

Archaeology of Conflict in Tanah Rejang: A Comparison of Indigenous and Colonial Defense Systems in Bengkulu in the 17th-19th Centuries

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Abstract

Bengkulu occupied a strategic position where local trading powers, the international pepper trade, and European colonial rivalries converged from the seventeenth century onward, giving rise to two distinct fortification traditions: the indigenous Rejang *kutai*—bamboo-fenced settlements (*reduai*) integrated with the community's social-cosmological structure, and the colonial fortifications of the British East India Company (EIC): Fort York, Fort Marlborough, Fort Anna, and Fort Linau. This paper builds a comparative interpretive framework for these two fortification typologies within a conflict archaeology lens, while mapping existing data gaps. As a conceptual study, it employs a qualitative approach based on secondary data synthesis, prior excavation reports, colonial archives, and ethnographic studies without primary fieldwork. Findings indicate that the two systems represent distinct epistemologies of conflict space: the Rejang *kutai* reflects an organic, community-scale defensive logic embedded in the landscape, while EIC forts reflect a geometric, centralized logic responding to larger geopolitical threats. The study also reveals significant disparities in the preservation of the three colonial forts, Marlborough well-maintained, Anna damaged as symbolic rejection, and Linau physically vanished and mythologized, analyzed through memory archaeology and critical heritage studies. The paper contributes to broadening the scope of Indonesian conflict archaeology, long dominated by colonial fortification studies, and proposes a primary field research agenda for the physical remains of Rejang *kutai*.

Keywords: *Conflict Archaeology, Colonial Fortifications, Rejang Kutai, Memory Archaeology, Bengkulu.*



A. INTRODUCTION

Bengkulu occupies a distinctive position in the maritime history of the Indonesian archipelago, serving as a nexus where local economic power, the international pepper trade, and European colonial rivalry intersected. Since the sixteenth century, the western coast of Sumatra has been recognized as one of the region's major pepper-producing areas, supplying both the Sultanate of Banten and broader international trading networks (Marsden, 2008; *Sejarah Daerah Bengkulu*, 1978). Its strategic location transformed Bengkulu into a contested frontier between local polities, including Sungai Serut, Sungai Lemau, and Selebar, and competing European trading powers, particularly the British East India Company (EIC) and the Dutch Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC). This enduring structural rivalry gave rise to diverse defensive architectures, each reflecting the distinct political interests, military strategies, and security challenges faced by the respective actors.

The Rejang people, the indigenous inhabitants of much of Bengkulu's inland and coastal regions, developed a fortified settlement system known as the *kutai*—a territorial unit enclosed by a defensive fence of thorny bamboo (*reduai*), approximately two meters high. This enclosure served a dual function as both a territorial boundary marker (*gais pigai*) and a defensive structure against external threats (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). The *kutai* system reflected the Rejang community's spatial cosmology and socio-political organization, which were founded on kinship ties and customary law. This was manifested in the internal spatial arrangement of the *kutai*, comprising the *balei hulu*, *balei tengeak*, and *balei ilo*, which functioned as integrated socio-religious spaces while simultaneously supporting the settlement's defensive system.

In contrast to the indigenous defensive tradition, the arrival of the British East India Company (EIC) in 1685 introduced a more monumental and permanent form of European military architecture. Fort York, initially established as the EIC's principal stronghold, was subsequently replaced by Fort Marlborough between 1714 and 1719, which became the Company's primary fortress due to its larger scale and more strategic location (Marihandono, 2008; Novita & Darmansyah, 2004). Archaeological investigations conducted by Miksic (1986) at the Fort York site uncovered a wide range of cultural materials, including coins issued by the EIC, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and Chinese authorities, as well as European and Chinese ceramics dating from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. These findings demonstrate that the area had already functioned as an important center of economic and political activity long before the construction of the permanent fortress. This interpretation was further supported by subsequent archaeological research undertaken jointly by the National Research Centre for Archaeology (*Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional*) and the British Embassy in Jakarta in 1988.

Relations between indigenous communities and colonial powers were far from peaceful. A 1696 Dutch East India Company (VOC) archival record provides a detailed description of the English defensive fortification at Silebar, including the thickness of its walls, the number of cannons, and the composition of the multiethnic garrison stationed there (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia [ANRI], 1696). These tensions eventually escalated into episodes of open violence, including the deaths of Royal Navy Captain Robert Hamilton in 1793 and Governor Thomas Parr in 1807 at the hands of Bengkulu inhabitants who resisted colonial oppression (Marihandono et al., 2010). The surviving graves and commemorative monuments within the Fort Marlborough complex have transformed the site from a mere architectural monument into a living landscape of conflict memory.

Another noteworthy phenomenon is the unequal preservation of Bengkulu's colonial fortifications. While Fort Marlborough has been preserved as a National Cultural Heritage site and has become one of the region's principal tourist attractions, Fort Anna in Mukomuko has suffered extensive deterioration due to looting, whereas Fort Linau has disappeared almost entirely, surviving only in local oral traditions and collective memory (Tedy, 2025). This disparity suggests a selective process of

collective memory construction that warrants further investigation from the perspectives of conflict archaeology and the archaeology of memory.

