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Stranger-Kings and Strangers in an Asiatic Country: The Ambiguity of Human Relations in Early British North Borneo

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to understand how it is that a small number of Europeans were able to extend their authority and control over the northern region of the island of Borneo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to establish a state known as British North Borneo, as well as to understand why the multi-ethnic society there remained largely peaceful during that time period. Often mentioned only in passing in histories of the colonial era in Southeast Asia, British North Borneo came to share many similarities with the colonial states in the region, particularly with the development of plantations and the importation of laborers. British North Borneo was also similar to other colonial societies in that a very small number of Europeans controlled a much larger local population. That said, while the concept of the "plural society," which posits that shared economic interests can enable diverse populations to find common ground, has been employed to explain the relative stability of colonial possessions such as British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, in this paper we argue that such an "economic factor" was not yet present in the early years of British rule in North Borneo. Instead, this paper argues that the theory of the "stranger-king," the idea that some societies welcome an outside ruler to resolve their internal divisions, can also be of benefit in understanding early British North Borneo. Ultimately, however, any historian who wishes to understand the reality of life in early British North Borneo faces the challenge of having to rely on sources that reflect a clear colonial bias, a mindset that saw "Asiatic" societies as inherently different. This paper takes on that challenge, but also recognizes that we cannot help but be left with a great deal of ambiguity in our understanding of human relations in early British North Borneo. This paper also argues, however, that it is precisely the ambiguity of the relations between "strangers" and "stranger-kings" that might be key maintaining of that relationship.

Keywords: *British North Borneo, colonialism, stranger king, plural society, ethnic relations, history*

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INTRODUCTION

On the 26th of June 1906, Lester Maynard was appointed US consul at Sandakan in British North Borneo. In October of that year he learned that a German-born naturalized American citizen by the name of Adolf Muller had become very ill and was in the Sandakan Hospital. Mr. Muller asked the consul to write a letter to his father. Maynard did so, and on 29 October 1906 he informed the elder Muller that his son was "ill in the Sandakan Hospital suffering from Stomatitis and a complicated derangement of the stomach, liver and bowels, having been taken ill while at his work in the jungle and entering the hospital on the 23rd of this month." Maynard went on to say that although the young Muller was weak, he was "brave and patient." Maynard also assured the senior Muller that his son "shall want for nothing that can be supplied him here and I will see that the best possible care will be taken of him." This promise, however, was not easy to keep.[1]

That same day, Maynard wrote a letter to Fredrick Davies, the British North Borneo government surgeon, to complain about the lack of care that Muller was receiving. In his letter, Maynard noted that when he first visited the hospital, he had found that there was a "coolie" who was taking care of Muller, and Maynard had dismissed him. However, the Chinese boy who replaced the coolie was also "careless," and on a second visit, Maynard found the boy "on the veranda talking to another Chinaman." Muller, meanwhile, was "alone in the ward, lying on his back with his head hanging limply over the side of the bed and blood dripping from his lips." He was still able to talk, and he informed Maynard that all he had eaten that day had been sour milk

[1] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Lester Maynard to Henry Muller Esq.," 29 October 1906.

that had made him vomit. Maynard examined the milk, and finding it indeed sour, scolded the Chinese boy who was supposed to be taking care of Muller. To which the boy replied, "It is not my fault. The cook gave it to me."[2]

It is unclear if Mr. Muller was cared for any better after this point, for on the first of November Maynard wrote another letter to the senior Muller informing him that his son had died from "Typhoid Malaria, with Stomatitis and complications as stated in my letter to you of October 29th 1906."[3] This was a sad end to the life of a man who had clearly strived to make a living for himself. American consular records indicate that Muller first arrived in British North Borneo in August of 1904 on an American pearling ship called the Maria Filemina. The ship was captained by a certain N. P. Sorensen. In addition to Sorensen, there were two other Americans, George Care and Muller himself. Additionally there were two Filipinos, Martin Isguena and Salvodor Holenba, and two Moros, Saleh Sab and Emihy. At the time of its arrival in Sandakan, the Maria Filemina was well stocked with cases of sardines, corned beef, sausages, baked beans, roast mutton, assorted jams, and coffee.[4] So one would imagine that Mr. Muller must have been in good health at that time.

What is more difficult to imagine, however, is what life was like on the Maria Filemina. How did people like Muller, Martin Isguena, and Saleh Sab get along together? Did this Filipino and Moro eat baked beans and corned beef with Muller? Where did Muller eventually meet the Chinese coolie who took such poor care of him when he was ill? Why did the Chinese boy who replaced the coolie stay at the hospital? And how did any of these people even communicate with each other?

In the first few decades following its founding in 1882, British North Borneo was a "strange" place. It had a multi-ethnic population dispersed along long coasts and throughout a jungle interior and was ruled by a small number of British men who allowed thousands of foreigners, mainly Chinese, to reside and work in the territory. It was thus a place where many

[2] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Lester Maynard to Dr. Frederick Davies," 29 October 1906.

[3] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Lester Maynard to Henry Muller Esq.," 1 November 1906.

