

POWER AND PROWESS

THE ORIGINS OF BROOKE KINGSHIP IN SARAWAK

J.H. WALKER



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J.H. Walker

For Craig Rendell

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Spelling, weights and measures

In using non-European names and in identifying Sarawak places I have generally followed the conventions of spelling used in the primary sources. Where contemporary European sources use more than one spelling, for example Mashor, Mussahore, Masahor and Mushor, I have settled on one, using it consistently, except when quoting directly. I have not used modern standard Malay spelling for places and names. An important exception to this rule is my use of the Malay spelling for *semangat* even when referring to Iban *semengat* or to Bidayuh *simungi*. This I did for simplicity, and not to elide differences in understandings and practice.

In deciding against using standard Malay spelling, I had regard for Peter Vandergeest's concern about the use of modern Thai in writing about the history of Thailand. As Vandergeest argued, the development and use of modern national languages is part of the process of nation building, implying uniformities and consistencies between pre-national pasts and modern, national presents, uniformities and consistencies that did not exist.¹ For similiar reasons, I have not used 'sic' to highlight James Brooke's idiosyncratic spelling or grammar, or that of the other Europeans whose observations I quote.

Although I am aware that Malay, Bidayuh and Iban words are not rendered plural by adding an 's' to them, it has been convenient to do so when writing in English.

I have given modern equivalents of traditional weights and measures and local units of currency where doing so contributes to understanding. In other cases I have not.

Glossary

<i>abang</i>	Malay aristocratic title (male)
<i>adat</i>	traditional law
<i>antu</i>	spirit
<i>antu padi</i>	spirits which animate Iban rice
<i>bala</i>	Iban war fleet
<i>balai</i>	Malay audience hall
<i>bangkong</i>	Iban war boat
<i>bejalai</i>	Iban trading expeditions to acquire prestige
<i>berkat</i>	the act of visiting a <i>kramat</i> to increase spiritual status
<i>bilek</i>	Iban longhouse segment, family unit
<i>binua</i>	Bidayan community, village
<i>budi</i>	kindness, benevolence
<i>dagang sera</i>	Malay forced trade
<i>datu</i>	non-royal, Malay title of rank
<i>daulat</i>	divine quality of Malay kingship (majesty)
<i>dayang</i>	Malay aristocratic title (female)
<i>haji</i>	Moslem title assumed by those who have completed the <i>hajj</i> to Mecca
<i>halus</i>	refined, delicate, gentle, invisible
<i>imam</i>	leader of Moslem congregation
<i>kampong</i>	Malay village
<i>kapitan China</i>	Chinese community leaders appointed by the Rajah
<i>kapitan Inglis</i>	English official appointed by the Rajah to coordinate government relations with Bau <i>kongsi</i>
<i>kongsi</i>	self-governing Chinese community

<i>kramat</i>	saint, shrine; sacred place or person
<i>lela</i>	small bore Malay cannons
<i>manang</i>	doctor and spirit intermediary
<i>naik pangkat</i>	effort to achieve higher ritual rank or status
<i>nakhoda</i>	Malay boat captain, merchant
<i>nama</i>	name, title, reputation
<i>ngayau</i>	Iban headhunting
<i>orang kaya</i>	Malay title denoting leadership, used by 19th-century Iban and Bidayan leaders
<i>Orang Kaya di Gadong</i>	Brunei official responsible for provincial administration and trading relations
<i>padi pun</i>	strains of sacred rice grown by Iban
<i>pangah</i>	Bidayan headhouse and ritual centre
<i>panglima</i>	war leader
<i>pengiran</i>	Malay royal and aristocratic title in Borneo
<i>perabang</i>	ridgecapping on an Iban longhouse
<i>perabangan</i>	Malay upper class in Sarawak, people of <i>abang</i> and <i>dayang</i> rank
<i>pindah</i>	Iban urge to migrate
<i>prahu</i>	Malay ocean-going vessel
<i>raja</i>	Malay ruler, patrilineal descendants of ruler
<i>raja berani</i>	Iban leader of several longhouse communities
<i>semangat</i>	cosmic energy, potency, soul
<i>semangat</i>	see <i>semangat</i>
<i>sherif</i>	descendent of the prophet, Mohammed
<i>simungi</i>	see <i>semangat</i>
<i>sumangé</i>	see <i>semangat</i>
<i>towkay</i>	Chinese community leader, merchant
<i>tua kampong</i>	municipal leaders in Kuching
<i>tuai rumah</i>	Iban leader of a longhouse community
<i>Tuan Besar</i>	Malay honorific, used by James Brooke c 1839–48 and by Brooke Brooke, 1848–61: great lord
<i>Tuan Muda</i>	Malay honorific used by Charles Johnson Brooke, 1852–68: young or junior lord

Abbreviations

Add	Additional manuscript
CLR	Copy of Letters Received
CO	Colonial Office (United Kingdom)
FO	Foreign Office (United Kingdom)
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office (United Kingdom)
HO	Home Office (United Kingdom)
<i>JMBRAS</i>	<i>Journal, Malaysian Branch, Royal Asiatic Society</i>
<i>JSBRAS</i>	<i>Journal, Straits Branch, Royal Asiatic Society</i>
Ms, Mss, MS, MSS	Manuscript/s
<i>SMJ</i>	<i>Sarawak Museum Journal</i>
USPG	United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel

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The usual disclaimers apply.

Approaching 19th-century Sarawak

The focus of this study is a network of power and ritual relationships that developed on the northwest coast of Borneo during the 19th century, and from which a coalition led by James Brooke established the state of Sarawak.

