. In the letter dated 23 August 1900, the prominent advocate of women's rights and education Raden Adjeng Kartini disparaged this attitude:[92]

*The most minor European official has the right to sit on a chair, while native officials below the rank of regent of whatever age, origin, or expertise, are directed to sit on the floor when Europeans are present.*

This, however, was not a construct solely supported by Dutch mechanisms. Indigenous aristocrats also played a role in keeping the exclusive status of Western-style chair-sitting. This was perhaps most visible in the meticulous (or pedantic) regulations administered by Javanese courts (*kraton*). A Surakarta manuscript entitled *Serat Adhel* (compiled in the 1900s but with regulations that probably date from the late 1700s), has regulations of *kursi* use where they were only permitted to *kaliwon* rank courtiers and above.[93] Seating rights were then handed out to lower-rank courtiers at the *kraton*'s discretion, which was never extended to non-courtiers.[94] Admittedly, aristocrats were not unified in their

opinions; some considered *lesehan* and certain traditional comportment like *sembah-jongkok* (squat-bowing) to be demeaning when enforced in public with mixed company. Prince Mangkunegara IV, for one, prohibited *sembah-jongkok* in his palace in 1904.[95]

In 1913, a Javanese public prosecutor named Raden Soemarsono, well educated in Batavia and then recently appointed to the Purwakarta district court, vehemently refused to sit on the floor and crouch in deference while his Javanese and Dutch superiors sat on chairs. Soemarsono did not take issue with floor-sitting itself but rather his superiors' unwillingness to provide chairs, thus relegating him to lower spatial order. There were actually repeated government circulars in 1890, 1904, 1906, and 1909 prohibiting officials from insisting on such deferential (*hormat*) performance, but they were widely flouted by provincial civil servants. Soemarsono appealed to his former high school mentor, the influential and progressive Dutch advisor for native affairs, G. A. J. Hazeu. Using Soemarsono's correspondences as evidence, Hazeu was able to convince the government to issue the uncompromising 1913 *hormat* circular,[96] scolding conservative civil servants for failure to comply with previous circulars. Galvanised by this success, Soemarsono then took the lead in founding the local branch of the *Sarekat Islam* association, the first mass political movement in Indonesian history, with the objective of ending other forms of humiliating abuses. Chair-sitting thus subverted Dutch colonial hegemony and ignited emancipatory change in colonial Indonesia.[97]

## Conclusions

A number of key takeaways can be surmised from our *longue durée* assembly. For a long time, *lesehan* is the predominant sitting mode in the Indonesian archipelago and this mode is supported by diverse sitting implements such as mats, cushions, and whole structures. Elevated seating in the form of thrones can be traced to similarly ancient provenance. However, they went through successive cultural layering, first under Hindu-Buddhist then Islamic influences, which augmented their primary use as status signifier. Colonial chairs represent the gradual domestication of elevated seating in the archipelago, although local notions of exclusivity were appropriated within colonial socio-political norms to exclude most everyday Indonesians. It was through the critique of these norms by 20th century nationalists that chair-sitting became democratized as an everyday alternative to *lesehan*. For Indonesian design education especially, hitherto heavily reliant on literature penned from Western perspective and examples, this assembly may serve as an alternative framework for studying local modes of habitation.

In this study, analysis has been limited to opportunistic collation by the author. Some regions, particularly Java, received multiple threads of discussion while other regions were only mentioned in passing. *Lesehan* and its supporting elements has been discussed, but many aspects of this sitting mode remain under researched, despite its relevance in everyday Indonesian life. While comprehensive survey in a region as vast as the Indonesian archipelago is not feasible in the short term, discussion of more material examples or in-depth study to particular aspects may be worthwhile avenues of future research. This may contribute to more inclusive understanding of human habitation in a truly global perspective.

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No substantive part of this article was AI generated and at no point the author consulted programs with explicit AI models for this article's content. The author would like to thank Melissa Lauw for the English language copyediting in the initial draft.

NOTES

[1] The author apologizes for the assumption if the readers are not.

[2] Elizabeth Wilhide and Andrew Wood, *The Chair: Living with Modern Classics* (Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000), 6. The original quote, "Un fauteuil est une machine à s'asseoir," is from Le Corbusier's 1923 *Vers Une Architecture*.