[4] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "N. P. Sorensen to U. S. Consular Agent A. T. Wardrop Esqr.," 17 August 1904.

strangers converged and lived together. And while violence did occur, it did not take the form of large-scale conflicts between groups. At the same time, it is clear that the diverse peoples in British North Borneo were not exactly friends either. What held such a world together? How was a small group of British men able to gain control of this territory and its diverse peoples? And how was it that all of these peoples were able to live more or less in peace?

It is of course tempting to follow the ideas of J. S. Furnivall and to view British North Borneo as an example of a plural society, that is, a society "comprising two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit."[5] As Furnivall demonstrated, such societies can enjoy considerable stability. However, in his examination of the Netherlands East Indies, Furnivall argued that the glue that held that plural society together was what he termed the "economic factor," that is, the desire of all to purchase cheaply and to sell at a profit.[6] This is a factor that I argue here was not yet clearly dominant in the first few decades of the existence of British North Borneo, and which can therefore not fully explain the stability of human relations at that time.

For that we need to turn to other theoretical insights, and in the next section I will make the case here for employing the concept of the "stranger king." In making this case, I will rely in this paper largely on information that was published in the *British North Borneo Bulletin*, an official government gazette, as well as information from US consular reports from British North Borneo. This information clearly reflects a kind of "colonial common sense" from that time and place we need to read against in order to attempt to understand the reality of early British North Borneo.[7] My use of the term "Asiatic country" in the title is meant to remind us that all of the information that we are examining here is information that we are viewing through the filter of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century British "colonial common sense." Our effort to understand the past by viewing it through such a filter is a one that is difficult to reach definite

[5] J. S. Furnivall, *Netherlands India: A Study of Plural Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 446.

[6] Ibid., 446-469.

[7] For more on "colonial common sense," see, Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

conclusions, and as a result, we will inevitably be left with a good deal of ambiguity. Nonetheless, the insights we do gain along the way are still worth the effort.

Stranger-Kings

The concept of the stranger-king was first developed by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins.[8] In a 1981 article focusing on Polynesian societies, but drawing comparisons with societies in other parts of the world, Sahlins noted that it was a common phenomenon in the past that the rulers of a given society often came from outside that society. Such a ruler might come to power through such means as an act of violence or by marrying a local woman, but in the end he (and usually it was a man) was accepted in large part because he was a "stranger," and was therefore above and detached from the local society and as a result, could rule with a greater degree of impartiality. In addition, in many cases a sense of divinity was imparted to the stranger-king, further enhancing his "strangeness" and thus facilitating his rule.

A couple of decades after Sahlins made these observations, David Henley employed this concept to examine the advent of Dutch colonial rule on Sulawesi, and argued that people on Sulawesi treated the Dutch as stranger-kings and appreciated "the usefulness of foreign authority as a way of controlling indigenous conflict and violence through various combinations of third-party mediation, impartial adjudication, and legal enforcement."[9] A few years after Henley published works on this topic, a workshop on "Stranger-Kings in Southeast Asia and Elsewhere" was held in Jakarta in 2006 where a group of scholars delved more deeply into this question of the role of stranger-kings and put forth various qualifications and details to the work of Sahlins and Henley. Kwee Hui Kian, for instance, pointed out that stranger-kings tend to decide when they wish to become kings, and that this timing is related to their own needs and the dynamics on the

[8] Marshall Sahlins, "The Stranger-King or Dumézil among the Fijians," *The Journal of Pacific History* Vol. 16, No. 3 (1981): 107-132.

[9] David Henley, "Conflict, Justice, and the Stranger-King: Indigenous Roots of Colonial Rule in Indonesia and Elsewhere," *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 38, No. 1 (2004): 87.

ground in the area where they seek to become dominant.[10] Anthony Reid, meanwhile, pointed out that there were differences in the ways that the "strangeness" of stranger-kings was manifested in cosmopolitan coastal ports and stateless interior regions.[11] Finally, Thomas Gibson expanded on this same idea of multiple forms of estrangement by adding another, the bureaucratic state, thereby placing colonial states in a more clear conceptual line of rulership, where estrangement from the populace is part of what makes rule effective.[12]

While these scholars all agree that the stranger-king phenomenon existed in one form or another, they do not agree on what motivated the indigenous peoples who came to be ruled by stranger-kings. Some scholars, for instance, emphasize cultural beliefs in the (mystical/divine) power of outsiders, while others emphasize the practical role that outsiders can sometimes play, a kind of dichotomy between "magic" and "logic."[13] That scholars differ on this issue is not surprising, as the historical record is filled with ambiguity. This is a topic that Hans Hägerdal has pointed to in an article on a Dutch fort at Kupang, West Timor in the period from 1653-1800. While Hägerdal can find logical reasons for why the Dutch were recognized as stranger-kings, he also admits that Dutch relations with the local Timorese were ambiguous, with alternating evidence of friendship and contempt.[14]

This ambiguity in the ways in which stranger-kings viewed, were viewed, and interacted with indigenous peoples was definitely evident in British North Borneo in the late 1800s. In the historical record from that time and place we can find what appear to be classic examples of the stranger-king phenomenon, but these examples also reveal a good amount of evidence for miscommunication and ambiguity, which leads one to wonder to what extent the ambiguity in the

[10] Kwee Hui Kian, "How Strangers Became Kings: Javanese-Dutch Relations in Java 1600-1800," *Indonesia and the Malay World* Vol. 36, No. 105 (2008): 293-307.