Since James Brooke acceded to the government of Sarawak in 1841, with the title Rajah, his exploits have attracted the attention of biographers and historians. Early histories of the Brooke regime either were sponsored by Rajahs themselves, or were associated with members of the Brooke family or their friends. Gertrude Jacob was inspired to write her valuable biography by her uncle's admiration for the first Rajah.¹ Spenser St John was an acolyte of James Brooke.² Bampfylde, who collaborated with Baring-Gould to produce the first general history of Sarawak under Brooke rule, was a former senior officer in the second Rajah's service.³ Steven Runciman's *The White Rajahs* was undertaken at the suggestion of the British Colonial Office, with the cooperation of Rajah Vyner, his family and supporters.⁴ Robert Payne, meanwhile, was working on *The White Rajahs of Sarawak* with the active involvement of Rajah Vyner's brother and nephew, and other opponents of Sarawak's cession to Britain.⁵ Although Emily Hahn was not directly linked to the Brookes, she had previously published an admiring biography of Raffles, and she reflected much of the uncritical admiration of the first Rajah which earlier works assumed.⁶

From the 1960s, the scope of writings about Sarawak history expanded. Nicholas Tarling's *oeuvre* explores the importance of Brooke rule in the expansion of Britain's presence in southeast Asia.⁷ Craig Lockard's detailed history of Kuching pioneered the writing of a broader, social history of the place,⁸ providing a context for more recent analyses by Saunders and Ooi.⁹

The most important advance in Sarawak historiography, however, remains Robert Pringle's unsurpassed *Rajahs and Rebels*. Pringle's achievement was to shift scholarly focus from the Brookes and their administration onto the relationship between the Brookes and one of the groups of people they sought to rule. Pringle analysed the *interaction* between the administrative systems of the Brookes, and the social and economic systems of Iban.¹⁰ Written with the cooperation of the Iban ethnographer Benedict Sandin, Pringle's work, more than any other, explicated the systemic change which Brooke rule and other pressures for modernisation engendered. In contrast to other studies, Pringle analysed the *dynamics* of Iban–Brooke relations. His success was underpinned by his openness to new methodologies in historical analysis, particularly the concepts and concerns of social anthropology.

Pringle's innovation was part of a wider methodological advance linking historiography more closely to the social sciences. But at the same time that some historians realised the usefulness of social anthropology, some social scientists had begun to move beyond the analysis of social structures to explore culturally specific understandings of power. Since Pringle completed his research, more recent studies, across a range of geographic areas, have significantly developed culturist methodologies. Clifford Geertz, O.W. Wolters and Benedict Anderson have transformed our capacity to understand power and hierarchy in Southeast Asia.¹¹ Their insights, in turn, have been developed in works by later scholars, such as Anthony Milner, Shelly Errington and Margaret Weiner.¹² Milner, Errington and Weiner have demonstrated the inadequacy of narrative realism in history, which too often involves Western (or Western-trained) historians imposing Western perceptions of 'common sense' onto other people's pasts.¹³

Largely, Sarawak historiography has not reflected these more recent developments. Yet it ought to be axiomatic of Sarawak's history, no less than of its anthropology, 'that people perceive the world in widely differing ways, *that they behave on the basis of those perceptions . . .*' Whether, as Vinson Sutlive also observed, such perceptions present 'insuperable barriers to understanding'¹⁴ depends on the extent to which scholars focus on how rather than why, on mechanics rather than meaning. The mechanics (e.g. of some shamanic practices) might remain inscrutable, yet the meaning is susceptible to study.

Although the large *corpus* of Sarawak history has delineated patterns of conflict, it has not explained adequately either the sources of support for James Brooke in Sarawak or the processes through which opponents became supporters. Thus, although it is accurate, it is not sufficient to note, as Sandin did, that hostilities among various groups caused some Iban to support Brooke against other Iban.¹⁵ Such analysis needs to be augmented by an analysis of the *meaning* for Iban of both conflict and alliance.

Critics of cultural analysis point to the tendency of culturist scholars to overlook dissent, pluralism and the material bases of existence in favour of

symbolic coherence and integration.¹⁶ Notwithstanding the cultural particularities of historical experience, there are certain universalities. However economic activities, for example, are perceived, they produce material sustenance. Social structures, however they are conceptualised, regulate human relationships. It is important, therefore, to explore the cultural dimensions of power in the context of the economic and social structures from which power can derive and to which culture gives meaning. The material, social and cultural dimensions of power need to be studied each in the context of the others in order to avoid distorting historical experience.

The materialisation of metaphysics is inexact, confronting people, as they seek to reify their cosmologies, with contradictions and inconsistencies. In the consequent attempts of people to realign beliefs and practices with their environment, or to manipulate their environment to accord more closely with their beliefs, lie important sources of change. This supports Bentley's call for 'diachronic' analysis: 'If we begin to understand how systems of religious symbols orient people so that they may act effectively in the world, then we may ask how divergences between prevailing symbols and experience give rise to transformations in identity and belief.'¹⁷

Historians seem to have been deflected from exploring the local meanings of James Brooke's power by an unquestioned assumption that Brooke established Sarawak as a peculiar form of British colonialism or a 'private kingdom', somehow different from any other kingdom. Even Pringle described the country as one of the 'spectrum of colonial regimes', assessing James Brooke as 'a superb example of the private individual as empire builder'.¹⁸ For Ulla Wagner, Sarawak was both 'a specific type of colonialism' and 'a private raj' with a 'colonial administration'.¹⁹ Otto Doering also saw it as 'the private domain of a dynasty of Englishmen'.²⁰ Although Lockard noted that James Brooke 'constituted in fact a vigorous and independent power source within the traditional state system of north-west Borneo',²¹ he commented elsewhere that the first Rajah 'governed Sarawak as a private fiefdom'.²² Wright considered that Brooke and Sarawak were simply 'an anomaly'.²³ Brooke's power in 19th-century Sarawak, it seems, was colonial, special, private and anomalous.

Such assessments overlook Brooke's predecessors and contemporaries, who sought also to establish authority in Borneo. Alexander Hare had set himself up as 'Raja of Moloeko' in the south of the island during the early 19th century.²⁴ In the 1840s Erskine Murray tried to establish a settlement in Kutai, while Edward Belcher was entrenched at Berau.²⁵ Still later, Joseph Torrey would claim to be 'Raja of Ambong . . . and Supreme Ruler of the whole of the northern part of Borneo', Baron von Overbeck would style himself 'Maharaja of Sabah and Raja of Gaya and Sandikan', and the Sultan of Brunei would offer to make John Dill Ross 'Raja of Palawan'.²⁶

Graham Saunders explored some of these attempts at rulership in South-east Asia in the context of European imperialism, noting that, in

the hiatus between the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and the new imperialism of the 1870s and 1880s, government interest in colonies was not very great. The way was open for individuals, for their own gain or for that of their country, to make their mark.²⁷

