



Tribe-Sultanate Relationships

Traditional Patterns of Rule in Brunei

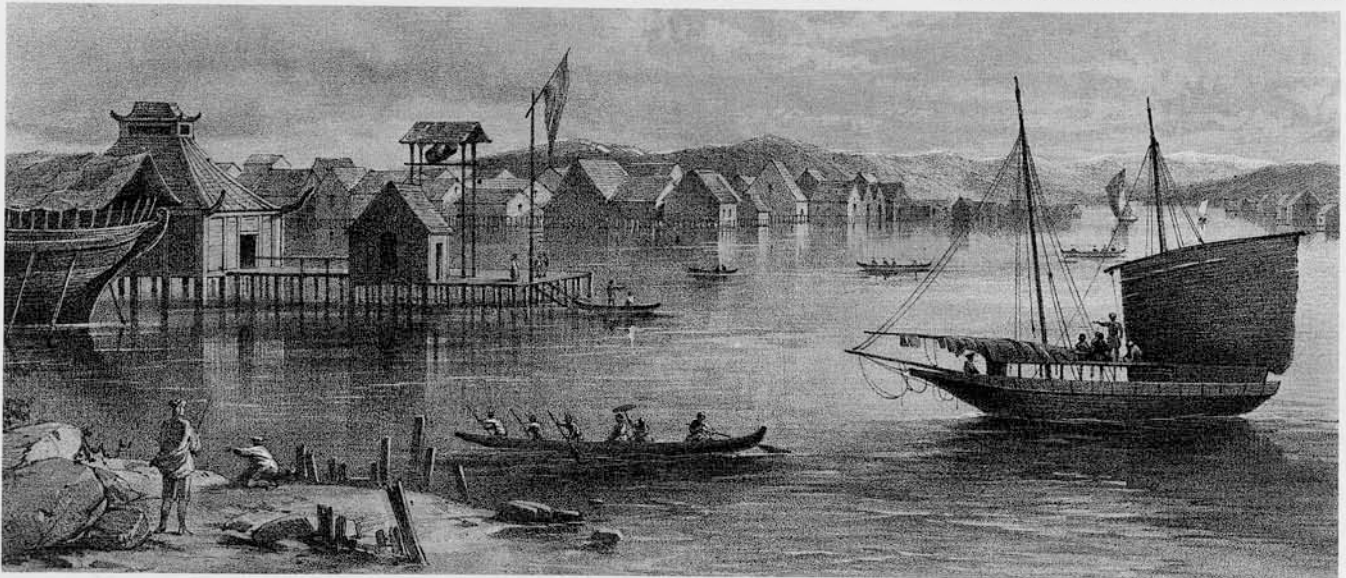
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An Overview

The late 19th century was a period of momentous change in Borneo. Dutch influence—spinning off from Holland's control of

a wide arc of Indonesian islands—had penetrated nearly all the south of Borneo and much of the east coast. British influence—associated with the establishment of Singapore—was coming to predominate in Borneo's north and northwest. For strategic reasons, European penetration was focused on the sultanates that ringed Borneo and con-

trolled its coastline and river mouths. But access to the natural resources of the interior were ultimate goals, and the impact of European penetration reverberated throughout the island. Relations between the sultanates—such as those at Sambas, Pontianak, Banjarmasin, Kutei, and Bulungan—and the various peoples who inhabited the interior of Bor-



1
Lithograph entitled "Bruni (Borneo Proper)" (Marryat 1848:opp. p. 106).
"Bruni [Brunei] is called...the Venice of the East;...it is built in the same peculiar way, and is a most extraordinary town. It is built almost entirely on the water. It is of great size, containing from thirty to forty thousand inhabitants, most of whom are Malays, but who, from having so long intermixed with the tribes on the coast, now style themselves Brunese, after the town" (p. 106).



2
Map showing the location of Brunei and various sultanates.

neo were undergoing numerous changes. By looking at a single sultanate, Brunei, it may be possible to extract some of the more durable elements of tribe-sultanate relations in Borneo.

Brunei (pronounced Bruhnei or Bahruhnei) is the sultanate after which the island of Borneo is named (the -o at its end being a Spanish or Portuguese addition). Located on the northwest coast of the island (Fig. 2), it is an ancient kingdom, well-known from Chinese and Javanese literary sources that predate the arrival of Europeans, and well-known from Antonio Pigafetta's famous account of the Magellan expedition around the world.