[11] Anthony Reid, "Merchant Princes and Magic Mediators: Outsiders and Power in Sumatra and Beyond," *Indonesia and the Malay World* Vol. 36, No. 105 (2008): 253-267.

[12] Thomas Gibson, "From Stranger-King to Stranger-Shaikh," *Indonesia and the Malay World* Vol. 36, No. 105 (2008): 309-321.

[13] Ian Caldwell and David Henley, "Introduction, The Stranger Who Would be King: Magic, Logic, Polemic," *Indonesia and the Malay World* Vol. 36, No. 105 (2008): 170.

[14] Hans Hägerdal, "White and Dark Stranger Kings: Kupang in the Early Colonial Era," *Moussons* Vol. 12 (2008): 137-161.

relations between the British, as stranger-kings, and indigenous peoples is what enabled the relationships to function to some degree of effectiveness.

Becoming a Stranger-King on the Padas River

In 1888, a British North Borneo official by the name of D. D. Daly published an account of an expedition that he had made up the Padas River. At that time, Daly was the Assistant Resident of Dent Province, a province on the west coast of British North Borneo through which the Padas River flowed. Daly travelled up that river to its main tributary, the Pagalan River. The people who lived in this area were collectively known as Muruts, and they were headhunters. Stopping at a village called Naloyan, Daly visited a Murut chief's house with "fifty-two human heads and pieces of human bones hanging from the rafters of the ceiling; the skin of some of the faces so well preserved by the process of tanning pickle that the expression could still be recognized." Daly felt uncomfortable in such a room and asked the chief to cut them down, which he reportedly did.[15]

The following day many of the Muruts from the surrounding area arrived, having heard about "the news of a white man's arrival." Daly wrote that "the Muruts began to crowd into the audience-chamber in such numbers that the air was redolent of the unpleasant odour of half-naked savages." The various chiefs who had arrived all gave Daly a fowl, some rice and some corn, and Daly offered gifts of cloth, beads and brass wire in return.[16] Daly believed that the granting of these gifts came with ulterior motives, namely that the various Murut groups wanted Daly to assist them "in some long-standing inter-tribal feud," but that his purpose in journeying to the region was to stop the practice of headhunting and to open the region to trade. According to Daly, some Muruts who resided closer to the coast had already given up the practice through their contact with the British. He was thus undeterred by the fact that the Muruts in the interior still engaged in headhunting, and stated instead that "The past history of Borneo, as well as of many other countries, teaches us that the more hostile and savage the tribe may be in its primitive state of

[15] D. D. Daly, "Explorations in British North Borneo, 1883-87," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and Monthly Record of Geography* 10 (1888): 12.

[16] Ibid.

ignorance, the more faithful and friendly it will become when converted by British influence from the errors of its ways."[17]

Daly's ultimate goal was to meet a group of peoples known as the Peluans or Punan. The Peluans and Muruts had been engaging in attacks against each other, and at the time of Daly's journey, the Peluans had taken five more heads from the Muruts than the Muruts had taken from them.[18] This imbalance in the number of heads that had been taken should have motivated the Muruts to seek vengeance, but Daly suggested that the sway of British justice was more appealing to them. At a place in Murut country called Sandêwar, Daly found a place to establish a police station and he reported that the Muruts vowed to support the police stationed there. According to Daly, the Murut chiefs "frequently expressed a hope that a European officer would be sent to live among them, so as to put an end to their blood-feuds."[19]

In visiting various settlements in the Murut area, Daly stated that "the natives everywhere welcomed the 'white man,'" and that he found that in many of the houses he visited there were no heads hanging from the rafters. When he expressed his satisfaction at this, he reports that "I was informed that the people had cut them down, as they had heard that I would not enter or take a meal in a house where they were to be seen."[20] Such statements, however, are very difficult to verify. Daly noted that the statements of Muruts were translated into Malay by his interpreter.[21] However, we have no way of knowing how accurate that man's interpretations were, and we do not know how proficient Daly was in Malay. What we can sense, however, is that at times Daly's interpretations of what he saw were likely not always accurate. At one point, for instance, Daly reported seeing merriment when a large crocodile that had been killed was presented to a Murut chief. This crocodile had previously eaten one of the chief's brothers-in-law, and Daly recorded that pieces of the bones and skull of the brother-in-law were found inside the crocodile and brought

[17] Ibid., 13.

[18] Ibid., 14.

[19] Ibid., 16.

[20] Ibid., 17.

[21] Ibid., 16.

to the chief's house "with a good deal of merriment." Daly explained that chiefs had to support their brothers-in-law, and that the merriment in this instance stemmed from the fact that the chief was pleased that he had been freed from the obligation to do so.[22]

Such an explanation is difficult to believe. And we can see other instances in which Daly's thoughts and actions appeared to have been out of sync with those of the Muruts and Peluans. Let us look, for instance, at what Daly reported about his first contact with Peluans.