[3] Galen Cranz, *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design* (Norton, 1998), 25-30.

[4] See, for example, the plaited mats of Kalimantan (Jonathan Fogel and Bernard Sellato, "Decorated Mats of the Peoples of the Borneo Hinterland," *Tribal Art* 69, no. Autum (2013): 126–37), 畳 *tatami* mats of Japan (Hirai Yuka [平井ゆか] and Uchida Yosichika [内田祥哉], "Research on Books Concerning the Development of Tatami and its Production and Distribution Systems | 畳と畳を支えるシステムの開発と普及についての文献に関する研究," *Housing Research Foundation Annual Research Report* [住宅総合研究財団研究年報] 27 (2001): 263–74, https://doi.org/10.20803/jusokennen.27.0_263), and rugs of Central and Western Asia (Dorothy Armstrong, *Threads of Empire: A History of the World in Twelve Carpets* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2025).

[5] For example, when designer Hans Jørgensen Wegner is quoted to say, "the chair is of course closest to the person" (Cory Olsen, "Ch(Ai)Rs: A Case Study," *Interiors* 13, nos. 2–3 (2023): 187, https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2024.2445103).

[6] Or WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies, in the terms used by Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, nos. 2–3 (2010): 61–83. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X0999152X.

[7] The author for one disagrees with the remarks of Jorge Wagensberg in Anatxu Zabalbeascoa Conca, *Chairs: Historia de la Silla*, 1st ed (Gustavo Gili Editorial S.A, 2018), 12-3. To breezily dismiss floor-sitting altogether, done by vast number of the world's population, based on a single poor experience is highly presumptuous and very much resemble 19th century colonial writings (cf. Cranz, *The Chair*, 25-6).

[8] Seung Nam Min et al., "Postural and Spinal Stability Analysis for Different Floor Sitting Styles," *Heliyon* 10, no. 17 (2024): 2, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e37379; Tim Ingold, "Culture on the Ground: The World Perceived Through the Feet," *Journal of Material Culture* 9, no. 3 (2004): 323–4, https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183504046896. Even when exhaustion of chair-centric studies is recognized, what is labelled as "exciting works" still persistently revolves around Western cultural contexts, as seen in Joana Albernaz Delgado, "A Rhapsody of Chairs," *Journal of Design History* 37, no. 3 (2025): 272–78, https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epad045).

[9] E.g. Inas Alkholy, "Theorizing the Chair: History, Culture, and Design," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 8, no. 2 (2024): 1751–61, https://doi.org/10.70082/esiculture.vi.1553; Zabalbeascoa Conca, *Chairs*; Florence de Dampierre, *Chairs: A History* (Abrams, 2006); Carsten Kullmann, "The Monobloc Chair: Democratising the Practice of Sitting," *Res Mobilis* 9, no. 11 (2020): 3–18, https://doi.org/10.17811/rm.9.11.2020.1-18; Anne Massey, *Chair*, Objekt (Reaktion books, 2011). Counter examples like Gerard Lico, *Salumpuwit, Bangko, Silya, Atbp: Chairs in Filipino Life*, (Arc Lico International Services, 2023) seem to be rare.

[10] Sanjeh Kumar Raman and Safial Aqbar Zakaria, "To Find a Seat: Tracing the Ideoscape of Seats in the Pathars' Lifeworld in Penang," *Interiority* 6, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.7454/in.v6i1.247.

[11] Following Tan Zi Hao, "The Chimeric Trace: The *Makara* and Other Connections to Come," *Art in Translation* 14, no. 3 (2022): 340–1, https://doi.org/10.1080/17561310.2022.2114674.

[12] Following Jordan Sand, "Tropical Furniture and Bodily Comportment in Colonial Asia," *Positions: Asia Critique* 21, no. 1 (2013): 96, https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1894299.