When Magellan's ships stopped in Brunei in 1521, Brunei exercised hegemony as far north as Manila, and almost certainly controlled all of northern and western coastal Borneo. Brunei tradition has it that the kingdom once controlled the entirety of coastal Borneo, but the evidence is lacking for eastern and southeastern parts of the island.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that for a long time Brunei was one of the most important sultanates of Borneo, if not *the* most important. Although Brunei remained independent until early in this century, European incursions that began in the 16th century—when the

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Spaniards sailed out of the Philippines and attempted to conquer Brunei—initiated a long period of decline in Brunei's fortunes. By the beginning of the 19th century, Brunei controlled only northwest Borneo, and portions of that region were contested with the Sultanate of Sulu, a one-time vassal of Brunei.

One of the key features that explains Brunei stability and importance is the location of its capital. It is inside a very large bay, Brunei Bay, that provided good anchorage and a quiet place for fishing when the South China Sea was too windy (Fig. 1). A further advantage of Brunei Bay was that it brought several river mouths, and access to their watersheds, into close proximity. The only easy way to approach the capital required sailing up the fairly narrow Brunei River, directly under guns mounted on hills that flanked the river. In indigenous conceptions the capital *was* Brunei. The term “Brunei” referred simultaneously to a river, a city, a people, and a kingdom. But it is important to note that it was a kingdom in the sense that it had a king at its center, not that it had a clearly defined set of outer geographic boundaries.

The control of coastline and river mouths was the political and economic key to all the sultanates, including Brunei. With few exceptions, the sultanates were situated near the coast, and they competed with one another primarily for control of the mouths of rivers that penetrated the coastline. Because overland travel in Borneo was generally difficult and inefficient, direct control of a river mouth was tantamount to indirect control of its watershed. Whether one wanted to conduct trade or a military expedition, the easy way to travel was up and down rivers and thence along the coast between rivers.

The dominant inhabitants of the sultanates were coastal Malays, a widespread ethnic group associated with the Malay language, a coastal-riverine way of life, and a rich Hindu-Buddhist cultural background that has long been modified by the adoption of Islam. Malays are generally distinguished from one another in terms of specific kingdoms or Malay dialects, for example, the Brunei Malays or *bangsa* Brunei (*bangsa* means “kind,” “race,” “ethnic group”). At any point in its history for which the information is available, it is clear that the *bangsa* Brunei was an ethnic minority within the Brunei sultanate, and that by any definition of its boundaries, the majority of the sultanate's subjects were members of other *bangsa*: Iban, Kayan, Land

Dayak, and so on. Even Malays living under Brunei control were not necessarily *bangsa* Brunei; non-Brunei Malays may well have outnumbered Brunei Malays in Brunei. Thus at all times the Sultanate of Brunei has been an ethnically plural society.

In traditional history, Brunei came to rule its neighbors through a series of ancient conquests that pitted the semi-divine founders of Brunei and their followers against the rulers of the little countries (*negri*) centered on the river mouths of Borneo. Since these conquest stories were told outside of Brunei itself in the 19th century, they may well have some important truth to them. But Brunei's military might was very limited by the 1800s, so it is clear that to some extent Brunei hegemony rested on ancient custom and willing consent.

The strongest evidence of a willingness to accept Brunei rule is seen in two practices that brought the tribal peoples to the Sultan of Brunei: they came to him for adjudication of disputes, and because of his power to bestow fertility. Europeans generally considered the 19th-century Brunei sultanate decrepit and ineffective, but there are definite signs that from the viewpoint of Bornean peoples it was still effective enough to be seen as a source of ultimate order. Hence it served as a court of last resort. The role of the sultan as a bestower of fertility—a matter of urgent concern in virtually all preindustrial societies—goes back to the pre-Muslim roots of Brunei. Like most old Southeast Asian states, Brunei was originally a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom. Many features of state ritual, custom, and mythology linked the ruler to an ultimate Hindu-Buddhist source of fertility: Indra, the god of the sky and the thunderbolt.

To deal with those peoples who didn't willingly accept Brunei rule, the options were few. In earlier times the Bruneis allegedly brought a region to its knees by blockading its river mouth, and in particular by cutting off access to salt—a scarce and vital commodity in the interior of Borneo. But there is no clear evidence that this tactic still worked or was employed late in the 19th century. A tactic that was employed, however, was divide and rule: pitting one tribal

group against another. This method was not a very precise tool in the hands of the Bruneis in the later part of the 19th century. Although Europeans, particularly the Rajas Brooke in Sarawak (see box), used the technique of divide and rule with devastating effect in Borneo, they were outraged by Brunei's use of the tactic, and mounted some of the most successful propaganda efforts against Brunei precisely because it sought to rule by encouraging one people to attack another.