This study addresses the following central question: How did the spatial and material logic of indigenous defensive systems, represented by the Rejang *kutai*, differ from that of colonial defensive architecture, represented by European bastioned forts, in responding to the distinct security threats faced by each society? This overarching question is explored through three subsidiary inquiries. First, how did the architectural and functional characteristics of the Rejang *kutai* compare with those of British colonial fortifications in Bengkulu? Second, how did conflict—including inter-community disputes, European colonial competition, and indigenous resistance—shape the defensive designs adopted by each side? Third, what does the unequal preservation of colonial forts reveal about the politics of postcolonial memory in Bengkulu?

It is important to emphasize from the outset that this article is conceived as a conceptual-comparative study (or position paper) rather than a report of new archaeological excavations or field surveys. This distinction is editorially significant because primary archaeological evidence relating to the physical remains of the Rejang *kutai* remains extremely limited and has never been the subject of dedicated archaeological investigation. In contrast, colonial fortifications have received considerably greater scholarly attention through previous archaeological studies (Koestoro & Susanto, 1994; Miksic, 1986; Mujib, 1995). Consequently, the principal contribution of this article lies not in presenting new empirical findings but in offering a comparative interpretative framework based on the synthesis of secondary evidence while proposing a research agenda for future archaeological field investigations.

The primary objective of this study is to develop a comparative interpretative framework for understanding indigenous and colonial defensive systems in Bengkulu during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Rather than presenting new archaeological discoveries, the study synthesizes existing secondary evidence to identify patterns, research gaps, and future directions for the systematic development of conflict archaeology in the region.

This study seeks to broaden the scope of conflict archaeology in Indonesia, which has traditionally focused on colonial fortifications, by incorporating indigenous defensive systems that have largely remained outside the scope of formal archaeological investigation. From a practical perspective, it proposes a more focused agenda for future field research, emphasizing the urgent need for primary archaeological surveys of the remaining physical traces of the Rejang *kutai*, which have never been investigated as an independent archaeological subject and are increasingly threatened by ongoing environmental and developmental changes.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on British colonial fortifications in Bengkulu have received sustained scholarly attention over several decades. The earliest and most substantial archaeological investigation was conducted by Miksic (1986) at the Fort York site,

where pre-colonial and colonial occupation layers were identified through numismatic and ceramic evidence. This work was followed by a joint archaeological project undertaken by the National Research Centre for Archaeology (*Pusat Penelitian Arkeologi Nasional*) and the British Embassy in Jakarta in 1988. At the regional level, Koestoro & Susanto (1993/1994) carried out a comprehensive archaeological survey across Bengkulu, although the findings were not widely published. Mujib (1995) subsequently examined the technical specifications of British colonial fortifications in Bengkulu in an article published in *Berkala Arkeologi*. More recently, Novita (2017) investigated the activities of the inhabitants of Fort Anna, while Novita and Darmansyah (2004) analyzed the broader architectural development of Bengkulu during the colonial period.

From a historiographical perspective, Marihandono (2008) and Marihandono et al. (2010) provide valuable historical context regarding the strategic considerations that influenced the British East India Company (EIC) in selecting sites and constructing its fortifications. Meanwhile, current understanding of the socio-spatial organization of the Rejang people, including the kutai settlement system, continues to rely largely on the ethnographic work of Sidik (1980), which remains the principal reference despite the limited contribution of more recent archaeological investigations.

To date, no study has explicitly compared indigenous and colonial defensive systems within the framework of conflict archaeology in the context of Bengkulu. Existing scholarship has largely developed along parallel trajectories. Archaeological studies have concentrated on European colonial fortifications, whereas research on the Rejang kutai has been undertaken primarily within the disciplines of ethnography and cultural anthropology rather than archaeology. This conceptual gap is the principal focus of the present study.

The identification of this research gap is based on a literature review conducted using Google Scholar, Garba Rujukan Digital (GARUDA), and the SINTA-indexed journal database. The search employed combinations of the keywords "Bengkulu conflict archaeology," "Rejang kutai," "Bengkulu colonial forts," "conflict archaeology Indonesia," and "indigenous fortifications Sumatra," covering publications from 1980 to 2026. The review identified studies examining colonial fortifications and others discussing the kutai independently, as outlined above. However, no publication was found that explicitly compares these two defensive typologies within a single conflict archaeology framework. It should be acknowledged that this review was limited to Indonesian- and English-language sources accessible through online databases. Consequently, relevant studies contained in unpublished institutional reports or other non-indexed materials may have been overlooked.