[13] For Indonesian terms, author refers to the Indonesian Language Grand Dictionary (*Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, *KBBI*), Version III, Web Edition, https://kbbi.web.id/. For OJ and Sanskrit terms, the author refers to P.J. Zoetmulder, *Old Javanese-English Dictionary* (M. Nijhoff, 1982). For reconstructed terms in Austronesian proto languages (marked with asterisk *), the author refers to Robert Blust and Steven Trussel, "Cognate Sets," Austronesian Comparative Dictionary, Web Edition, June 21, 2020, https://www.trussel2.com/ACD/acd-s_p.htm#27325. Some language names are abbreviated in this article: OJ (Old Javanese), PAN (Proto- Austronesian), PPh (Proto-Philippine), PMP (Proto-Malayo-Polynesian), PWMP (Proto-Western-Malayo-Polynesian).

[14] Nadia Maria El Cheikh, 'The Institutionalisation of 'Abbāsid Ceremonial', in *Diverging Paths?: The Shapes of Power and Institutions in Medieval Christendom and Islam*, ed. by John Hudson and Ana Rodríguez (BRILL, 2014), 354, https://doi:10.1163/9789004277878

[15] Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (PENN, 2009), 14-15, 148.

[16] Sand, Tropical, 96.

[17] Ostensibly borrowed from Javanese *léséhan*, which has unclear etymology. There are distinct terms in other Indonesian languages, for example, Sundanese *ngampar*, from PMP **hampar* 'unroll a mat, spread out a mat' and PAN **sapar* (Blust and Trussel, "Cognate Sets").

[18] Dave van Gompel et al., *Furniture from the Netherlands East Indies 1600-1900: A Historical Perspective Based on the Collection of the Tropenmuseum* (KIT, 2013), 21-2.

[19] Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 35.

[20] Defining when and where they are appropriate can be difficult. See, for example, discussion in Dudy Wiyancoko and Kiyoshi Miyazaki [宮崎清], "Representational Function of Seating Facilities Design : Representational Characteristics and Semantics of Seating Facilities in Javanese Society of Indonesia," *Bulletin of Japanese Society for the Science of Design* 46, no. 2 (1999): 45–54, https://doi.org/10.11247/jssdj.46.45_1. While not incorrect, it perhaps no longer reflects current situation in Java where chair sitting has become more common in informal situations.

[21] Cranz, *The Chair*, 28-9.

[22] Aditya Bayu Perdana, and Niken Laksitarini, 'Makalamau House Images: Revisiting One of the Oldest Known Depiction of Interiors in Indonesia | Gambar Rumah Makalamau: Mengulas Kembali Salah Satu Depiksi Interior Tertua Di Indonesia', *SPAFA Journal*, 8 (2024), 120-23, https://doi.org/10.26721/spafajournal.377dkv70y8.

[23] Bruce W. Carpenter et al., *Javanese Antique Furniture and Folk Art: The David B. Smith and James Tirtoprodjo Collections* (Editions Didier Millet, 2009), 29; Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 21-4; Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 31.

[24] See various described cases in James J. Fox, ed., *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living* (Dept. of Anthropology in association with the Comparative Austronesian Project, Research School of Pacific Studies, the Australian National University, 1993); and Waterson, *The Living*.

[25] See Reimar Schefold, "The Southeast Asian Type House: Common Features and Local Transformations of an Ancient Architectural Tradition," in *Indonesian Houses: Tradition and Transformation in Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Reimar Schefold et al. (KITLV, 2004).

[26] Perdana & Laksitarini, Makalamau, 122-123.

[27] For example, see *tampan* and *palepai* from South Sumatra (Mattiebelle Gittinger, "The Ship Textiles of South Sumatra: Functions and Design System," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 132, no. 2 (1976): 216, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90002640) and *tilam* in OJ and Malay texts (Jiří Jákl, "Beds and Bed Pavilions in Java before 1500 CE," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 109 (2023): 129–31, https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.2023.6444). Traditionally, Indonesian cultures do not produce 'true' pile carpets.

[28] Consisting of inscriptions and longer literary works preserved by Balinese writing traditions.