In Brunei's weakened condition in the 19th century it could exert only a fitful and inefficient control over its provinces, so that when Singaporean commercial interests sought contact with Borneo there was a considerable temptation to bypass the Bruneis. The result was that, by the end of the century, control of many river mouths in old Brunei territory had slipped into the hands of others. Although Brunei survived into this century more intact than most Bornean sultanates, it was rapidly disintegrating in the latter half of the last century.

The Structure of Brunei Administration

Sometimes we gain our most important insights into human affairs in a particular time and place by noting some item that is missing from the picture. Perhaps the most striking sign of the long interaction between the tribal peoples of Borneo and its sultanates can be called the pattern of missing chieftainships. Anthropologists conventionally classify the levels of social or political development as bands, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. (A band is a small group of nomadic peoples; a tribe is a larger group of peoples with no central leadership; a chieftainship is of a size similar to a tribe, and has centralized but elementary leadership; a state is generally larger and has leaders who possess a staff to carry out their commands.) All other things being equal, it is fair to expect that some sort of normal gradient will exist between these levels of development in any particular region. That is, if bands and states

are found in a major region, as they are in Borneo, we would expect the intervening stages to be present too, and in some sort of proportion to the bands and states. But what we find is an enormous proliferation of tribes, and few if any true chieftainships. Clearly, the chieftainship in Borneo is for some reason an unstable or impossible form.

What I suspect to be the case is that societies that probably could achieve chieftainship were effectively decapitated by the sultanates. Interestingly, traditional Brunei history indicates this process by referring to the local petty ruler who was subjugated as each *negri* was conquered by the Bruneis. And there can be no doubt that throughout the 19th century (almost certainly earlier too) there was a continuous pattern of strong men striving to achieve a position similar to chieftainship among their respective peoples. But strong men came and went; stable chieftainship did not develop. In order to understand this process, let us look more carefully at the institutions that linked the Brunei sultanate to the tribal peoples it claimed to rule.

The central institution of Brunei was the sultanate itself, a set of offices with the sultan at its apex. The four highest officers beneath the sultan were called *wajir* (cognate with *wazir*); beneath them was a larger body of officers called *cheteria* (from the name of the Hindu warrior “caste,” *kshatriya*). The *wajir* and *cheteria* were appointed from the Brunei hereditary nobility. Beneath these noble officers were a ranked series of non-noble officers, drawn mostly if not exclusively from the *bangsa* Brunei.

Various peoples and places were either parceled out to one or another Brunei official to be ruled and taxed, or were ruled by some Brunei noble by hereditary right. Certain districts of peoples, for example, customarily belonged to the reigning sultan, and so were called *kerajaan* (of or pertaining to the *raja*). Other districts or peoples were attached to each of the *wajir*, and sometimes to *cheteria*. The sultan and other officials might also hold districts or people by inherited right, and some nobles held such rights even though they held no offices.

I say that the Bruneis ruled "districts or people" because in the late 19th century they did not have a fully territorial system of administration. As in many Southeast Asian kingdoms, the relations between a ruler and his subjects were sometimes seen as "personal," meaning that the subjects belonged to the ruler no matter where they lived; if they moved to a nearby district that was under some other ruler, they still owed taxes, say, to their personal ruler. But the identification of peoples with districts was very strong, and the Bruneis often did what they could to hinder movement from one district to another, so that administrative districts defined territorially were at the same time personally defined aggregates of people.

It is important to bear in mind that a district was fundamentally centered and articulated by its river system. If there was any substantial town in the district it would be on the river and near its mouth. The upstream and downstream halves of the river might be administrative subdistricts, the left and right banks

might also provide administrative division, so too with tributaries and their halves and subtributaries. Furthermore, these subdivisions were assigned to Brunei officials or owned by Brunei nobles in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Thus part of a major watershed might belong to the sultan by virtue of office, part of it by personal inheritance; other parts of the same watershed would belong to other officials and nobles. At the very lowest levels of administrative division, a number of longhouses or "landings" (points along a river where persons dwelling inland had their access to the river) might belong to one or another official or noble. In some cases a single longhouse was divided: so many "doors" (apartments or families) belonging to one Brunei, other doors belonging to other officials or nobles.