Notwithstanding Saunders' observations, European adventurers in Borneo need also to be placed in the context of still earlier intruders. The contested and transient nature of power in Borneo had long provided opportunities for outsiders to acquire positions, and even to found enduring states. It is not clear why James Brooke's realm should be regarded as any more colonial, private, special or anomalous than those of Syed Abdul Rahman, who founded a sultanate at Pontianak, southwest of Sarawak, in the late 18th century,²⁸ or the Al-Aidarusi Tuan of Kubu.²⁹ Similarly, the Bugis princes, Raja Muda Ali of Riau and Opu Daeng Menambun, established themselves at Sukadana and Mempawah, respectively.³⁰ The *Hikayat Banjar* records that Banjarmasin was founded by a successful trader from India, Ampu Jatmaka.³¹ Brunei court chronicles emphasise the importance of Arab and Chinese outsiders in the development of that realm.³²

It seems that historians of Sarawak have brought to their analyses unquestioned assumptions about the relationships between ethnicity and power, and ethnicity and colonialism, failing to recognise that rulers and overlords in the 19th century were often of a nationality and background different from those of the people they ruled, even in Europe.³³ Ethnic boundaries and identities were far more fluid in the early 19th century than they had become by the century's close. It is not clear, therefore, why James Brooke's ethnicity should be regarded as a key signifier of the Brooke state.

Nor have modern scholars been alert to the terms in which some of Brooke's contemporaries saw his achievement. The Bishop of Sarawak, Frank McDougall, congratulated Brooke in 1864 for 'bringing together the scattered hostile and oppressed population of the country, and forming them into a compact native state'.³⁴ James Augustus St John considered that Sarawak provided 'an example of the way in which new states are founded'.³⁵ Although Lockard argued that Sarawak history 'has been seriously distorted by the tendency of historians to focus primarily on the Brookes and the peculiar nature of their rule',³⁶ it has been distorted also by the failure of scholars to explore adequately the nature of the relationships between the first Rajah and his subjects, or the roles played by the Rajah in conflicts among his subjects.

If historians have been impeded in understanding Sarawak's past by their assumptions about ethnicity, they have been constrained also by their sources, which are composed largely of the letters and other records of the Brooke family and their European followers, European missionaries and merchants, and the records of the British Government. This poses a problem because such accounts are not necessarily reliable. David Bassett

even cited James Brooke's published diaries and Charles Brooke's memoirs to demonstrate how unreliable European sources for Southeast Asian history could be.³⁷ In addition to the issues that Bassett outlined, Sarawak scholars face the further problem that James Brooke's published correspondence and diaries have been extensively edited. Templer's heavy hand is particularly evident.³⁸

Although Bassett's study was the first to detail problems with Brooke sources, the general issue had long been recognised. Tom Harrison, almost 20 years before Bassett, proposed that to develop a true picture of Sarawak's past scholars needed to 'read between the lines' and 'listen to the voices of the people'.³⁹ James Ongkili also thought that quite 'often it is more profitable to read, not the lines, but between the lines'.⁴⁰ Neither Harrison nor Ongkili offered any practical suggestions about how this might be achieved, however.

Anthony Milner explored the issue of European sources in Malaysian history more conceptually than Harrison and Ongkili. Like Bassett, Milner argued that Malaysian historiography has been distorted by the almost exclusive use of British records. As an antidote, Milner urged the use of whatever indigenous writings exist.⁴¹ Benedict Sandin's publications provide valuable Iban perspectives on Sarawak's past,⁴² while a number of transcriptions of traditional histories and genealogies published by the *Sarawak Museum Journal* have also made available other indigenous perceptions of events.⁴³ But these works have not displaced the Brooke archives. Where colonial or European language materials remain, they should be used. The challenge, as Ian Black noted with regard to Sabah, is to establish whether European archives can yield a more complete picture of indigenous life than was perceived by the individuals who contributed to them.⁴⁴ In order to do so, European records need to be examined more critically than many historians have attempted to do.

Bassett suggested that, by bringing a rigorous scepticism to bear on the detail of European accounts, indigenous viewpoints might emerge.⁴⁵ Milner has proposed further that where indigenous sources are lacking historians should read European accounts 'against the grain', that they should 'interrogate' their sources.⁴⁶ In attempting this, Milner recommended the adoption of a 'conceptual construct from the social sciences'.⁴⁷ At the heart of Milner's recommendation is the assumption that 'facts' do not necessarily have natural or universal meanings but are culturally encoded and contextualised. As Sullivan observed:

The perception, selection and ordering of data requires, on the one hand an epistemology, an assumption of how the object can be known, and on the other hand implies a theory of the relationship of objects of knowledge. Natural facts, whether historical or otherwise, do not surrender up their meaning in the moment of perception.⁴⁸

Facts do not necessarily have a natural relationship one to the other, any more than they have a natural meaning. The sheer volume of surviving records relating to Sarawak requires scholars to exclude from their accounts most of the 'facts' they uncover. Methodologies are useful not only for comprehending the meaning of facts, but also for structuring facts into sequences encompassing causes and effects. Many of the narratives of Sarawak history are derived from the 'natural' meanings and relationships identified by earlier generations of 'court' historians. With their Eurocentric assumptions and Brooke loyalties, such scholars did not seek to bring the historical experience of the non-European peoples of Sarawak into the foreground. The narratives such writers established need to be tested and reviewed to incorporate the other historical voices that are recorded in the archives and in more recently published indigenous narratives.

The use of a conceptual construct from the social sciences, as Milner advised, helps both to select facts and to explore their meanings, exposing the process of selection and rejection to greater scrutiny. This study follows Milner's precepts in both ways. First, it seeks to interrogate archival sources in order to review and expand the historical narrative, by using anthropological concepts to explore indigenous expectations of and responses to the development of Sarawak. Secondly, it employs paradigms derived from political science and anthropology to analyse the nature of the early Brooke state.