It is important to emphasize that the research gap identified here is specific to the Indonesian context rather than to conflict archaeology as a global field of study. Comparative analyses of indigenous and colonial defensive systems have already been well established in the international literature, particularly in studies of the New Zealand Wars, which compare Māori pā, fortified settlements characterized by

wooden palisades and defensive ditches, with British redoubts and stockades (Fox, 1976; Prickett, 2016). Prickett (2016) demonstrates how these contrasting fortification typologies can be analyzed within a unified conflict archaeology framework, documenting, among other findings, the evolution of pā design from single palisades into multilayered "gunfighter pā" in response to the introduction of colonial firearms. This provides a valuable methodological precedent for comparable research in Indonesia.

Accordingly, this article does not claim to introduce a globally novel model for comparing indigenous and colonial defensive systems. Rather, it represents one of the earliest applications of such a comparative framework to the Bengkulu context—a region with a rich historical record but one that has received limited attention through comparative conflict archaeology approaches comparable to those employed in New Zealand case studies. Such cross-contextual comparisons also create opportunities to examine whether the adaptive design patterns identified by Prickett (2016) for Māori pā were likewise evident in the Rejang Kutai, a question that remains unresolved because of the limited archaeological evidence currently available.

This study adopts conflict archaeology as its principal theoretical framework, viewing the material remains of warfare, violence, and defensive systems not merely as aesthetic or architectural objects but as physical manifestations of the power relations and security challenges confronted by past societies. Fortifications—whether traditional bamboo enclosures or European brick bastions—are therefore understood as spatial texts that embody the logic of threat, resource utilization, and the spatial cosmology of the communities that constructed them.

The concept of fortification archaeology is employed to examine the technical and architectural characteristics of both defensive typologies, including construction materials, structural forms, orientation, and auxiliary defensive features such as moats. This approach enables a systematic comparison between the Rejang *kutai*, which relied on organic materials and close integration with the surrounding landscape, and the fortifications of the British East India Company (EIC), which followed established principles of European military architecture (Kelanaku, 2018; Marihandono, 2008; Ministry of Education and Culture, n.d.).

This study also draws upon the concept of entangled landscapes, which argues that colonial conflict landscapes were rarely created on entirely new terrain but were instead superimposed upon places that already possessed social, political, and cultural significance for local communities (González-Ruibal, 2019). This perspective provides a useful framework for interpreting the continuity of spatial occupation between the pre-colonial and colonial periods. In addition, concepts from the archaeology of memory, particularly Nora's (1989) notion of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), which explains how collective memory may persist—or even become stronger—despite the disappearance of its material traces, together with the perspectives of critical heritage studies (Harrison, 2010, 2013), are used to examine the unequal preservation of Bengkulu's colonial fortifications. These theoretical perspectives help explain why Fort Marlborough has been carefully conserved,

whereas Fort Anna has deteriorated and Fort Linau has disappeared almost entirely. More broadly, they illuminate how contemporary societies selectively preserve, neglect, or mythologize particular colonial remains, processes that are closely intertwined with questions of identity formation and the politics of postcolonial memory.

C. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual-comparative approach, which differs methodologically from conventional archaeological research that relies primarily on excavation or field surveys. This approach was selected because the objective of the study is to develop an interpretative framework for understanding indigenous and colonial defensive systems in Bengkulu rather than to generate new archaeological evidence through field investigation. Such an approach is consistent with methodological traditions in both history and archaeology that recognize the critical synthesis of secondary sources as a legitimate basis for scholarly argumentation, as demonstrated by comparative studies of Dutch colonial fortifications in Ambarawa, which similarly relied on archival and literature-based research without conducting new excavations (Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019).

The research follows the four stages of the historical method commonly applied in Indonesian historical and archaeological scholarship: heuristic inquiry (source collection), source verification and criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Herlina, 2024; Tedy, 2025). Employing the historical method is appropriate because the evidence analyzed consists primarily of historical and archaeological records rather than newly excavated material remains. Methodologically, the study therefore occupies an interdisciplinary position at the intersection of historical research and interpretive archaeology.

The comparative nature of the research requires two parallel units of analysis: the indigenous defensive system represented by the Rejang kutai and the colonial defensive system represented by the British East India Company (EIC) fortifications. Comparative analyses of this kind are well established in Indonesian fortification studies. Research on colonial forts in Java, for example, has demonstrated how comparisons of defensive designs can reveal the evolution of colonial strategic knowledge over time (Pawitro, 2014, as cited in Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019). The present study adopts this comparative logic while extending it beyond comparisons among colonial forts to include cross-cultural comparisons between indigenous and colonial defensive traditions.

All data analyzed in this study are secondary in nature and are derived from previous archaeological reports, scholarly publications, colonial archives, and ethnographic studies. These sources are classified into four categories. The first category consists of archaeological reports concerning British colonial sites in Bengkulu, particularly Miksic's (1986) excavation report on Fort York, the subsequent investigation conducted by the National Research Centre for Archaeology in 1988, and the regional archaeological survey undertaken by Koestoro & Susanto (1993/1994).