[29] Blust & Trussel, Cognate; Jákl, Beds, 121-2; Zoetmulder, *Old Javanese*, 218, 774, 968, 976.
[30] Jákl, Beds, 121-2.
[31] Blust & Trussel, Cognate; Francine Brinkgreve, *Lamak: Ritual Objects in Bali*, with Universitas Udayana (Sidestone Press, 2016).
[32] Blust & Trussel, Cognate.
[33] Fogel & Sellato, Decorated, 126.
[34] A quick search of keyword "zitmat" in https://collectie.wereldmuseum.nl also show attractive plaited mats from Aceh, Jambi, Sulawesi, Halmahera, and other places. Unfortunately, the author can only find scholarly discussion of Kalimantan mats.
[35] Bernard Sellato, ed., *Plaited Arts from the Borneo Rainforest* (Lontar Foundation ; University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 332-416.
[36] Sellato, *Plaited*; Bernard Sellato, "Basketry Motifs, Names, and Cultural Referents in Borneo," in *Basketry & beyond: Constructing Cultures*, First edition, ed. T. A. Heslop and Helen Anderson (Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas, University of East Anglia, 2020), 18.
[37] Sellato, *Plaited*, 71, 158, 407-16.
[38] Defined as "attire designed to cover or adorn the body and provide a functional, inhabitable space" (Deborah Schneiderman" (Deborah Schneiderman, "The Wearable Interior," *Interiors* 14, no. 1-3 (2025): 7, https://doi.org/10.1080/20419112.2025.2496008). Similar objects may exist elsewhere in Indonesia, but documentation is scarce. In the Baliem Valley of Papua, a type of mat that also functions as a raincoat is known to be used (Christopher Buckley, *Stone and Fiber: Daily Life in the Baliem Valley, Papua* (Floating World Editions, 2025), 44, 131).
[39] Sellato, *Plaited*, 2-38, 57.
[40] The Makassarese cognate *bale-bale,* also means 'sitting platform,' interestingly saw further adoption in the Aboriginal languages of north Australia (Antoinette Schapper, "Beyond 'Macassans': Speculations on Layers of Austronesian Contact in Northern Australia," *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 41, no. 4 (2021): 438, https://doi.org/10.1080/07268602.2021.2000365.)
[41] James J. Fox, ed., *Inside Austronesian Houses: Perspectives on Domestic Designs for Living* (Australian National University, 1993), 9-13. Robert Blust, with Australian National University, *The Austronesian Languages*, Pacific Linguistics, 602 (Pacific Linguistics, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2009), 346.
[42] James Bennett, "Sacred Allusions: Spiritual and Temporal Powers in Indonesian Arboreal Imagery," in *Numinous Fields: Perceiving the Sacred in Nature, Landscape, and Art* (Brill, 2024), 190, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004687387_008.
[43] Pushkar Sohoni, "Old Fights, New Meanings: Lions and Elephants in Combat," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67–68 (November 2017): 225–7, https://doi.org/10.1086/691602.
[44] Zoetmulder, *Old Javanese*, 1778.
[45] Theodore G. Th. Pigeaud, *Java in the 14th Century: A Study in Cultural History: Commentaries and Recapitulation*, IV (Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), 175-96.
[46] For the numbering and interpretation of scenes in Borobudur, the author referred to Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, *Avadāna: traditions about the Bodhisattva | tradisi sang Bodhisattwa*, Edition 1 (Ehipassiko Foundation, 2019); Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, *Gaṇḍavyūha: The Quest for Awakening | Pencarian Kecerahan* (Ehipassiko Foundation, 2019); Ānandajoti Bhikkhu, *Lalitavistara: The Life of Gautama Buddha | Kehidupan Buddha Gautama* (Ehipassiko Foundation, 2020).
[47] Although it must be admitted that—due to the absence of real lions in local environments and other factors—leonine depictions in pre-modern Indonesia may be ambiguous and difficult to identify. See discussion in Hélène Njoto, "Mythical Feline Figures in Java's Early Islamisation Period (Fifteenth to the Early Seventeenth Centuries): Sinitic and Vietnamese Imprints in Pasisir Art," *Arts asiatiques* 73, no. 1 (2018): 41–60, https://doi.org/10.3406/arasi.2018.1992.
[48] With mouldings similar to the *upapīṭha* base in Javanese temple design (Aditya Bayu Perdana, and Kemas Ridwan Kurniawan, 'The Vāstu Order as an Alternative Concept for Analysing Javanese Temple Architecture | Tatanan Vāstu Sebagai Konsep Alternatif Untuk Menelaah

Arsitektur Candi Jawa', *SPAFA Journal*, 6 (2022), 12, https://doi:10.26721/spafajournal.q790t38g6i).