Within a broadly narrative framework, this study explores the origins and nature of the first Brooke Rajah's power and authority, examining Brooke's relations with Malays, Bidayuh, Iban and Chinese, and detailing the processes by which Brooke attracted supporters and converted opponents into supporters. To explain how Brooke became an independent ruler required a careful re-examination of the archival and other primary sources. Hoping that the extant records would contain evidence of how local people perceived, understood and participated in Brooke's activities, I had little reason to revisit the accepted historical narrative. The 'facts' of Sarawak history had been well established by previous writers. Brooke had been rewarded with the governership of the country for helping the Brunei ruler suppress a revolt. He was concerned to protect the otherwise hapless Bidayuh from Malay oppression. He governed indirectly, through existing Malay hierarchies. He persuaded the Royal Navy to attack Iban and Malay pirates, whose activities confronted British imperial interests, and this naval support established his power over wide areas. In 1857 his capital was burned by Chinese miners, who resented his attempts to tax and police them, and his regime survived two plots to topple it by a group of Malay nobles. His nephew and heir seemed to have become mentally or emotionally unstable, and was replaced by a younger brother who succeeded as Rajah on James Brooke's death, in 1868.

Reviewing the primary sources, however, revealed most of these 'facts' to be, at best, misrepresentations. James Brooke was not given power, he seized it with the support of the people whose revolt he had helped to quell.

The Bidayuh, far from being hapless, determinedly resisted Brooke's attempts to collect taxes and enforce his labour demands. Brooke ruled directly, reserving power in his own hands, and becoming at the same time the ritual and symbolic focus for association in the area. That the Royal Navy repeatedly attacked many Iban communities did not, in itself, explain how Brooke established his authority among these enemies. Far from plotting against Brooke, the Malay nobles who had been condemned or lauded by historians emerged from the archival record as the victims of a power struggle within the Malay community that had been overlooked by successive scholars. Finally, far from going a bit mad, the Rajah's heir acted against him with the support of Malay and European elite figures to preserve Sarawak from European colonisation.

The earliest Brooke historians, Jacob, St John and Baring-Gould and Bamfylde, it seemed, had not just relegated native people to the background, but in doing so had presented a particular view of James Brooke's career that was often at variance with information recorded elsewhere (including, in the case of St John, elsewhere in his own works). They all admired the first Rajah, while St John and Bamfylde had served in Sarawak. Their treatments of conflicts were intended to reflect well on the men they served. They promulgated James and Charles Brooke's own published accounts and explanations. Notwithstanding Bassett's salutary warnings, subsequent scholars have rarely had occasion to revisit these received versions of James Brooke's career. Hoping initially to provide a reinterpretation of Sarawak's formation, I found an historical narrative that varied significantly from those previously published.

Drawing on conceptual frameworks that emphasise the importance of culturally specific understandings of power, I have sought to reconstruct how people in Sarawak understood James Brooke. Instead of perceiving people in Sarawak either as passive recipients (or victims) of Brooke power or as defeated opponents, I have sought to understand how Brooke's role and position in Sarawak were, in key ways, constructed by local people to reflect their own objectives and priorities. Some of the reinterpretations that I offer and the narratives that I have reconstructed are contentious. Consequently, I have documented my arguments more closely, perhaps, than is usual.

I

Power and prowess in northwest Borneo

Prior to 1841, the term 'Sarawak' referred to the Sarawak River area and the territory accessible from it. Since then, it has become associated with the polity that was created by James Brooke and his allies and that, throughout the latter half of the 19th century, expanded along the northwest coast of Borneo. Today that entity is one state of Malaysia.

Sarawak is divided into three geographic zones: a low-lying, poorly drained coastal plain comprises about one-fifth the State's area; behind the plain are steep, forested hills rising to about 1000 feet, which comprise about three-fifths of the State; the remaining one-fifth comprises rugged, forested mountain ranges in which begin the many rivers that have shaped the State's history and demography. Although parts of the Sarawak and Sadong River basins have fertile soils suitable for the intensive agriculture associated with alluvial areas elsewhere in Southeast Asia, much of the lowland areas, particularly in the basins of the Skrang, Saribas and Rejang Rivers, is composed of acidic peat unsuitable for intensive cropping.¹

The amount of rain that falls on Borneo defines the other main features of the island's geography, producing rivers on the largest scale, such as the Rejang, Barito, Mahakam and Kapuas. Three hundred and fifty miles long, the Rejang is navigable for steamers for 150 miles up to Kapit. Ocean-going ships berth at Sibu, and even at Kanowit it is half a mile wide. The rains also sustain some of the world's greatest rainforest ecosystems. The botanist Odoardo Beccari had nowhere seen 'primeval forests so rich, so varied, and peculiar in their flora as in the vicinity of Kuching'.²

The forests create illusions of agricultural potential. Although lush and vigorous, they grow on shallow topsoils that need constant regeneration from the forest's own humus to support them. Destroy the forests, therefore, and the source of agricultural wealth itself is destroyed. The solution to this agricultural barrier in Borneo was the development of systems of

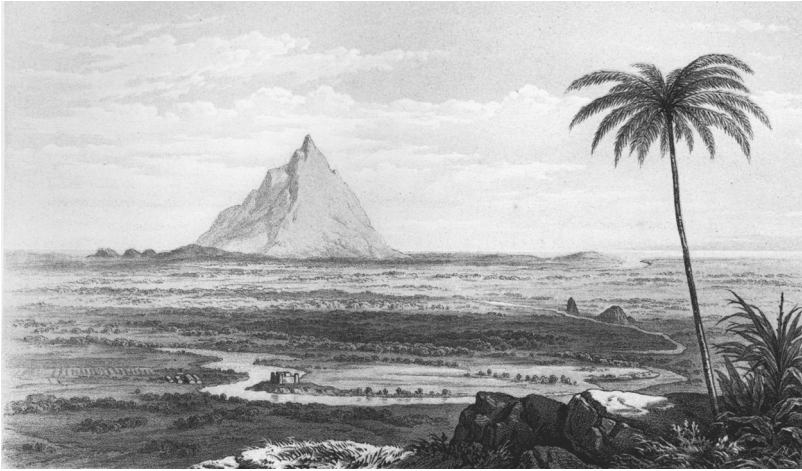
slash-and-burn farming. The ashes of burned forest provided enough additional nutrients to sustain dry-rice and other cultivation for a few years, after which the area was allowed to regenerate. Fallow areas were colonised by secondary growth which, in its turn, provided ashes to the soil to nourish crops. Far from being a 'prodigal farming system',³ slash-and-burn was a sustainable form of agriculture suited to the limitations of Bornean ecology.