The second category includes peer-reviewed scholarly publications with verifiable bibliographic information, such as SINTA-indexed or DOI-registered journal articles, including Mujib (1995) and Tedy (2025). The third category comprises digitized primary colonial archives published by official institutions, especially the 1696 VOC records available through the Sejarah Nusantara portal of the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI). The fourth category consists of ethnographic studies on the Rejang Kutai, drawing primarily upon the works of Sidik (1980) and Arios and Yondri (2007).

To ensure analytical rigor, explicit selection criteria were applied throughout the synthesis. Academic sources (the first through third categories) constitute the primary basis for all comparative arguments and were prioritized whenever overlapping information was available. Non-academic secondary and tertiary sources—including news websites, popular publications, and historical blogs—were incorporated only under three conditions: (a) when they contained specific technical information unavailable in academic publications; (b) when they explicitly referred to official cultural heritage institutions as their sources; and (c) when their content did not substantially contradict verified academic evidence. When discrepancies occurred between non-academic and official sources—for example, differences in reported wall thickness measurements for Fort Marlborough between the Ministry of Education and Culture (2012) and a popular media publication (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2026)—the latter was treated as supplementary contextual information rather than primary evidence and was accompanied by an explicit statement regarding its verification status. The same principle of critical evaluation was applied to colonial archival sources, which were produced from the perspective of colonial authorities and therefore require careful source criticism to account for potential bias (Herlina, 2024).

The principal methodological challenge of this study lies in the unequal depth of evidence available for the two units of analysis. Information concerning the Rejang kutai is derived almost exclusively from ethnographic and historical sources, with no supporting archaeological surveys or contemporary documentation of surviving physical remains. In contrast, the colonial fortifications are documented by substantially richer archaeological and historical evidence.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: archival research, systematic literature review, and secondary visual documentation. Archival research focused on digitized colonial documents, particularly VOC records concerning British activities and the condition of defensive installations at Silebar and Bengkulu during the late seventeenth century (ANRI, n.d.). These documents were interpreted critically in recognition of the colonial perspectives embedded in their production (Herlina, 2024).

The literature review was conducted systematically through scholarly publications, archaeological reports, and official documents issued by cultural heritage institutions. The review included SINTA-indexed and DOI-registered national journals (e.g., Mujib, 1995; Tedy, 2025), as well as archaeological reports that were not widely published but could be identified through citations in subsequent

studies, such as the survey by Koestoro and Susanto (1993/1994), as cited in Novita and Darmansyah (2004). This practice is common in Indonesian historical archaeology because many archaeological reports produced during the 1980s and 1990s were never formally published.

Secondary visual documentation—including photographs, historical illustrations, and published architectural descriptions—was used to examine the architectural characteristics of the colonial fortifications, such as the turtle-shaped layout of Fort Marlborough with its four bastions. Regarding technical dimensions, official data from the Regional Cultural Heritage Preservation Office (Balai Pelestarian Kebudayaan) Region V (n.d.) record defensive moats measuring approximately 1–3 meters in depth and 7 meters in width, while the official publication *Forts in Indonesia* (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2012) reports wall thicknesses ranging from 1.85 to 3 meters and wall heights of approximately 8–8.5 meters. As explained in the selection criteria above, more precise figures—such as the reported wall thickness of 1.25 meters and descriptions of iron gates circulated by popular media citing the Regional Cultural Heritage Preservation Office Region VII (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2026)—were treated as supplementary information because they have not yet been directly verified through official institutional sources.

Data were analyzed using a comparative-interpretative approach consisting of three stages. The first stage involved categorizing the evidence according to the two principal units of analysis: the Rejang kutai and the colonial fortifications (Fort York, Fort Marlborough, Fort Anna, and Fort Linau). This categorization ensured that comparisons were conducted between equivalent analytical units (Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019).

The second stage consisted of contextual historical analysis, in which each dataset was interpreted within its broader social, political, and economic context. Defensive architecture was understood as a response to the specific security challenges faced by each community (Marihandono et al., 2010), consistent with the central premise of conflict archaeology that material remains represent expressions of power relations rather than merely aesthetic or architectural objects.

The third stage involved comparative analysis across four principal dimensions: construction materials and building techniques; spatial orientation and relationships with the surrounding landscape; socio-symbolic functions; and responses to different forms of perceived threat. A fifth, reflective dimension addressed the unequal preservation of colonial fortifications by applying perspectives from the archaeology of memory to examine how social processes selectively determine which heritage sites are maintained within collective memory and which are allowed to disappear (Pawitro, 2014, as cited in Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019).

Given the conceptual nature of this research, the comparative analysis is not intended to establish definitive causal conclusions. Instead, it seeks to formulate interpretative propositions that can be examined through future primary archaeological field investigations. This objective is consistent with the tradition of conceptual scholarship in archaeology and history, which aims to stimulate academic

discussion and establish future research agendas rather than to resolve scholarly debates through claims of conclusive empirical evidence.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Rejang *Kutai* Defensive System

The Rejang people developed fortified settlements known as *kutai*, which functioned both as spatially organized communities and as traditional defensive systems. According to Sidik (1980), each *kutai* was enclosed by a thorny bamboo fence (*reduai*), approximately two meters high, serving both as a territorial boundary marker (*gais pigai*) and as a protective barrier against enemy attacks and wild animals. The use of organic construction materials fundamentally distinguished the Rejang defensive system from the brick fortifications later erected by the British East India Company (EIC) in the same region.