[49] See Tan Zi Hao, The Chimeric, for discussion and bibliography on *makara*.

[50] I. S. Sundström, "The Iconography of Avalokiteśvara in Java" (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2020), 47, https://hdl.handle.net/1887/86069. For other sculpted examples, see Jan Fontein et al., *The Sculpture of Indonesia* (Abrams, 1990), 186-9.

[51] Regarding this implement, see Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Indian Architectural Terms," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 48 (1928): 250–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/593145; Naufal Raffi Arrazaq, "Penggambaran Yogapatta dalam relief candi-candi hindu-buddha abad IX M : Kajian atas varisi penggambaran dan fungsi" (Undergraduate thesis, Universitas Gadjah Mada, 2020), https://etd.repository.ugm.ac.id/penelitian/detail/192394.

[52] Jákl, Beds, 131-2.

[53] E.g. *Arjunawiwāha* canto 29.4, *Sumanasāntaka* canto 18.1 (Peter Worsley et al., *Mpu Monaguṇa's Sumanasāntaka: An Old Javanese Epic Poem, Its Indian Source and Balinese Illustrations*, Bibliotheca Indonesica, vol. 36 (Brill, 2013), 114-5, 500).

[54] Theodore G. Th. Pigeaud, *Java in the 14th Century: A Study in Cultural History: Translations*, II (Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 73; Pigeaud, *Java … Commentaries and Recapitulation,* 175, 188.

[55] R. Michael Feener et al., "Islamisation and the Formation of Vernacular Muslim Material Culture in 15th-Century Northern Sumatra," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 49, no. 143 (2021): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2021.1873564. Although 11th century materials have also been found (Denys Lombard, *Nusa Jawa: Silang Budaya; Bagian II: Jaringan Asia* (Gramedia, 1996), 32, 471).

[56] Camphor's reputation is well recorded in Arabic texts. See Rusni Muhammad and Thuraya Ahmad, "Malay Camphor in Arabic Text and Its Latest Trend of Research," *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences*, European Publisher, October 12, 2020, 720–29, https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2020.10.02.67.

[57] Ian Proudfoot and Virginia Hooker, "Mediating Time and Space: The Malay Writing Tradition," in *Illuminations: The Writing Traditions of Indonesia: Featuring Manuscripts from the National Library of Indonesia*, First edition, ed. Ann Kumar et al., with Perpustakaan Nasional and Lontar Foundation (Lontar Foundation, 1996); James N. Sneddon, *The Indonesian Language: Its History and Role in Modern Society* (UNSW Press, 2003), 52-78.

[58] E. D. Edwards and C. O. Blagden, "A Chinese Vocabulary of Malacca Malay Words and Phrases Collected between A. D. 1403 and 1511 (?)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London* 6, no. 3 (1931): 734; Tom G. Hoogervorst, "Seventeenth-Century Malay Wordlists and Their Potential for Etymological Scholarship," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 25, no. 3 (2024): 533, https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v25i3.1782.

[59] See James Bennett, *Crescent Moon: Islamic Art & Civilisation in Southeast Asia = Bulan Sabit: Seni dan Peradaban Islam di Asia Tenggara* (Art Gallery of South Australia ; National Gallery of Australia, 2005) and the associated volume of Andrea Acri and Verena Meyer, "Indic-Islamic Encounters in Javanese and Malay Mystical Literatures," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 47, no. 139 (2019): 277–84, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2019.1657723.

[60] "الذي نعرفه من الكرسي في اللغة: الشيء الذي يعتمد ويجلس عليه" (Muhammad ibn Mukarram ibn Alī ibn Ahmad Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān Al-'Arab* [لسان العرب], vol. 13 (Dar Shadir, 2003), 49).

[61] A Persian term absorbed twice in Indonesian as *dewan* "council" and *dipan* "divan."