> At the next bend in the river we were hailed by a party of Peluans who had heard the shots, but they would not approach us for some time. At last they mustered courage, keeping well behind trees for fear of being fired at, and asked what we were doing in their country. The interpreter told them that there was a white man on board who was going to visit the chief Si Dolamit. They did not believe this, and said we were deceiving them, and that they had assembled in large numbers. They then began hacking away with their swords at branches, this being their form of oath. They called out that if we took the same oath, by chopping off branches, they would come to us; but a sudden suspicion crossed them that we were playing false, and they suddenly called out, "We are off!" I took off my coat and walked out on the sandbank, showing, with my arms out, that I was not armed; but they made off all the same. This shows the distrust that exists between the Muruts and the Peluans, and that a mere wordy peace-making between them will not suffice.[23]

It is clear from this passage that the Peluans had a very specific way of establishing a sense of trust with strangers, what Daly referred to as a "form of oath" that involved striking at branches with swords. Daly, in contrast, took off his coat and walked onto the shore with his arms open. To Daly, holding out one's arms was a "universal" sign, but it clearly was different from what the Peluan

[22] Ibid., 17.

[23] Ibid., 18.

attempted. And while Daly was right to conclude that there was distrust between the Muruts and the Peluans and that "a mere wordy peace-making between them will not suffice," what is equally clear is that Daly was not actually understanding the people around him on their own terms, and yet even with this lack of communication, an "agreement" was reached.

Daly reports that he camped on the bank of the Padas River at a place called Api to wait for Peluan chiefs to come. That first evening a Peluan chief by the name of Si Dolamit, who lived with a group of thirty followers on the western side of the river, arrived with ten of his followers. They all had blowpipes with poisoned arrows, as well as two 1867 Enfield rifles. Si Dolamit offered Daly watermelons and bananas, and Daly gave in return some cloth and beads. They then talked and Daly learned about a complex situation that Si Dolamit was in.[24]

Four years earlier, another group of Peluans, the Dalit Peluans, had attacked some Bruneis in a place called Mungaloun and had taken three heads, as well as two captives. The Dalit Peluans, however, apparently did not want the captives, so they gave them to Si Dolamit and asked him to return them to the Mungaloun Bruneis, believing that this would be possible since Si Dolamit was a neutral party to the conflict between the Dalit Peluans and the Mungaloun Bruneis. The Mungaloun Bruneis, however, suspected that Si Dolamit was an ally of the Dalit Peluans and attacked him, burning down his house and stealing his property in the process. Si Dolamit survived the attacked, and was somehow able to capture a Mungaloun slave girl whom he was now holding as a hostage until he received compensation. Si Dolamit therefore asked Daly if he could return the girl to the Mungaloun Bruneis and obtain from them some goods in compensation, including a brass gong, a gun, and some cloth and beads. Finally, Si Dolamit expressed his desire to move to an area close to a police station that the British North Borneo government had established for safety.[25]

The next day a group of Peluans arrived and called to Daly from the opposite side of the river. Daly reports that he feared that if any of the Muruts that were with him went across to meet the Peluans, that the Peluans would run away. Therefore, his three policemen – two Dayaks and a

[24] D. D. Daly, "Extracts from the Diary of Mr. D. D. Daly, the Assistant Resident of Dent Province," *The British North Borneo Herald*, January 1, 1886, 3.

[25] Ibid., 3-4.

Sikh – went across the river to meet them instead. It then took these three men an hour to convince the Peluans to cross the river to meet with Daly. With these people having arrived, Daly then commenced to perform an oath of allegiance ceremony. The flag of British North Borneo was raised on a staff while Muruts and Peluans sat on the ground facing each other. Each individual Murut and Peluan chopped at a stick with some form of knife while repeating the words of the oath. Daly provided the following example of the oath with the "†" mark indicating the points where the person taking the oath would chop at the piece of wood.

> I follow the authority of the Government of the British North Borneo Company. † The Sandêwar and Peluan † people are now of one mind. † If I kill a Sandêwar (if a Peluan is swearing) man † when I go to the water may I not be able to drink, † when I go to the jungle may I not be able to eat † may my father die †, may my mother die, † may my wife die, † may my children die, † may my house be burned down, † may the paddy not grow in my fields, † may I not catch a fish when I go fishing, † may my life be ended, † I cut this stick, † as if I am cutting my own neck, † the Great Spirit is my witness, † may this stick grow into life again, † if I ever kill or take heads any more, † and I follow the customs and orders of the British North Borneo Company, † and I take this oath with a sincere mind, † and I shall pay the poll-tax of the Company. †[26]

As various men took the oath, Daly claims that they frequently pointed to the North Borneo flag fluttering above them in the breeze, and that when the ceremony had concluded they were all "friends and 'long-lost brothers.'" Daly also states that one of the Peluan chiefs said to the Muruts that they were lucky that they had come with a white man, as otherwise they would have lost their heads. Not all exchanges, however, were so serious. Daly also reports that when a Murut chief by the name of Panglima Prang came to the part where he had to say "may my wife die" (if I ever take a Peluan head), he stopped and said with a grim smile, "I have no wife, you Peluans took her

[26] Daly, "Explorations," 20 and Daly, "Extracts," 4.

head long ago." Apparently after he said this, everyone there was "convulsed with merriment," including Panglima Prang.[27]