The internal organization of the *kutai* reflects a sophisticated socio-spatial structure closely integrated with its defensive function. The *balei hulu* served as the residence of the village leader and the meeting place for community elites, the *balei tengeak* functioned as a venue for celebrations and youth activities, and the *balei ilo* was reserved for religious functions conducted by the *alim pedito* (religious leaders) (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). Additional spatial components included the *unen* (separate bathing areas for men and women), the *tuwoa* (rice granary), the *buteu bejemoa* (stone platform used for sunbathing), and the *datet libea* (training ground for traditional martial arts). These elements demonstrate that the *kutai* was not merely a defensive enclosure but represented the broader social organization and spatial cosmology of Rejang society.

The *kutai* defensive system also incorporated a distinctive spatial arrangement for burial grounds, which were intentionally located outside the fortified enclosure and across a river to prevent the spirits of the deceased from disturbing the living (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). This arrangement illustrates that the physical boundary of the *kutai* carried a dual significance, functioning not only as a defensive perimeter but also as a cosmological boundary separating the world of the living from the realm of the dead. A settlement could only be formally recognized as a *kutai* if it possessed all of the essential structural components, including a defensive moat. Newly established settlements that had not yet fulfilled these requirements were known as *sosokan*.

Within the broader political organization of Rejang society, the *kutai* system operated under a traditional leadership structure headed by an *ajai*, whose authority derived from one of the four *petulai* (major kinship groups). This political arrangement helps explain why the *kutai* defensive system was decentralized and community-based, in contrast to the centralized European colonial fortification system, which concentrated military authority within strategically located permanent forts (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). To date, no contemporary archaeological investigation has undertaken a dedicated survey or spatial mapping of the surviving physical remains of the *kutai*. Consequently, current knowledge of the system is derived entirely from

ethnographic and historical sources rather than from direct archaeological documentation.

2. Fort York and Fort Marlborough: From the First British Outpost to the Principal Colonial Fortress

Fort York was established by the British East India Company (EIC) in Bengkulu in 1685, strategically situated between the coast and the mouth of the Serut River to serve as the Company's principal defensive outpost for securing the pepper-producing region against Dutch and French competition (Kelanaku, 2018). Its establishment followed a series of unsuccessful attempts by the EIC to create trading bases in Aceh, Pariaman, and Barus before eventually receiving the support of local rulers in Bengkulu. Archaeological investigations conducted by Miksic (1986) at the site recovered a diverse assemblage of material culture, including coins issued by the EIC, the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and Chinese authorities, seventeenth- to nineteenth-century Chinese ceramics, European ceramics produced in Gouda and Delft, and locally manufactured earthenware resembling pottery from Banten (Novita & Darmansyah, 2004). These findings demonstrate that Fort York functioned not merely as a military installation but also as an important node within regional and international trading networks. Subsequent archaeological investigations undertaken between 1987 and 1988 by the National Research Centre for Archaeology in collaboration with the British Embassy in Jakarta further suggested that the area had already served as an indigenous center of economic and political activity from 1685, before the construction of the permanent EIC fortification.

A VOC archival document dated 28 January 1696 provides a detailed description of the English defensive post at Silebar, located near Fort York. The record documents approximately thirty iron cannons, around forty English soldiers, two Dutch deserters, eight young Englishmen, and approximately 140 Bugis and Malabar personnel, including enslaved individuals. It also describes defensive walls measuring two bricks in thickness and approximately ten feet in height, which were in the process of being reinforced into full masonry walls (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia [ANRI], 1696). This archival evidence offers valuable insight into both the scale of the fortification and the multiethnic composition of the colonial garrison during the early phase of British occupation.

Fort Marlborough was constructed approximately two miles from Fort York, facing the Indian Ocean, to replace the earlier fortification as the Company's principal military stronghold. Construction began in 1714 under the supervision of Governor Joseph Collett and was completed in 1719 after repeated conflicts with the inhabitants of Bengkulu had temporarily forced the British to abandon the settlement (Tirto, 2023). According to available historical accounts, the fortress was built using granite and laborers brought from India (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2026). Covering approximately 4.4 hectares, Fort Marlborough became the largest British fortress in Southeast Asia after Fort St. George in Madras. Its overall plan resembles the shape of a giant turtle, with four bastions positioned at each corner (Goodnewsfromindonesia,

2026; Mannanesia, 2024). Official documentation records wall thicknesses ranging from 1.85 to 3 meters and wall heights of approximately 8–8.5 meters (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2012), while the fortress is surrounded by a defensive moat measuring approximately 1–3 meters in depth and 7 meters in width (Regional Cultural Heritage Preservation Office Region V, n.d.).