[62] Absorbed in Indonesian as *mimbar*. On *minbar* and related professorial chair, see Nadia Erzini, and Stephen Vernoit, 'La Cátedra (Kursī 'ilmī o Kursī Li-l-Wa'ẓ Wa-l-Iršād) En Marruecos', *Al-Qanṭara* 34. no. 1, 109-119, https://doi:10.3989/alqantara.2013.004

[63] Virginia Hooker, "Lines of Meaning: Three Calligraphic Paintings by Didin Sirojuddin," *SUHUF* 4, no. 2 (2015): 328, https://doi.org/10.22548/shf.v4i2.59. Note however that in some interpretation, the *kursi* of the verse is translated as the footstool of an even larger throne beyond human comprehension.

[64] Often known in English as the *Malay Annals,* although its original title means 'genealogy of kings.'

[65] Boon Kheng Cheah, *Sejarah Melayu: The Malay Annals* (MBRAS, 2010), 68, 201.

[66] Sri Wulan Rujiati Mulyadi, "Hikayat Indraputra: A Malay Romance" (PhD thesis, London, 1989), https://pueaa.unam.mx/uploads/materials/Hikayat-Indraputra-A-Malay-Romance.pdf?v=1628228189.
[67] Bennett, Sacred.
[68] Including, Art Gallery of South Australia (no. 20068A90, https://www.agsa.sa.gov.au/collection-publications/collection/works/throne-rest-sesako/23618/), Musée du quai Branly (no. 70.2001.27.316.1), Museum Nasional (no. 610, https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/sesako-unknown/cAFgtgHJn_dDzA?hl=en), National Gallery of Australia (no. 1985-1982 https://searchthecollection.nga.gov.au/object/113098), Yale University Art Gallery (no. ILE2019.12.380a-c, ILE2019.12.386, ILE2019.12.381a-e, ILE2019.12.383a-e).
[69] Bennett, *Crescent*, 50, 192-217.
[70] Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 21-22.
[71] Sneddon, *The Indonesian*, 79-82.
[72] H. L. A. Fricke, "Traces of Language Contact: The Flores-Lembata Languages in Eastern Indonesia" (Doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2019), 7, https://hdl.handle.net/1887/80399.
[73] Betty Litamahuputty, "A Description of Ternate Malay," *Wacana, Journal of the Humanities of Indonesia* 14, no. 2 (2012): 342, https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v14i2.66; Sneddon, *The Indonesian*, 79-82.
[74] Aditya Bayu Perdana, Reza Hambali Wilman Abdulhadi, and Rebecca Victoria Simatupang, 'Elements of a Vanished Space: A Preliminary Study of an Early Eighteenth Century Batavia Castle Residential Hall and Its Furnishings', *Interiors: Design/Architecture/Culture*, 13.2–3 (2024), 320, https://doi:10.1080/20419112.2024.2396722, citing Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 42-6,75-100.
[75] The Portuguese-conquered Melaka is another contender.
[76] See Carpenter et al., *Javanese*; Titus M Eliëns, ed., *Domestic Interiors at the Cape and in Batavia, 1602-1795* (Fernwood Press, 2002); Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*; Jan Veenendaal, *Furniture from Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India during the Dutch Period* (Volkenkundig Museum Nusantara, 1985).
[77] Floor sitting was originally predominant in Chinese culture. Chairs were introduced from Buddhist monasticism and diffused across inland China until they were widely accepted around the Tang dynasty (Dampierre, *Chairs*, 32-42; Dongqing Wang, "Representing Kowtow: Civility and Civilization in Early Sino-British Encounters," *The Eighteenth Century* 60, no. 3 (2019): 291, https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2019.0022).
[78] Bennett, *Crescent*, 50; Perdana, Abdulhadi, and Simatupang, Elements of a Vanished Space, 310; Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 33-35.
[79] In mediaeval Europe, even peasants used elevated sitting, but in the form of benches and stools. Chairs were rare until the 1600s (Bill Bryson, *At Home: A Short History of Private Life* (Black Swan, 2010), 57; Cranz, *The Chair*, 39). Kullman (The Monobloc, 8) puts the French Revolution as a turning point when chair-sitting (formerly restricted to European aristocrats and clergy) became *bourgeois*. However, Dutch East Indies company personnel (neither aristocrats nor clergy) had already made chair-sitting *bourgeois* in 17th century Batavia.
[80] Carpenter et al., *Javanese*, 32; Adam Clulow, "'Splendour and Magnificence': Diplomacy and Sumptuary Codes in Early Modern Batavia," in *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c.1200–1800*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 308-10, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108567541.012.
[81] Eliëns, *Domestic*, 19.
[82] Discussed in Tom G. Hoogervorst, "Nieuwe Woordenschat: Lessons from an 18th-Century Triglot Language Manual," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Routledge, 2025, 1–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2025.2513792.
[83] Perdana, Abdulhadi, and Simatupang, Elements of a Vanished Space, 63-66, cf. Karen Mazurkewich, *Chinese Furniture: A Guide for Collectors*, with A. Chester Ong (Tuttle Publishing, 2024), 63-6.
[84] See Irna Arlianti, Deny Willy Junaidy & Jake Kane, "Historical Study of the Use of Low Seat Dingklik in Java in the Socioeconomic Activities of the Colonial Era (1800-1900)," *Dutch Crossing* 49, no. 1 (2025): 28–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2024.2381947.