In addition to pledging to not attack each other, the Muruts and Peluans also agreed to pay a poll tax to the British North Borneo government. Daly noted that married men were to each pay $1 and bachelors 50 cents. However, the Muruts and Peluans did not have the concept of money, so an arrangement was made for them to pay the equivalent in products such as gutta-percha, beeswax, and rattan. This arrangement, Daly claimed, the people "perfectly understood" and "would willingly pay it."[28]

Daly stated that the Peluans also told him that "they would not have come here if a white man had not called them and that they still distrusted the Muruts." However, they were pleased to learn that a police station was to be established and that the police would help keep the peace between the Muruts and the Peluans." At hearing this, Daly recorded, the Peluans "seemed greatly pleased and shouted out, 'Munohoei' (excellent, very good)."[29] That said, it is difficult to imagine that the Peluans would have had such a powerful image of a white man. The chief, Si Dolamit, did apparently state that he knew an earlier British North Borneo official by the name of Witti who had been killed by Peluans further inland, but Si Dolamit also stated that he had been the only white man who had ever visited the area. As such, Daly's claim that "Mr. Witti was well-known on these rivers as 'Tuan Capitan,'" is difficult to assess.[30] The presence of someone as different as a European in the area would have certainly attracted notice, and word of such an event would likely have spread, but how did people really understand this?

In the end, it is very difficult to gain a sense of what the parties involved in this encounter understood. While we can see what it is that Daly wanted to accomplish, and while the conditions he describes seem to fit perfectly the type of violent conditions that would lead people to seek the

[27] Daly, "Explorations," 20-1.

[28] D. D. Daly, "Extracts from the Diary of Mr. D. D. Daly, the Assistant Resident of Dent Province," *The British North Borneo Herald*, February 1, 1886, 21.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Daly, "Extracts," January 1, 1886, 4.

assistance of an outside arbiter, a stranger-king, there are also signs here that suggest that the Muruts and Peluans understood what was happening differently. How was the oath translated into Peluan and Murut? What did the Muruts and Peluans actually think was happening? Were they in agreement with Daly, or is it merely that their mutual misunderstandings somehow matched and enabled these peoples to reach some form of "agreement"? This is all ambiguous.

Eliminating a Strange King on the Kinabatangan River

In the same decade that D. D. Daly became a stranger-king on the Padas River in the 1880s, one of his fellow British North Borneo officials eliminated a local ruler who lived on a river on the other side of the island, the Kinabatangan. At a place along this river quite a distance inland from the coast were massive caves at a place called Gomanton where a large quantity of birds' nests were annually harvested. These caves were in an area where a people known as the Buludupih lived. They were divided into several different groups, each with a different chief. In the early 1870s, there was one chief, Pangeran Samah, who oversaw most of the collection of birds' nests at the Gomantong Caves.

Apparently, earlier in the century a Buludupih chief had found the caves, and had asked Pangeran Samah's grandfather, Sandukur, to assist in the collection of birds' nests. The story goes that Sandukur cheated the chief out of his share, and that this led to hostilities. Outsiders from the Sulu Archipelago and Murudu Bay then arrived and took advantage of the instability in the region to take nests on their own. Finally, in an effort to stabilize the situation, Sandukur sought the assistance of a stranger-king, the Sultan of Sulu. Sandukur granted the sultan a stake in one of the best caves, Bubung Bubud cave, and the sultan then issued an edict which forbid anyone else from collecting birds' nests there.[31]

It is unclear when that arrangement began, but in 1878 the Sultan of Sulu ceded his claims over territory in Borneo and products like birds' nests to a private British association that had been

[31] James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone, 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007), 82.

granted sovereignty over North Borneo by the Sultan of Brunei, and that would go on in 1882 to become the British North Borneo Company.[32] In so doing, this new British government in North Borneo assumed rights to what had previously been the Sultan of Sulu's portion of the birds' nests at Bubung Bubud, and some other caves that some of the sultan's relatives had established stakes in. That same year, a former Sarawak official by the name of C. A. Bampfylde visited the Gomantong Caves and recorded that half of the nests in five caves (Bubung Bubud, Kuris, Simud Putih, Derham, and Kina Batang) were for "the Government," one quarter for Pangeran Samah, who oversaw the collection of the nests, and one quarter for the actual collectors. Pangeran Samah divided the nests from two other caves equally with the collectors, while eleven other caves, presumably the smallest ones, were divided between other Buludupih chiefs and collectors.[33]

So while after 1878 Pangeran Samah was supposed to transfer a percentage of the birds' nests to the British North Borneo Company, he apparently neglected to do so, because at some point, either in the late 1870s or early 1880s, William Pryer, the main British North Borneo official at Sandakan, went on an expedition up the Kinabatangan River to the area where Pangeran Samah was based in order to force him to comply. Assembling a group of Bajaus, Sulus, Malays, Bugis, and Arab traders, Pryer journeyed up the Kinabatangan to Melapi, where Pangeran Samah had built a stockade with cannons pointing towards the river. Pryer then sent an emissary to inform Pangeran Samah that he had three days to submit or he would be attacked. Pangeran Samah took the entire three days to do so, and in the interim there was apparently a good deal of spying and assessing on the part of both sides, but ultimately Pryer's show of force led Pangeran Samah to finally submit and to agree to resume sending birds' nests.[34]

However, this apparently did not happen, as at some point not long after this Pryer made another trip up the Kinabatangan to investigate the situation there. During his journey, Pryer heard that the Pangeran was preparing to lead an attack against him, and that he was summoning the chiefs of various tribes for that purpose. To prevent this, Pryer moved first. He proceeded to Melapi, and there he was able to get the Sulus and "traders" there to assist him. He confronted the

[32] *Handbook of British North Borneo* (London: William Clowes & Sons, 1890), 2.