Fort Marlborough also stands as a significant site of colonial conflict. Historical records indicate that local communities launched three major attacks against British authority, resulting in the deaths of Royal Navy Captain Robert Hamilton on 15 December 1793 and Governor Thomas Parr on 23 December 1807 (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2023; Kelanaku, 2018). These events remain materially commemorated by three British graves located in front of the fortress's main gate and by the Thomas Parr Monument, an octagonal structure supported by Corinthian columns situated approximately 170 meters southeast of the fort (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education Repository, n.d.). Following the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, Britain ceded Bengkulu to the Netherlands in exchange for Singapore. Thereafter, Fort Marlborough served successively as the Dutch colonial administrative and military headquarters until the Japanese occupation in 1942, the headquarters of the Indonesian National Police after 1945, the headquarters of the Indonesian Army District Command (Kodim 0407) between 1949 and 1983, and, following restoration by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture between 1983 and 1984, was officially designated as a Cultural Heritage site in 1977 (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2023; Kelanaku, 2018; Siberzone, n.d.).

3. Fort Anna and Fort Linau: Unequal Preservation and the Construction of Cultural Memory

Unlike Fort Marlborough, Fort Anna in Mukomuko has suffered extensive physical deterioration. According to Tedy (2025), this condition can be interpreted as reflecting local resistance to the restoration of colonial authority. Novita's (2017) study of the "cultural box" (*kotak budaya*) associated with the activities of communities living around Fort Anna further demonstrates that, despite its deteriorated physical condition, the site continues to function as a meaningful social space for contemporary local communities.

Fort Linau represents an even more extreme pattern of heritage transformation. No visible physical remains of the fort survive today, and its existence has largely been preserved through local myths, which function as a symbolic mechanism for protecting the area from uncontrolled exploitation of its natural resources (Tedy, 2025). The disappearance of the fort's material remains, accompanied by the persistence of mythological narratives, illustrates how collective memory of colonial sites can evolve from tangible archaeological evidence into symbolic and narrative forms once the physical traces have vanished.

The contrasting trajectories of these three sites—Fort Marlborough as a well-preserved heritage monument, Fort Anna as a deteriorated structure interpreted as a symbolic expression of local resistance, and Fort Linau as a site preserved only

through myth and oral tradition (Tedy, 2025)—are examined further in the Discussion (Section 4.4) through the theoretical perspectives of the archaeology of memory and critical heritage studies. At this stage of the analysis, it is sufficient to emphasize that the preservation of colonial heritage in Bengkulu has not followed a uniform pattern. Instead, it has been shaped by local factors, including site accessibility, tourism and economic value, and the historical and emotional significance that individual sites hold for surrounding communities.

Table 1 summarizes the comparison of Kutai Rejang and EIC colonial forts on the four dimensions of analysis. Cells marked "limited data" reflect explicitly acknowledged data gaps; the absence of data does not imply the absence of that characteristic, but rather indicates the need for further field verification.

Table 1. Comparison of Kutai Rejang and EIC Colonial Fortress in Four Dimensions of Analysis

Analytical Dimension	Rejang Kutai	Fort York	Fort Marlborough	Fort Anna	Fort Linau
Materials and Construction	Thorny bamboo (<i>reduai</i>), approximately 2 m high; organic construction	Limited technical data available	Indian granite with coral stone and brick masonry; wall thickness 1.85–3 m	Limited technical data available	No physical remains survive
Spatial Orientation and Landscape	Integrated with the surrounding landscape; cemeteries deliberately located outside the enclosure and across the river	Situated at the mouth of the Serut River	Constructed on an elevated site overlooking the Indian Ocean	Located in Mukomuko; limited spatial information available	Unknown because the site has disappeared
Socio-symbolic Functions	Customary halls, ritual spaces, and cosmological boundaries	Pre-colonial and colonial center of economic and political activity	Landscape of memory featuring graves and memorials; later used as Indonesian National Police and Army headquarters; currently designated as Cultural Heritage	Continues to function as a living space for surrounding communities despite severe deterioration	Preserved primarily through myths associated with environmental protection
Response to Security Threats	Small-scale threats, including inter- <i>kutai</i> conflict	Early colonial rivalry and protection of the	Intercolonial competition combined with indigenous	Limited evidence; presumed to have followed the general	Unknown because the site has disappeared

	and animals	wild pepper trade routes	resistance (1793 and 1807)	EIC defensive pattern	
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Note: cells marked “limited data” reflect explicitly recognized data gaps; the absence of data does not imply the absence of the characteristic, but rather indicates the need for further field verification.

4. Conceptual Proposition

The synthesis of the available evidence reveals two defensive typologies that differ fundamentally in both materiality and design: the organic and community-based Rejang *kutai* on the one hand, and the monumental, centralized British East India Company (EIC) bastioned forts on the other. This material contrast should not be interpreted merely as a technical difference but rather as the manifestation of two distinct epistemologies of conflict space. The central proposition advanced in this discussion is that defensive architecture is not simply a neutral product of available technology and building materials. Instead, it constitutes a social construct that encodes a society's understanding of the sources of threat, the scale of political authority to be protected, and the relationship between physical and cosmological space.