The Bornean jungle also provided a wide range of products for jungle dwellers to consume or to trade with outsiders. 'The rattans of Borneo', Hugh Low recorded, 'are esteemed finer than those produced in any other part of the world'.⁴ To this he added camphor, gutta percha, and timbers like belian and ebony in a list of forest exports.⁵ Borneo people also exported sago, which they cultivated so extensively in the 19th century that Mukah, Oya, Bintulu, Matu and Bruit among them produced more than half the world's supply.⁶

Control of downriver areas was central to the processes of domination and state formation in Borneo. Upriver groups needed salt and dried fish products as well as iron.⁷ Control of river mouths gave downriver groups some potential to monopolise the trade in these and other products. Thus river systems supported trade-based polities which, through relationships of varying inequality, sought to expropriate the jungle produce of tribal peoples living upriver. Downriver groups traded this produce into the international trading networks centred on China or one of the major archipelagic entrepôts serving the China trade. Relations between downriver Malayo-Moslem elites and upriver tribes were uneasy and shifting, however.

It has been a commonplace view in the literature about Borneo that forests created barriers to communications by land, encouraging the use of rivers. According to one Bornean cliché, 'the water unites and the land divides'.⁸ In this view it was because they facilitated movement that rivers became the primary locus of human settlement, the major arteries of trade and a major focus of power and identity. But there are a number of problems with such materialist interpretations. Healey proposed in 1985 that:

Contrary to the apparent assumptions of most commentators on central Borneo, this orientation to rivers as lines of communication was surely not an ecological imperative. In other parts of the tribal world (e.g. in New Guinea) communications are often concentrated in high ground rather than along rivers, even if they are navigatable. Indeed, many stretches of waterway in inland Borneo are broken by rapids dangerous to canoes or rafts. The orientation of Borneo tribalists to river-borne transport seems as much induced by ideological factors as by topography and ecology. Rivers occupy a significant place in tribal cosmology, often serving as lines of contact with deities of the upper air and the upstream and with deities, dragons and serpents of the underworld and downstream. Burial customs often include themes of river voyages.⁹



In Borneo, downriver groups sought to monopolise upriver trade as a basis for domination and power. The Rajah's fort at Belidah is clearly visible in this view from his holiday bungalow

A range of examples from across northwest Borneo support Healey's suggestion. The ease of land-based communications between Sambas and Pontianak was sufficient to undermine the Sambas economy as early as 1812. The watershed between the Sarawak River and the Kapuas was also permeable, allowing ready land access between the interiors of Sarawak and Sambas and Pontianak.¹⁰ The Iban of the Saribas and Skrang rivers maintained an inland system of communication through paths which 'intersect the forests between the villages of all the Sakarran and Sarebas tribes, so that a constant communication is easily kept up . . .'¹¹ Rather than trading in the Rejang delta, the Punan Bah of the upper Rejang travelled up the Belaga branch of the Rejang, trekked overland to the Tubau river and down the Kemena,¹² a route followed also by the Kenyah Badeng settled on the Plieran and Danum tributaries of the Rejang.¹³ Similarly, in the 1840s, Robert Burns found that Kayan wishing to trade could travel down to the Rejang delta, or travel further up the Rejang, trek for five or six days across the watershed, and descend the rivers flowing south and east.¹⁴ Although both downriver and upriver groups might have conceived movement and identity in terms of rivers and river basins, upriver groups throughout northwest Borneo were alert to the potential of land-based communications to subvert the control sought by downriver groups.

HISTORY

Indianised remains discovered at Kutai suggest that Borneo has sustained high levels of civilisation since the 5th century.¹⁵ The first of a succession of advanced states based on the northwestern coast was Po-ni, which probably encompassed what is now Sarawak's First Division. Po-ni's economy was partly industrial. Santubong, at the mouth of the Sarawak River, was a significant iron-smelting centre by the 11th century.¹⁶ It is not clear whether Po-ni can be identified as an early name for Brunei, or whether it was a predecessor state. Nor is its relationship to a 7th-century state on the northwest coast known as Vijayapura at all clear.¹⁷

The relationship between Melaka and Brunei in the Melakan period is also obscure. Although the dating of the conversion of the Brunei court to Islam remains controversial, it probably occurred through intercourse with Melaka in the 16th century.¹⁸ Notwithstanding increasing European contacts with the north and west coasts of Borneo from this period, Brunei resisted Spanish encroachment from the north, in reprisal for which the Spanish burned the Brunei capital in 1645.¹⁹

A Spanish report from 1530 describes Cerava (Sarawak) as one of the four chief ports of Borneo, inhabited by 'many and rich merchants' whose trade consisted of diamonds, camphor, aloes-wood, provisions and wine.²⁰ Bob Reece suggested that the Sultan of Brunei gave Sarawak to a Portuguese captain, '*penguilan* Maraxa de Raxa', in 1578, in reward for 'de Raxa's' support against the Spanish: 'Helping to restore Sultan Saif ul Rijal to the throne, it seems likely that de Raxa was rewarded with a wife and the opportunity to carve out his own little kingdom on the northwest coast.' Although Reece acknowledged that little more is known of this first white Rajah of Sarawak, he suggested that the cannon captured at Sadok after Rentap's flight, 'may also have come from de Raxa's ship'.²¹

One problem with this reconstruction is the absence of evidence to support it. The documents Reece cited do not suggest either that Maraxa de Raxa was Portuguese or that he was given Sarawak by the sultan. As Nicholl explained, '*penguilan* Maraxa de Raxa' was a Spanish rendering of a Malay title, Pengiran Maharaja de Raja. There is no mention in the sources of his being married to anyone, and it is not certain that he even went to Sarawak. He was said to have been instructed by the Sultan to visit all the rivers 'as far as Saragua'.²² '*Penguilan* Maraxa de Raxa' was noteworthy to his Spanish contemporaries because he was a leading official of the Brunei court, not because he was Portuguese. Nor did the Spanish treat him as though he were Portuguese. When they wrote to him, they translated their letters into Malay before dispatching them.²³ Moreover, far from being hostile to the Spanish, as Reece suggested, the Pengiran was one of the Brunei officials friendly to Spain. The Spanish Captain-General in Manila, De Sande, claimed to have appointed him a 'commander', giving him a 'letter of assurance and friendship' and instructing his captain to 'observe

all friendship' towards him.²⁴ Finally, the cannon taken at Sadok was 'Bujang Timpang Brang', a gun that had been captured by the Iban leader, Orang Kaya Pamancha Dana, in Sambas in 1825.²⁵