[33] C. A. Bampfylde, *Mr. C. Bampfylde's Report on the Birdsnest Caves of Gomanton* (n.p., 1882), 7.

[34] Mrs. W. B. Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1893), 21-23.

Pangeran and held him at gunpoint until the Pangeran agreed to not interfere. Pryer then got the various chiefs who had arrived to state that they would not collaborate with the Pengeran to oppose the Pryer and his officials. And finally, as a result of this journey, Pryer had police stations established at two places on the Kinabatangan: Quarmote and Penungah.[35]

In this sense, Pryer was in some ways playing the role of the stranger-king, but the relationship did not hold. Perhaps it was because there were too many profits to be made in birds' nests that neither Pangeran Samah nor the British could be happy with the agreement. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that by 1882 when C. A. Bampfylde visited the Gomantong Caves the British were losing interest in working through Pangeran Samah and wanted to see him eliminated. We can get this sense from an account that a companion of Bamfylde's published about the trip a year later in the *Straits Times Weekly Issue* in Singapore. In this account a visit to Pangeran Samah's house is described as follows:

> . . . we walked along a swampy path to Pangeran Samah's, and found the old gentleman rather badly laid up. He received us in his dirty, miserable house, with all hospitality, at first wanted us to drink square gin out of the bottles of a cruet stand (!) he had stolen somewhere, but on second thoughts made one of his slaves drink the gin and sent out to a Chinaman's house for a bottle of cherry cordial. I had my drink out of the vinegar bottle. The old fellow seemed pretty well used up. He pointedly remarked that since the Orang putihs had arrived on the scene his tribe were no longer harassed by the Sugais – a horrible inland tribe, which formerly used to make periodical head hunting expeditions right up as far as Sandakan.[36]

We see from this passage that in some ways the stranger-king role was working. Raids had stopped, and Pangeran Samah had stopped resisting, but the depiction is nonetheless negative. This was

[35] Ibid., 45-7.

[36] "The Gormanton Birdsnest Caves in North Borneo," *Straits Times Weekly Issue* 29 December 1883, 10.

how Bampfylde wrote about Pangeran Samah and his role in the birds' nest trade as well. It is as though these men had already decided to eliminate Pangeran Samah, and were simply looking for "evidence" to justify such an act. In the process, however, Bampfylde produced ambiguous and even conflicting information. On the one hand he stated that "Regarding the amounts hitherto received by Government on these Caves, I am unable to write anything for certain." On the other hand, he then stated that "I am given to understand that Pangeran Samah owes large arrears on Government shares for past years, so it is apparent that for past years Government has received very little indeed of its rightful shares." And then in addition to these two somewhat contradictory statements, Bampfylde noted that Pangeran Samah had paid for the previous two years.[37]

Bampfylde makes similarly contradictory statements about the "claims" to the caves. He states that Pangeran Samah's family had discovered the caves and worked them "only as a steward of the Sultan of Sulu" and that beyond that he "has no claims to these caves." Instead, the caves belong, Bampfylde argues, "to all the other members of the Buludup[ih] tribes," and yet he also states that the chiefs of the other tribes had received their rights to the caves from Pangeran Samah or his ancestors. Bampfylde then makes the case that the North Borneo government "take these caves over in their entirety." And while he acknowledges that it might be hard to deprive Pangeran Samah of his "rights" to the caves, it is acceptable "on account of his past dishonesty and negligence" since "he still owes Government a large amount of arrears."[38]

Bampfylde's comments do not make logical sense. They can only make sense to someone who wants to hear that the caves should be taken over, as a person would be able to be moved by words like "negligence" and "arrears" and not see the contradictions in Bampfylde's statements. Further, in the rest of the report Bampfylde provides a great deal of information about the caves that demonstrate their economic potential and how that potential could be achieved. In particular, he provides a description of the caves, notes their exact location, how the nests could be transported to the coast, where a station for basing operations could be set up near the caves, who should be employed to guard them, etc.

[37] Ibid., 6.

[38] Ibid., 8-9.