This sense that the people or districts "belonged" to the Bruneis was still apparent in the 1960s, when some residents of Brunei claimed to "own" certain nomadic Punan bands, meaning that the Bruneis had an exclusive right to trade for the

jungle produce collected by the Punans.

Certain details of the Brunei system of administration were crucial to its effective operation. For one, it is important to note that simply having an agreed-upon system for allocating lands and peoples dampened (but by no means eliminated) those divisions *within* Brunei society that could have been exploited by the Brunei's subjects or alien states to divide the ruling class. The system worked so well that even in regions that had long lain outside Brunei's effective control the Bruneis were able to decide who among them had rights to the various districts in those regions. Another important detail was the strong tendency of the major rulers not to live in their districts but rather in the capital. This gave the ruling class a cohesiveness that was essential to their long-term interests. Equally important was the overlapping nature of district rulership. Given that different individuals had different kinds of rights to rule in any major district, it was difficult to achieve the sort of regionally concerted action that

pendence of his country, both at the expense of Brunei sovereignty (Fig. 3). By 1868, the year he died, he had accomplished both objectives.

James Brooke was succeeded by his nephew Charles Johnson Brooke, who continued to expand Sarawak's boundaries by taking control of more Brunei territory. This was done by a combination of persuasion, treaty negotiations, and straightforward coercion. While the Brooke regime had no significant military might of its own with which to threaten Brunei, it was able from time to time to call upon British naval forces, based in nearby Singapore, to make shows of force on Sarawak's behalf. The curious political aspect of this was that England did not move to make Sarawak a colony, nor did it seek to annex Brunei. England did, however, have an obvious interest in maintaining a full measure of control over the northern coasts of Borneo along which all ships sailing between Singapore and East Asian and Philippine ports had to pass.

Internally, the Brookes managed to enforce peace among the Dayak peoples so as to allow the development of commerce and trade, also without any significant armed forces of their own. They did this by adroitly playing one Dayak group off against another. The Sea Dayaks, now called the Iban, were the cultural group most deeply involved on behalf of the Brooke regime during the pacification of the interior (Dayak) peoples.

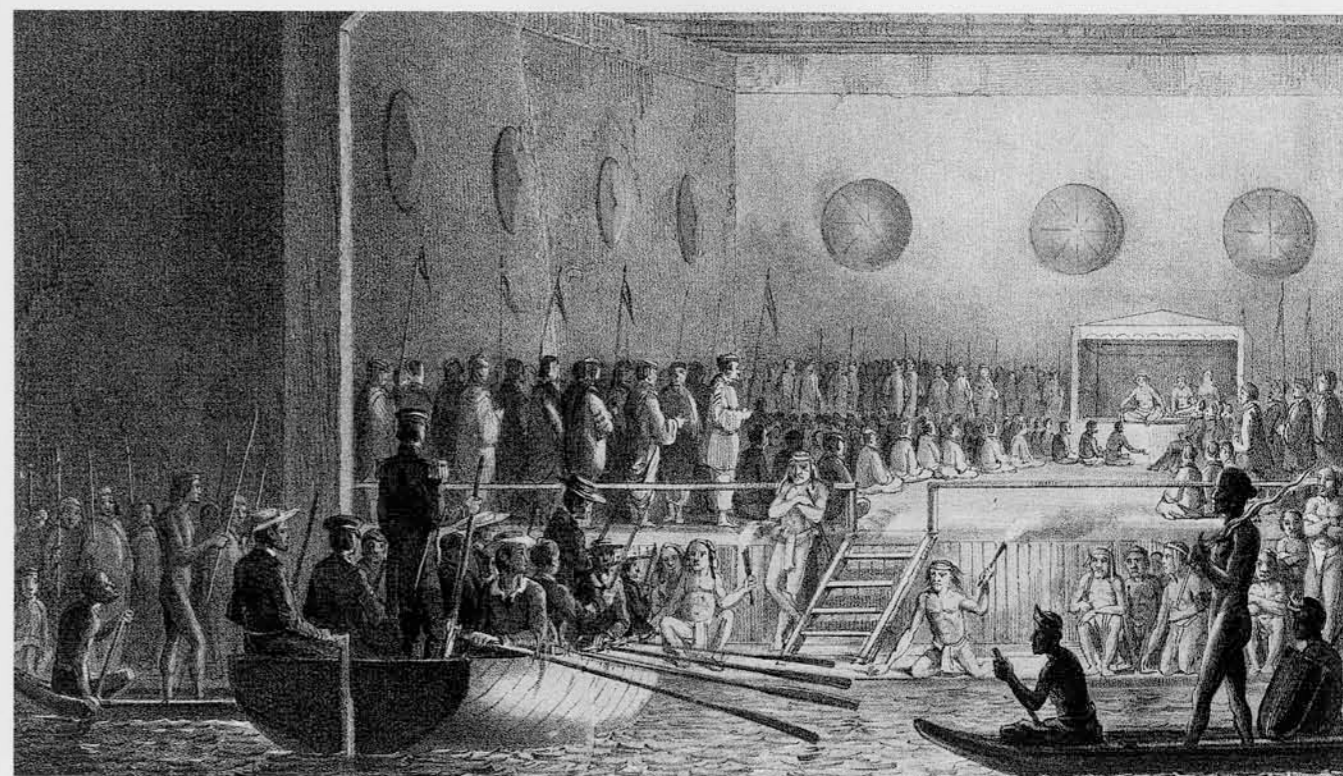
In 1917 Charles Johnson was succeeded by his son, Charles Vyner Brooke, who reigned as the Third White Rajah of Sarawak until the Japanese invaded Borneo in 1942. With the defeat of the Japanese and the end of World War II in Asia, Charles Vyner Brooke and his advisors decided to turn Sarawak over to the British crown instead of continuing the rule of the Brooke dynasty. In 1963 Sarawak and other former British possessions in Southeast Asia were merged into the independent federation called Malaysia.