Although Sarawak figures prominently in the 16th-century sources collected by Nicholl, its importance must have declined during the following century. It is not marked on 17th-century European maps of the area. Nor did Berthelot, who sailed in the region in 1626–1627, mark it, although he did note one of the Rejang's tributaries.²⁶

Brunei had risen to regional dominance by monopolising trade from the northwest coast of Borneo. From the late 17th century, however, a series of conflicts within the ruling family diminished Brunei's control over its northern territories.²⁷ As the volume of trade controlled by the Brunei elite decreased, Brunei people sought to maintain their standard of living by increasing the profits they made from the surviving traffic. By 1821 Brunei's once considerable trade with China had ceased and the Chinese population itself 'from oppression are now reduced to about 500'.²⁸ Lee cited figures indicating that the population of Brunei fell from 40 000 in 1700–1720 (30 000 of whom were Chinese pepper planters) to 15 000 in 1805. By 1849, the Chinese population of Brunei was entirely dispersed.²⁹

Sarawak unequivocally re-enters European records as a source of marauding: about 1810 Raffles complained to Lord Minto about the pirates of 'Serawa' who had operated in conjunction with those of Sambas to disable the British ship *Commerce*. After the capture in 1813 of Sambas by the British, the British commander sent a letter to a 'Raja of Sarawak' admonishing him for his piracy.³⁰

ETHNOGRAPHY

Sarawak's ethnography is complex. A 1940 census in Sarawak divided the then population into 51 'races', three of which it divided into 81 tribes.³¹ It is also contentious. 'Anthropologists,' Emily Hahn remarked, 'are an argumentative race, and where the people of Borneo are concerned, their belligerent tendencies find full scope.'³²

This study, however, is concerned with the sources and development of power. Because of the nature of power in Borneo, and the processes of trade control that underpinned it, my interest is necessarily focused on coastal, lowland and hill-dwelling groups, the Iban or Sea Dyaks, the Land Dyaks or Bidayuh and the Malays, rather than upland peoples like the Punan, Penan, Kayan or Kenyah.

Malays

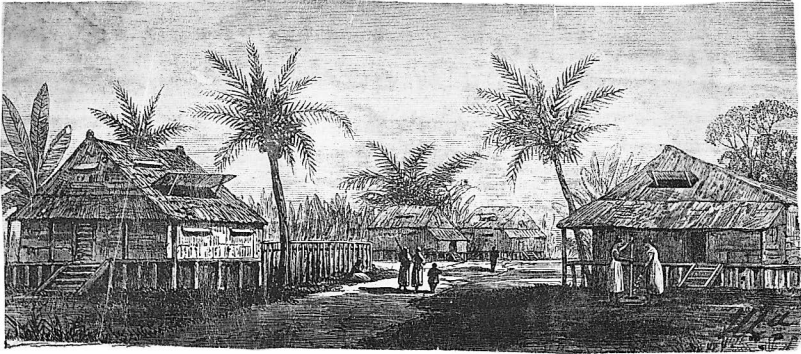
Although genealogies trace the descent of Sarawak's aristocratic Malay families to Sumatran and Javanese royalty, Sarawak's Malay population derives primarily from tribal pagans converted to Islam and to Malay

culture and identity. This process, *masuk Melayu* (or to become Malay), is well documented in northwest Borneo.³³ Despite their Dyak origins, Sarawak Malays have a 'coherent ethnic and cultural identity', and becoming Malay entailed progressive entry into a hierarchical, patriarchal and literate society.³⁴ Malay society operated according to stratified patterns in which individuals could be ranked according to factors such as ancestry, wealth and number of followers. The heritability of rank and Malay use of patrilineages resulted in distinctions between major and minor or illustrious and less successful lineages, which thus promoted a highly differentiated social structure. Donald Brown identified seven broad 'classes' among the Bruneis, and 27 ranks in the Brunei court hierarchy.³⁵

To be sustained, rank needed to correlate with power, and power required resources. Sarawak Malays acquired the resources necessary to maintain their power and substantiate their rank through controlling the distribution of forest products collected by tribal peoples on the world market. Although upriver groups exercised a degree of choice about the coastal Malays with whom they traded, the access they needed to exotic goods required them to trade with one Malay community or another. Malay dependence on trade was so complete that Malays do not seem to have practised agriculture. James Brooke saw little sign of rice or other cultivation among Sadong Malays in 1839, and it is clear from Low, an unusually reliable European observer, that Malays obtained their rice from Dyaks.³⁶

With the wealth and other resources accumulated, aristocrats were able to develop complex vertical linkages of mutual dependence with lower-ranking Malays and other non-Malay groups. In return for the advantages of association with an elite figure, dependent populations provided household services and labour in trading, military and other ventures. Additionally, the leader's entourage was a public expression of the leader's power and authority, thus contributing to it. Servants, as Kautsky observed, 'perform a useful function by their mere existence, not just by their work'.³⁷

Malay power, therefore, had two essential structural features: first, it was conducted within a framework of entourages bound to the leader by complexes of patron-client relationships; secondly, the resources necessary to maintain these complexes often derived from trading activity. *Nakhodas* (traders) were able to develop entourages based on their control of a vessel. Most trading ventures comprised a *nakhoda*, who owned the vessel(s) on which he carried goods to trade, and a number of other, smaller traders who provided their own trading capital and who worked to sail the ship(s) as payment for their transport, thus placing themselves under the *nakhoda*'s authority.³⁸ Not only, however, did the structure of Malay trade generate entourages, the purpose of Malay trade remained the creation of wealth that could be used to attract larger entourages and more followers. The function of Malay trading ventures was not to generate capital but to attract supporters for elite figures whose status reflected the number of people they could mobilise. In the 1880s in Brunei, Peter Leys observed the importance of