Bampfylde's report was thus a clear signal that there was money to be made in the Gomantong Caves and that the government should take control of them in order to gain that economic benefit. What stood between the government and that economic goal was Pangeran Samah and his family's role in managing the caves. The other chiefs, Bampfylde felt, could be offered compensation, but Bampfylde felt that Pangeran Samah was "not deserving" of compensation. So what did that mean? A clue can be seen at the end of the report where Bampfylde comments on stories about certain "lost caves" that were bigger than Gomantong but that "superstitious tales" indicated would bring grief to whoever discovered them.[39]

Bampfylde provides an example of one such "superstitious tale." He writes that around a century earlier it was reported to the Sultan of Sulu that Sandukur, his two brothers and some other men had discovered some caves that were twice the size of Gomantong, called Galiwan Gaya. Sandukur and his two brothers made the other men swear that they would never reveal where those caves were, or they would be killed. The person who reported this story to the Sultan of Sulu then said that if Sandukur and his two brothers were killed, that those other men would come forth and provide information. Bampfylde then notes that "The two brothers were accordingly executed, but no one ever came forward with the expected information."[40]

Bampfylde says nothing more about this, but if this "superstitious tale" was true, then obviously the fact that Sandukur was not killed would have still prevented those men from coming forth and revealing where Galiwan Gaya was. In 1882, Sandukur was long dead, but still no one had come forth to indicate where such magnificent caves were. Perhaps that was because Sandukur's grandson, Pangeran Samah was still alive. While Bampfylde does not make this assertion, in recounting this story he nonetheless paints Pangeran Samah's family as problematic. They had a long history of preventing others from benefiting economically from collecting and selling birds' nests. Pangeran Samah was an obstacle that had to be eliminated, and he soon was.

On the 1st of March 1884, *The North Borneo Herald* carried a report of Pangeran Samah's death. Like the report by Bamfylde and the one in the *Straits Times Weekly Issue*, this account also

[39] Ibid., 9.

[40] Ibid., 10.

represented Pangeran Samah in a negative light. It stated that Pangeran Samah "was a man of remarkable strength and character for a native, exceedingly self-willed and ever ready to resort to open violence or to secret poisoning had he reason to fancy that his wishes were in any way thwarted by another." According to this account, Pangeran Samah viewed the British North Borneo government in this way and that "his influence was brought to bear in opposing the Government." The main reason why he attempted to do this, according to this article, was to thwart the British North Borneo government's attempts to collect its share of birds' nests. As a result, "after patiently waiting for four or five years and finding that the Pangeran steadily neglected to mend his ways, although frequently warned, the Government at last decided as the only feasible alternative, to take over the collection of the nests into its own hands."[41]

To do so, William Pryer along with other officials and a police force paid a visit to Pangeran Samah at his house in Melapi on 12 February 1884. Pangeran Samah, according to this account, refused to meet these men "in a friendly manner" and "after a long colloquy it was found impossible to bring the Pangeran to reason." The report then states that "To leave the Pangeran and his armed followers master of the situation would have been interpreted by the ignorant natives as a sign of the weakness and timidity of the European's Government and might have induced a rising in which they certainly would have been easily overthrown, but which would have resulted in innocent blood being shed on both sides." The police, Sikhs and Dayaks, were then offered a reward "to any one securing the Pangeran *alive*." However, in the gun battle that ensued, Pangeran Samah was shot dead. With his demise, some other chiefs who had been present took the oath of allegiance to the British North Borneo government.[42]

As was the case with Daly's interactions with the Peluans and Muruts, these interactions with Pangeran Samah are also ambiguous. When it is recorded that Pangeran Samah gave a "colloquy" before being shot down, one has to wonder what exactly he said. What language was it in? Who understood that language? How was it translated to the British? In which language? What did that person understand? None of this is clear, and yet the ambiguities of this encounter

[41] "The Kinabatangan," *The British North Borneo Herald*, March 1, 1884, 3.

[42] Ibid., 3-4.

resulted in a very different conclusion than Daly's ambiguous encounter with the Peluans and Muruts.

Plucky Constables

The man or men who shot Pangeran Samah were either Sikh or Dayak. These men were part of the constabulary, a police force that served the British North Borneo government. While the leading officers of the constabulary were European, the main corps of constables consisted of men from certain ethnic groups, and when they are mentioned in sources, it is usually to commend their performance. In 1883, for instance, a Somali constable by the name of Allie was praised during the court proceedings to charge a man with murder. Allie had been the one "who at considerable risk to himself secured the murderer, not without receiving some severe cuts from his kris." In reward for his valiant service, Allie received an extra two months of pay and "a good conduct strip for his bravery."[43]

As brave as Allie was, his Somali compatriots ultimately gained a bad reputation for their inability, or perhaps reluctance, to perform certain duties. A report from 1883 stated that "though some of them are fine looking cheerful fellow they are plainly not in tone with a life of routine and strict discipline."[44] The chief medical officer in the colony also found that they suffered from constipation caused by the new foods that they had to eat in the alien environment of North Borneo.[45] So while the Somalis in the end did not become a mainstay of the constabulary, Sikhs did. That same report on the constabulary in 1883 noted that "There is no doubt that the Sikhs show great aptitude for and interest in all kinds of military exercises." At the time, this included practicing how to use field artillery like "twelve-pounder brass howitzers" and "breech loading rifled six-pounders." Further, this report also noted that "We are glad to see that recruits are now

[43] "Notes, Sandakan," *The British North Borneo Herald*, March 1, 1883, 6.

[44] "Notes, Kudat," The *British North Borneo Herald*, September 1, 1883, 5.