W.H.D.

Sarawak and the Rajas Brooke

Sarawak emerged as a semi-independent kingdom during the last half of the 19th century. It was formed, literally piece by piece, out of territories that had formerly been controlled by the Sultanate of Brunei. The history of the emergence of Sarawak is also the story of a dynasty of Englishmen named Brooke, often referred to as the White Rajas of Borneo.

In 1841 the Sultan of Brunei gave local jurisdiction over a small area called Sarawak in the west of his kingdom, together with the title of Rajah, to James Brooke, a private citizen of England and a former colonial officer in the India service. This grant was for services rendered the Sultan in assisting to put down a rebellion. From the very beginning of his reign, Rajah James Brooke set out to expand the scope of his rule and to establish the political inde-



3

Lithograph entitled "Court of the Sultan of Borneo (Signing the Treaty with England)" (Marryat 1848:opp. p. 107).

"We were received at the platform by a numerous party of chiefs, handsomely dressed in silks, satins, and gold embroidery. They ushered us into the audience chamber...[which] was filled with natives, all well dressed and armed.... The throne was a frame of painted wood, gilt and carved, and bearing a very suspicious resemblance to a Chinese bedstead. On this, sitting cross-legged, was the sultan of Borneo, to whom we were all separately presented as English warriors, &c. &c." (pp. 108-109).

["We" consisted of the Captain of the H.M.S. Samarang, the Rajah James Brooke, the author Frank Marryat, a translator and others. The demands made on the Sultan were to pay proper respect to the British flag, dismantle forts that guarded the entrance to Brunei harbor, and to reinstate some friends of Brooke to offices in his administration of Sarawak. The event was a real show of force: the British ship was anchored a pistol shot away with cannon trained on the Sultan's court.]

might lead to effective rebellion against the central government.

On-the-Ground Agencies of Brunei Control

Some of the least understood but no less crucial details in Brunei's administrative control of Borneo's tribal peoples concern the actual on-the-ground agencies of Brunei control. A few mechanisms are known to have been used, but just how they worked is often unclear.

Kinship was one of the important agencies, for at some very basic level the Bruneis and their tribal subjects were united by ties of kinship—fictive and real. In the Brunei origin myth the founder of Brunei descended from the Hindu heaven (the abode of the god Indra), and went

from river to river impregnating a local woman at each of them. The sons that resulted from these unions of sky god and earth women became the first rulers of Brunei, and came to symbolically express the kinship between ruler and ruled. The tribal peoples were well aware that Brunei royalty, and perhaps Brunei nobles in general, claimed and exercised a right to take wives and concubines from the tribal peoples under their control—clear memories of this practice persisted well into this century. Because of these marriage practices, in many cases the Brunei rulers were able to deal with their subject peoples via kinsmen who themselves had a stake in Brunei rule.