[85] Carpenter et al., *Javanese*, 41.
[86] Zakariya Pamuji Aminullah et al., "The Wooden Beam (Dhadha Peksi) of the Lasem Jami Mosque: Traces of European Influence in an Early Modern Islamic Context," *Archipel* 109 (2025): 121–3, https://doi.org/10.4000/144x9; Arlianti et al., Historical, 29
[87] Van Gompel et al., *Furniture*, 22.
[88] See also Van Gompel et al., Furniture, 23; Waterson, *The Living*, 108-109.
[89] See Ngaju Dayak images referred in Perdana & Laksitarini, Makalamau House Images, 127.
[90] Daniel S. Lev, 'Origins of the Indonesian Advocacy', *Indonesia*, 21 (1976): 159, https://doi:10.2307/3350960; Amrit Dev Kaur Khalsa, 'The Road to the Reformatory: (Mis-)Communication in the Colonial Courts between Judges, Juveniles and Parents in the Netherlands Indies, 1900–1942', in Heather Ellis, *Juvenile Delinquency and the Limits of Western Influence, 1850–2000* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 42, https://doi:10.1057/9781137349521_3.
[91] Sanne Ravensbergen, "'Do Not Harm the Decorum': Mixed Courts and Cloth in Colonial Indonesia," *Law and History Review* 40, no. 3 (2022): 533–48, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248022000438.
[92] Kartini, *Door Duisternis Tot Licht: Gedachten over En Voor Het Javaansche Volk*, ed. by J. H. Abendanon (Van Dorp, 1911), 70. Paul Bijl, "Legal Self-Fashioning in Colonial Indonesia: Human Rights in the Letters of Kartini," *Indonesia*, no. 103 (2017): 64, https://doi.org/10.5728/indonesia.103.0051.
[93] John Pemberton, "Musical Politics in Central Java (or How Not to Listen to a Javanese Gamelan)," *Indonesia* 44 (October 1987): 28.
[94] In a letter dated 15 December 1865 (now in Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Mvk, Verbaal 7-6-66), the painter Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman made reference of being prohibited to sit in his own chair should he visit Javanese courts. Although he considers himself to be Javanese in the letter, he resents the rigid court-controlled social protocols which made very little concessions to non-aristocratic Javanese (Werner Kraus, and Irina Vogelsang, *Raden Saleh: awal seni lukis modern Indonesia* (Goethe-Institut Indonesien, 2012), 90-91).
[95] Arnout H. C. Van der Meer, *Performing Power: Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia* (Southeast Asia Program Publications, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2020), 105.
[96] "De grote Hormatcirculaire van 22 Augustus 1913, no. 20/4 met bijgevoegde geheime nota" in Leiden University Library, Collection Hazeu, D H 1083 - 057, (http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:2057559).
[97] Arnout H. C. Van der Meer, "Igniting Change in Colonial Indonesia: Soemarsono's Contestation of Colonial Hegemony in a Global Context," *Journal of World History* 30, no. 4 (2019): 501–32.; Van der Meer, *Performing*, 48-49, 77-86.

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