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 sultanes that ringed Borneo and controlled 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 sultanes—such as those at Sambas, Pontianak, Banjarmasin, Kutei, and Bulungan—and the various peoples who inhabited the interior of Bor-

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 them-selves Brunese. after the town” (p. 106).
One of the key features that explains Brunei stability and importance is the location of its capital. It is inside a 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 vast wet lands, to its close proximity. The only easy way to approach the capital required sailing up the fairly narrow Brunei River, directly under gun mounted on hills that flanked the river. In indigenous perceptions the capital was thus a very secure place. 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. 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 interior. Because overland travel in Borneo was generally difficult and inefficient, direct control over river mouths was tantamount to indirect control of its watershed. Whether one wanted to conduct trade or a military expedition, the easiest way to travel was up and down rivers and thence along the coast between rivers.

The dominant feature of the sultanates was coastal Malay, a widespread ethnic group associated with the Malay Peninsula, riverine way of life, and a rich Hindu-Buddhist cultural background that has long been familiar to the region.

In the 18th century, when Brunei was the most important, the sultanate was independent until early in this century.

European incursions on the coast and the availability of goods from the interior were not considered significant in the early period, but they eventually became more important.

The control of coastline and river mouths was the political and economic key to all the sultanates.

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 16th century, Brunei controlled only northwest Borneo, and portions of that region were contested with the Sultanate of Solo, a one-time vassal of Brunei.

Dayak, and so on. Even Malays living only a little way below the river mouths were not necessarily bangsa Brunei; non-Bruhun Malais may well have outnumbered Brunei Malays. But what we find is that there was an enormous proliferation of tribes, and few if any true chiefships. Chiefdoms centered on traditional productive areas and were not amenable to the kind of centralization or unification that might be expected in the case of the Bunun.

In the 19th century, the increased availability of firearms and new forms of organization, such as tribal federations, led to a more centralized political structure. However, this did not necessarily mean a weakening of the traditional chiefship system. The continued presence of the Sultanate of Brunei as a formal political entity reflected a desire to maintain some degree of control over the surrounding territories. This was particularly true in the case of the Bunun, who were known for their resistance to foreign conquest and their refusal to accept the authority of the Sultanate.

The Structure of Brunei Administration

Sometimes we gain our most important insights into human affairs in a particular time and place from observing some item that is missing from the picture. Perhaps the most striking sign of the absence of the Sulu kingdom from the early 19th century is the lack of evidence for the existence of the Bangsamoro. Anthropologists conventionally classify the social or political development as clans, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. (A band is a small group of nomadic peoples; a tribe is a larger group of peoples with a common language and culture, and chiefdoms is a group that is partially isolated from the rest of the world.)

While some peoples and groups were either parcelled out to one another or Brunei itself was divided and ruled, and were only ruled by Brunei's noble by hereditary right. Certain districts of peoples, for example, were customarily held by the ruling sultan, and so were called kereh-keren, or “landed.”

Other states or districts were attached to each of the chief groups, and the various groups and individuals might hold districts or people by inherited right, and some districts were ruled by other states or groups.
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 functionally 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 were linked by the river by the administration of two subdistricts, the left and right banks.

Sarawak and the Rajas Brooke

Sarawak emerged as a semi-independent kingdom during the last half of the 19th century, literally piece by piece, out of territories that had formerly been controlled by foreign powers. 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 official in the Dutch East Indies. 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 independece of his country, both at the expense of Bruneis sovereignty (Fig. 3). By 1859, 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, offer 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 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 both sides of the Brooke regime's interests. The culture of Sarawak shows the influence of the interior (Dayak) peoples.

In 1877 Charles Johnson was succeeded by his son, Charles Vyner Brooke, who reigned as the Third White Rajah of Sarawak until his death in 1917. Charles Vyner Brooke and his advisors decided to turn Sarawak over to the British crown, and Mr. Brooke was instrumental in the ceding of the Brooke domain. In 1943 Sarawak and other former British possessions in Southeast Asia were merged into the independent federation called Malaysia.

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 arrangements on the ground for the management of the Brunei realm. Several mechanisms are known to have been used, but not how they worked is often unclear.

Kinship was one of the important agencies for some very basic level the Bruneis and their tribal subjects to become domiciled, seditious, 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 in quest of 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 kinship 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 Bruneis were, in a sense, true officials: 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. Lack of continuity through time, these positions had little on political leverage for 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 masok 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 nakhodas 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 tribes contrasted. Generally, the tribes 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 tribes and the rest of the world. The tribes 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 tribes 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 tribes were virtually all illiterate, while the Bruneis had long enjoyed some degree of literacy.

For the tribes, 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 tribes 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.