Malay town in northwest Borneo

maintaining entourages, noting that ‘all the rulers in Brunei are always impecunious, and many heavily in debt and urgently requiring funds, more through their own utterly improvident habits, the large households they keep up, and the numerous retainers they support’.³⁹

Because its purpose was the development of entourages, Malay trade in Borneo provided opportunities for developing power. The association of trade with power has been an enduring feature of Malay society throughout the archipelago. The *Maritime Code* promulgated by the Melaka Sultanate specifically equated the authority of a *nakhoda* on his vessel with that of a *raja* (ruler), according among the various people aboard the vessel authority analogous to that of Melaka’s court hierarchy.⁴⁰ The *Tufhat al-Nafis* also alludes to this essential link, describing how, after Raja Muda Ali lost influence at Riau, he travelled to Mempawah in Borneo, where he married his cousin:

After their marriage, Raja Ali moved to Sukadana where he built a settlement, complete with palace, audience hall and fortifications and promoted trade. The country prospered with *kapal*, *wangkang* and many other kinds of *perahu* coming to do business. The Yang Dipertuan Muda received a great deal in tolls, replacing all the property he had lost in Riau.⁴¹

Although Raja Ali regrouped his forces and eventually returned to Riau, successful trading ventures could be transformed into more enduring polities. The *Hikayat Banjar* records that Banjarmasin was founded by a successful trader from India, Ampu Jatmaka.⁴² The sultanate of Pontianak, southwest of Sarawak, was founded in the late 18th century by Syed Abdul Rahman, in part on his success as a trader.⁴³

Providing the means by which most of the resources necessary for maintaining state elites were extracted, trade was a prerequisite of sovereignty. In early 19th-century Brunei, commerce was almost exclusively in the hands

of the three most powerful ministers, Pengirans Usop and Mumin and Raja Muda Hassim.⁴⁴ 'In former days,' as Charles Grant observed, 'Malay Rajahs were all, more or less, traders. Government was only nominal; its functions were mercantile.'⁴⁵ Moreover, once tribal populations were within the domination of Malays they could be forced to trade, and *dagang sera* (forced trade) was a common feature of Malay political economy.

The existence of relatively large populations of tribal non-Moslem people provided elite Malays in Borneo with more direct opportunities to develop entourages than trading ventures, however. By raiding tribal neighbours, Malays would capture young boys to raise in their households, directly swelling their retinues. They would capture also women and girls to give as wives to men in their retinues, or use them as inducements to men to join their following. The importance of control over women to entourage-forming derived from residency patterns and from the high cost of marriage. Rather than endowing their daughters, Malay men paid bride-prices for wives.⁴⁶ The high bride-prices demanded of Malay men constrained their capacity to marry. Sarawak Malays are matrilocal: couples usually live near the wife's family rather than near the husband's.⁴⁷ Therefore, the capacity of an elite figure, or even a father, to provide wives could engender a following. Similar processes have been observed in the Sulu sultanate based on islands off northeast Borneo and the adjoining coast. In the Sulu slave markets, the highest prices were paid for young women, 'who could be offered as wives and concubines to recruit young men to a *datu's* retinue, and youths, who were considered tractable and therefore more readily incorporated into Tausug society than men'.⁴⁸

Elite Malays developed raiding as a means of acquiring control over women and, as elite figures sought to expand their power in the face of opposition from rivals, raiding longhouse communities to acquire women became epidemic. The contemporary literature abounds with such reports. For example, Sherif Sahib of Sadong, soon after he moved to Skrang to mobilise for war with Sarawak, sent parties through Sadong and Samarahan to capture women and children.⁴⁹ The process could also be combined with *dagang sera*. St John claimed that after Bidayuh supplies of rice and other valuables were exhausted through forced trade, the Malays 'seized on the best-looking girls and the most likely lads, and carried them off as slaves . . .'.⁵⁰

Iban or Sea Dyaks

The pagan, tribal peoples of Borneo contrasted with the Malayo-Moslems of the coastal and downriver areas on several obvious and significant counts. They occupied longhouses rather than single dwellings, they practised shifting agriculture and promulgated rice-centred cultures. Of these groups the most powerful were the Sea Dyaks, or Iban.

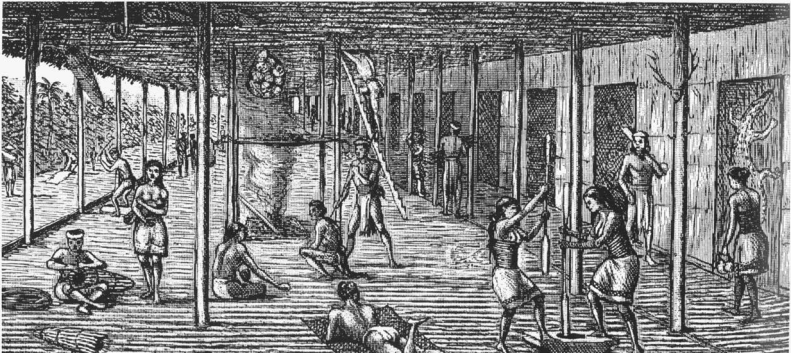
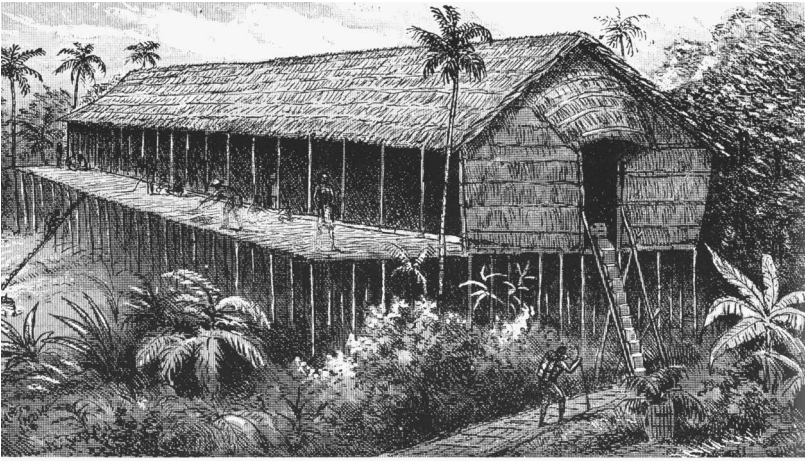
The Iban are believed to have entered Sarawak from the Kapuas valley. By about 1700, Iban had migrated into the headwaters of all the rivers of what is now the Second Division of Sarawak except for the Kalaka. They continued to expand their presence within the rivers' valleys towards the coast, coming into sustained contact with downriver Malayo-Moslem groups by the period 1740–1790.⁵¹