This proposition is grounded in contemporary conflict archaeology, which argues that the material remains of conflict—including defensive architecture—should be interpreted as representations of power relations rather than as isolated technical artifacts (Saunders, 2012). Conflict archaeology bridges the past and the present through materiality whose meanings continue to evolve over time, a premise particularly relevant to Bengkulu, where the same fortifications have acquired successive meanings under different political regimes, from the EIC and the VOC to the Japanese occupation and the Republic of Indonesia.

5. Comparing the Spatial Philosophy and Materiality of Defensive Systems

The Rejang *kutai*, enclosed by thorny bamboo palisades that incorporated natural materials as their primary defensive element, exemplify landscape-embedded fortifications—defensive systems integrated with, rather than separated from, their ecological and social environments (Connor, 2005). The internal organization of the *kutai*, including communal halls, ritual spaces, and the spatial arrangement of burial grounds, demonstrates that its defensive function cannot be separated from its broader cosmological and social significance (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980).

By contrast, Fort Marlborough and Fort York represent the European fortification tradition based on the bastion system developed from the seventeenth century onward by military engineers such as Vauban. This system emphasized offensive and defensive efficiency through geometrically arranged bastions positioned at the corners of the fortress (Pawitro, 2014, as cited in Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019). The turtle-shaped layout of Fort Marlborough with its four bastions was therefore not merely an architectural curiosity but a direct application of European military engineering principles designed to maximize artillery coverage.

This technical and geometric approach differed fundamentally from the *kutai*, whose design emphasized integration with the natural landscape and the social organization of the community.

The contrast between bamboo construction and masonry walls measuring approximately 1.85–3 meters in thickness (Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia, 2012) may also be interpreted as reflecting different temporal orientations. The organic materials of the *kutai* were renewable and adaptable, corresponding to the Rejang settlement pattern, which was relatively mobile and responsive to customary and environmental considerations (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). In contrast, the permanent stone construction of EIC fortifications reflected a colonial commitment to long-term territorial control, consistent with the objectives of commercial colonialism in securing strategic pepper-producing regions (Kelanaku, 2018). It should be emphasized, however, that this interpretation of "temporal orientation" remains an analytical inference rather than a conclusion directly supported by archaeological evidence. The use of bamboo in *kutai* construction may equally be explained by the abundant availability of local materials, whereas stone and skilled labor had to be imported by the EIC from India. These cosmological and practical explanations should therefore be regarded as complementary rather than mutually exclusive until future archaeological research provides evidence capable of evaluating both interpretations.

6. Conflict as a Determinant of Defensive Design

The Rejang *kutai* were designed primarily to respond to localized and interpersonal threats, including conflicts between neighboring *kutai* and attacks by wild animals (Arios & Yondri, 2007; Sidik, 1980). A two-meter-high bamboo palisade was sufficient to resist traditional edged weapons but was not intended to withstand firearms or large-scale military assaults. In contrast, Fort York and Fort Marlborough were designed to confront much broader geopolitical threats, including competition among European colonial powers, as reflected in the orientation of their artillery toward the open sea (Goodnewsfromindonesia, 2023), while simultaneously serving to suppress resistance from the local population, exemplified by the deaths of Robert Hamilton (1793) and Thomas Parr (1807) (Kelanaku, 2018). This duality of external and internal threats resulted in colonial fortifications with substantially greater functional complexity than the *kutai*, which generally addressed a single dominant category of threat.

Within the framework of conflict archaeology, this duality corresponds to Carman's (2005) concept of battlefields as cultural resources, which emphasizes that colonial conflict sites contain multiple overlapping narratives rather than a simple binary opposition between colonizer and colonized. The 1696 VOC record documenting the multiethnic composition of the garrison at Silebar—including English soldiers, Dutch deserters, young English recruits, and Bugis and Malabar workers (ANRI, 1696)—reinforces the interpretation that colonial fortifications in

Bengkulu functioned as arenas where diverse political interests and cultural identities intersected.

The distinction between "*kutai* responding to localized threats" and "EIC forts responding to large-scale geopolitical threats" should not be overstated. Historical evidence demonstrates that the Rejang people themselves confronted colonial pressures, as illustrated by the resistance that resulted in the deaths of Hamilton and Parr. Whether these colonial encounters prompted changes in *kutai* design—such as strengthening the *reduai*, enlarging fortified settlements, or forming alliances among *petulai*—cannot yet be determined because neither Sidik (1980) nor Arios and Yondri (2007) explicitly discuss chronological changes in *kutai* architecture during the colonial period. This absence of evidence represents an important direction for future research rather than a definitive conclusion.

7. Possible Cross-Cultural Influence and Reciprocal Adaptation

The available evidence provides no direct indication of technical adaptation between indigenous and colonial defensive systems. Nevertheless, archaeological findings suggest that the Fort York area had already functioned as an indigenous economic and political center before the construction of the EIC fortification (Novita & Darmansyah, 2004), indicating continuity in spatial occupation between the pre-colonial and colonial periods without necessarily implying continuity in defensive design.