A formal institution that provided the Bruneis with agents among the ruled were quasi-offices in the sultanate that were normally filled by

tribal subjects. All the Brunei officials held an official title constructed from some combination of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Malay terms. Non-Bruneis could be given similarly titled positions, but positions with a difference. The Brunei positions were true offices: each had a unique rank in a system of ranks, each would be passed on from one individual to another through a series of incumbents. The positions that looked similar but that were given to tribal peoples were not true offices: they were essentially all of the same low rank, and a new one was probably created for each holder. Lacking continuity through time, these positions had little more political leverage than the holders brought to them. Furthermore, there is reason to think that those men who accepted such titles were in some way co-opted. They signaled

their alliance or allegiance to Brunei by accepting its titles. And there would have been little reason for the Bruneis to bestow such titles if they didn't think it made the recipients more amenable to Brunei desires.

Conversion to Islam was probably another means by which able men among the tribals were co-opted. We know that conversion occurred, and that many of the Muslim subjects of Brunei were former tribals who had "become Malay." The very term for conversion to Islam was *masuk Malayu*, to "enter Malaydom." Converts typically became Malay in language and culture, and for a Malay, loyalty to his sultan is an unquestioned obligation.

A very poorly understood, but no doubt very important, agency of Brunei rule was the *nakhoda*, or sea captain. While the Bruneis were very interested in manpower per se, they were ultimately interested in extracting the resources of Borneo for foreign trade. The *nakhoda* was the person who actually shipped the goods from Borneo to foreign ports and who brought the return cargo too: the wealth of Brunei passed through his hands. The *nakhoda* was an important agent between the Brunei rulers and both the tribals and foreign commercial contacts. It was a position of great responsibility, but apparently also of great vulnerability in the 19th century. By the end of the century the *nakhoda* was little more than a memory, substantial trade having passed almost exclusively into Chinese and European hands. Some of the prominent *nakhoda* had been *bangsa* Brunei, but they appear rarely to have been nobles, and they may have been other kinds of Malays.

Enterprising Chinese (and sometimes Europeans) had become ubiquitous as agents of Brunei when the 1900s approached. Generally they were granted a "monopoly" of some sort by the Brunei rulers. For example, a particular individual might have the sole right to sell alcohol in or export rattan from a particular region. In some cases the monopolists were allowed to tax or otherwise have quasi-governmental authority. This was particularly the case with European monopolists, who suc-

cessfully rented the right to rule large areas. But this pattern was almost certainly something new, and part of the transition from traditional patterns to those colonial arrangements that were finally put in place in Brunei in this century.

Hierarchy and Symbiosis Between Sultanate and Tribe

As a consequence of Brunei control of the coastline and of coastal and overseas trade, a hierarchical symbiosis developed between the Bruneis and the various peoples over whom they claimed varying degrees of rule, oversight, and hegemony. Because of this symbiosis—rather than because of a lack of contact—there were many striking ways in which the Bruneis and the tribals contrasted. Generally, the tribals were not in any direct way ideologically, politically, or economically linked to the outside world. The Bruneis were, and they mediated the economic ties between the tribals and the rest of the world. The tribals tended to have a rather minimal division of labor: they were agriculturists for the most part, but they were also collectors of jungle produce, and sometimes had craft specializations. The Bruneis had a very complex occupational division of labor that was both the cause and effect of their control of contacts with

the outside world. The tribals were scattered into relatively small rural settlements. The Bruneis formed a dense urban cluster in the capital, and Bruneis or other Malays formed smaller urban settlements in strategic locations elsewhere along the coasts and rivers. The tribals were virtually all illiterate, while the Bruneis had long enjoyed some degree of literacy.

For the tribals, the village or longhouse was the highest level of stable political organization. On a temporary basis some powerful individual might become a paramount chief, thus linking several villages or longhouses into a single allied entity. As noted earlier, only rarely if ever did such an arrangement give way to chieftainship as a regular office. And so, rarely did tribals achieve the cohesiveness that might have allowed them to effectively counter Brunei claims to oversight of their affairs. By contrast, for the Brunei the village level of organization was the lowest in their political organization. Above the village was a complex but orderly hierarchy of officials, linked to one another by numerous ties of self-interest, and operating according to policies that must have been worked out over centuries. Brunei organization and procedures were not much of a match for those of the Europeans in the 19th century, but they clearly existed and for long had served to mediate relations between the Bruneis and Borneo's tribal peoples.

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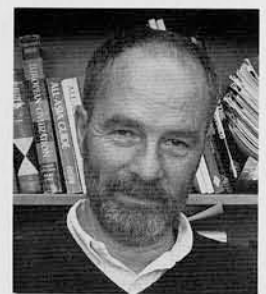
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