In common with most of Borneo's other agricultural longhouse-dwelling pagans, Iban developed a 'rice culture'. Rice was considered by them the distinctive element of their culture — that which made them human. Rice was a gift to the Iban from their gods, and its cultivation underpinned and gave substance to 'a total way of life that is supported by and in turn reinforces Iban theology, cosmology, and eschatology'.⁵² Rice represented a transubstantiation of Iban ancestors, a direct physical embodiment of the continuing presence of an individual's forebears in the world.⁵³ Rice cultivation was a ritual undertaking — a form of prayer designed to harmonise individuals with their cosmologies.

By the time European observers arrived in Sarawak in the 1840s, Iban were split into several major divisions and two antagonistic constellations. The Saribas and Skrang Iban lived on their respective rivers and had colonised the Lipat, a branch of the Krian, the Kanowit, Katibas and other tributaries of the Rejang. St John put the total population of these groups at 120 000, estimating that they could field at least 20 000 warriors.⁵⁴ Though disunited, Saribas and Skrang Iban enjoyed a 'good understanding' and, as I have already noted, maintained among themselves 'a constant communication'.⁵⁵

Opposed to the Skrang and Saribas Iban were the various communities described by early Europeans as Sibuyaus, after the small river between the Skrang and the Sadong to which they were expelled from the upper Batang Lupar by the Skrangs. About 1830, under further pressure from the Skrangs, the community splintered, with groups settling on the Lundu, Samarahan, Sarawak and Sadong Rivers.⁵⁶ All these communities remained in broad alliance against the more powerful Skrangs and Saribas. Those at Lundu told James Brooke in 1839 that if they needed heads they went and took them from the Saribas.⁵⁷ They also maintained an alliance with the Iban living on the Lingga River, a tributary of the Batang Lupar, who were similarly opposed to the Skrangs upriver and the Saribas.⁵⁸ Although these different Iban groups shared culture and spoke mutually intelligible dialects of the same language, they had little or no sense of common ethnicity. Iban identified themselves geographically, for example as *kami Skrang*, we of the Skrang River, or *kami menoa*, we of this area.⁵⁹

Central to the organisation of Iban life was the longhouse, a 'series of discrete sections, joined roof to roof, to form one architectural unit . . . in fact, a village under one roof'.⁶⁰ The longhouse was neither a form of communal living nor a framework for cooperative economic activity. Iban lived in *bileks*, a word which refers to both the basic family unit of parents



Iban longhouse: exterior and interior views

and children (and, sometimes, grandparents) and to the apartment in the longhouse occupied by the family.

Iban communities had up to four specialised leadership positions. The heads of individual longhouses were called *tuai rumah*. The *tuai rumah* coordinated his community's activities, and adjudicated and resolved disputes. He enjoyed no great deference, no powers of command and no guaranteed hereditary succession.⁶¹ A particularly successful or charismatic *tuai rumah* might unite the longhouses of a river valley or a segment of it under his broad leadership. The greatest of such leaders were called *raja berani* (literally, courageous wealthy).⁶² Reflecting the instability of the period, Low identified the position of *panglima*, a specialised warleader within the community.⁶³ The fourth role identified in Iban society was that of *manang*. Often transsexual, *manangs* were particularly powerful, functioning as the 'doctor and priest of the village' and managing their

communities' relations with the supernatural, especially by diagnosing and expelling the supernatural causes of illness.⁶⁴

Whereas Malays, through their use of patrilineages, developed a highly stratified society, Iban traced their descent through either parent. Iban society did not therefore provide patrilineages (or matrilineages) that readily allowed for complex, ascriptive hierarchies. According to Kedit, under

Iban adat all men are equals. During a life-time a man may acquire high prestige and become an honoured leader, but rank is not inheritable, and there is no institution of chieftainship. Iban society is classless and egalitarian.⁶⁵

The degree to which Iban actually were classless and egalitarian is contentious, however. In the Saribas there is evidence that chiefly positions such as *raja berani* were monopolised by a number of families — that in fact regional chieftaincies partly based on descent were established. Pringle, for example, conceded that the Saribas were more 'hierarchically stable' than other Iban. Noting that Benedict Sandin talked of hereditary chiefs among the Saribas, Pringle also conceded that there is 'a much greater sense of class in the Saribas, a tendency to think of "first families" whose members are, or should be, the natural heirs to political power'.⁶⁶ This apparent dichotomy has been addressed by Clifford Sather, who explored how 'equality of potential is, for the Iban, a precondition for the attainment of achieved inequality'. Sather noted also that, although inequality among Iban was a function of merit, it was also historicised: the descendants of powerful ancestors shared the rewards of their ancestors' achievement.⁶⁷

Within Iban society, individual men could acquire status through proficiency at *pindah* (the urge to migrate to new areas), *bejalai* (expeditions to acquire high-prestige or valuable items) and *ngayau* (headhunting expeditions).⁶⁸ *Ngayau* is a common ritual element of many Bornean societies and there were a number of complex sources of pressure on individuals to take heads. Wadley distinguished between two forms of Iban raiding: large-scale attacks by thousands of warriors on entire settlements or populations, and small-scale ambushes and attacks (*kayau anak*) with more limited objectives.⁶⁹ Both forms of raiding were directed against other interior groups, and were long established in Iban tradition. During the late 18th century, however, Saribas and Skrang Iban, in conjunction with Malays, developed large-scale raiding along the coast from north of the Bintulu River southwest to Pontianak. Although James Brooke's activities and writings focused European attention on Iban coastal raiding, reports of widespread and large-scale Iban raiding for heads on the northwest and west coasts of Borneo predate his arrival.⁷⁰

Datu Patinggi Abdul Gapur testified that Iban raiding along the coast were interested only in heads, leaving other booty for the Malays.⁷¹ Earl had similarly reported a raid on Sambas in about 1830–1831 in which the