This phenomenon can be interpreted through the concept of entangled landscapes (González-Ruibal, 2019), introduced in the theoretical framework. Colonial conflict landscapes rarely occupied entirely new spaces; instead, they were superimposed upon places that already possessed social and political significance for local communities. This perspective helps explain why strategically important locations such as the mouth of the Serut River were selected by both indigenous rulers and the EIC, even though each pursued different political objectives and operated on different scales of authority.

The absence of evidence for direct technological transfer may indicate that the two defensive traditions developed largely independently, reflecting fundamentally different systems of military knowledge: indigenous traditions rooted in customary practices and local experience, and colonial fortifications grounded in the codified principles of European military engineering (Pawitro, 2014, as cited in Wirabhaya & Rahardjo, 2019). Absence of evidence should not be interpreted as evidence of absence. This interpretation therefore remains a working hypothesis requiring verification through additional archival research and primary archaeological field investigations.

8. Archaeology of Memory: Unequal Preservation as the Politics of Memory

The contrasting preservation histories of the three British forts discussed in the previous section can be productively interpreted through the perspectives of critical heritage studies (Harrison, 2010, 2013), which emphasize that cultural heritage is not

automatically inherited from the past but is actively selected and redefined by contemporary societies according to present-day values and interests. Fort Marlborough's designation as an officially protected heritage site and major tourist attraction reflects a process of selection influenced by its accessibility and economic value. Conversely, the deterioration of Fort Anna through looting may be understood not simply as a failure of conservation but also as a meaningful expression of local attitudes toward the colonial past (Tedy, 2025), illustrating that the physical deterioration of a site does not necessarily imply the disappearance of its social and political significance.

Fort Linau presents an even more striking example and can be interpreted through Nora's (1989) concept of **lieux de mémoire** (sites of memory). Collective memory may survive—and even become stronger—precisely when material traces disappear, shifting from physical remains to symbolic and narrative forms. The transformation of the former fort into a myth associated with environmental protection demonstrates how local communities have reinterpreted colonial heritage, transforming it from a symbol of foreign domination into one of local stewardship over natural resources. This process of resignification is consistent with Schofield's (2009) argument that conflict sites continue to acquire new meanings through successive reinterpretations.

Taken together, these three trajectories—full preservation, deliberate deterioration as symbolic rejection, and disappearance accompanied by mythologization—represent a spectrum of postcolonial responses that is far more complex than a simple dichotomy between preservation and neglect. They demonstrate that decisions concerning the conservation or abandonment of conflict heritage are inherently political acts embedded within broader processes of collective memory formation (Harrison, 2013).

9. Implications for Conflict Archaeology in Indonesia

The comparative analysis presented here has several implications for the development of conflict archaeology in Indonesia. First, it demonstrates the need to broaden the field beyond its traditional emphasis on European colonial fortifications by incorporating indigenous defensive systems that, although differing in materiality and philosophical foundations, performed equivalent defensive functions. Despite the limited archaeological evidence currently available, the Rejang *kutai* possess a level of socio-cosmological complexity that warrants equal scholarly attention.

Second, the concepts of entangled landscapes and critical heritage suggest that Indonesian conflict archaeology should move beyond descriptive analyses of military architecture toward more critical investigations of power relations, collective memory, and the ongoing reinterpretation of conflict heritage by contemporary communities, as illustrated by the differing preservation histories of the British forts in Bengkulu.

Third, the pronounced imbalance between the limited archaeological evidence for the Rejang *kutai* and the relatively extensive documentation of colonial fortifications reveals a structural bias within Indonesian conflict archaeology.

Research has tended to prioritize colonial sites that are more visible and institutionally documented while overlooking indigenous defensive systems whose remains are less conspicuous and more dispersed across the landscape. Addressing this imbalance will require a more proactive program of archaeological field research, as proposed in the recommendations for future investigation.

E. CONCLUSION

This conceptual-comparative study demonstrates that the Rejang Kutai and the EIC colonial forts in Bengkulu represent two fundamentally different epistemologies of conflict space, yet both are equally valid objects of study in the archeology of conflict: the Kutai reflects an organic-communal defense logic that blends with the landscape, while the EIC forts reflect a geometric-centralized defense logic that responds to larger geopolitical threats. Both traditions developed relatively independently without evidence of direct technical transfer, yet both responded to the same geographical advantage in Bengkulu's coastal region. The disparity in the preservation fate of the three colonial forts, maintained, destroyed as symbolic rejection, and vanished, reveals that the legacy of the colonial conflict in Bengkulu continues to undergo a process of resignification and selection of collective memory to the present day.

This paper emphasizes that defense design, both indigenous and colonial, cannot be understood solely as technical-architectural matters, but must be read as a social construction that encodes a society's understanding of the source of threat, the scale of power, and the relationship between physical and cosmological-symbolic space.

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