[45] James H. Walker, "Medical Aspects of North Borneo," *The British North Borneo Herald*, November 1, 1883, 2.

coming forward from the natives of the country Bajaus, Illanus (the old pirates), Sulus, and Malays."[46]

While it was the Europeans who ruled North Borneo, it was this multiethnic constabulary that was tasked with maintaining order, and this frequently required that they put themselves in harm's way. In the gun fight which brought an end to Pangeran Samah's life, for instance, one of the Sikh constables was "shot right through both thighs, the ball passing clean through without touching the bone" while another Sikh was hit in the shoulder.[47] We can get a further sense of the kind of dangerous situations that these men faced in the following account of an incident in which the constabulary was called in to arrest a man:

> On 21st March a Chinaman, whilst carelessly holding a revolver, accidentally shot a Bajau woman who died immediately. The husband of the deceased and some of his friends determined to have the life of the Chinaman who was taken for safety to the Custom-house at Bongon and kept there that night. The next day, however, the house was forcibly entered and the Chinaman was hacked to pieces. The news having reached Kudat, the Assistant Resident sent off Inspector Foley and some Sikhs with a warrant to arrest the murderers. They no sooner showed themselves than they were fired upon from one house by the husband of the deceased woman and his relations, the rest of the villagers, holding aloof, many of them having fled into the jungle, while on all the houses were flying white flags in token of submission. The husband and two men ran "amok" right into the force and were killed, but not before they had despatched two of the Sikhs, so sudden and unexpected was their onslaught. The remaining criminals thereupon took flight. One Sikh private was slightly wounded.[48]

[46] "Notes, Kudat," September 1, 1883, 5.

[47] "The Kinabatangan," 3.

[48] "Note, Kudat," *The British North Borneo Herald,* May 1, 1883. 3-4.

What motivated these men to do this kind of work? Was it merely economic circumstances that led certain Sikh men to journey overseas to North Borneo and then to serve in a police force at the risk of their own lives? Or were these men adventurous and proud of what they were doing? In another report about a Sikh constable who persevered in executing his duty in the face of danger, the constable is described as "plucky," an adjective not used much today, but which means to show determination and courage when encountering difficulties. In February 1906 an arriving coolie attempted to escape. A Sikh constable, Sergeant Raidollah Khan, found the man in the house of a Chinese gardener. Khan "was suddenly attacked by one of the men who seized a meat chopper and cut the Sergeant across the head." Undeterred, Khan fought back and even though he "received a deep stab in the left leg above the knee," in the end he still succeeded in overpowering his assailant. Further, although "being himself wounded severely in the leg and head," Khan nonetheless brought both of the Chinese men to the police station, a distance of one mile.[49]

Hence, in addition to violence and the stranger-king phenomenon, regardless of how it worked, we also need to take into account the agency of people like Sikh constables. Yes, these men were in the employ of a colonial government, but they were not simply automatons who followed orders merely to get paid. They did dangerous work, and seem to have had a sense of responsibility and honor concerning their work. At the same time, such men upheld their honor in a world which contained a good deal of racism, a topic we will turn to next.

Multi-Ethnic Entertainment

In attempting to exploit the resources of Borneo, the members of the British North Borneo Company felt that the indigenous peoples on the island could not effectively do this work, and that Europeans would not be able to work well in tropical conditions. The people that they felt were best suited to work on Borneo were Chinese, and a prominent British career diplomat with years of experience working in China, Sir Walter Medhurst, was employed to recruit Chinese coolies to

[49] "Plucky Conduct of a Police Sergeant," *The British North Borneo Herald*, March 16, 1906, 58.

travel to North Borneo. Medhurst clearly believed in the wisdom of this policy. We can see this from the following statements that he made in 1883 at a dinner party hosted by Alfred Dent, one of the founders of the British North Borneo Company, and at that time its managing director:

> I have always been of the opinion, gentlemen, that the Chinaman only needs to be properly understood and managed to bring out his many good points. All the discontent and even hatred cherished against the Chinese by the populations [in] America and Australia, I consider as mainly to be attributed to the fact that the Chinese have been under disadvantage of living amongst peoples who have been utterly ignorant of their language, ideas, character, and customs. Misunderstandings have hence arisen, and disgust and oppression have followed as a matter of course. Properly understood, and discreetly managed, I consider the Chinaman one of the best colonists in the world, and as regards North Borneo, I strongly suspect that without the Chinamen we should find ourselves no where.[50]

Present at the dinner to hear these comments were the European residents of Sandakan, where the dinner was held, as well as that settlement's prominent Chinese and Malay residents. The report of this dinner in *The North Borneo Herald* states that these men also made short speeches "but as they were in their native languages it would be difficult and to some of our readers perhaps not altogether instructive, to reproduce their exact words." Did the Europeans present actually understand any of these words? Again, according to the account in *The North Borneo Herald*, "Suffice it to say that their general tenor was to express their confidence in Mr. Dent and to thank him for his kind hospitality." Perhaps this was true, but it is also possible that much more was said, but if it was, it was probably not understood. And in the end, to the Europeans it does not seem to have mattered. From their perspective, the evening was a success. And after hours of

[50] "Mr. Dent's Dinner," *The British North Borneo Herald*, July 1, 1883, 8.

dining, drinking and listening to speeches, the guests sang "God Save the Queen" and "Auld Lang Syne" and then went home.[51]

There are numerous accounts of events like this one where Europeans and "natives" were both present, and yet at the same time, they remained separate from each other. On 9 November 1903, for instance, events were held at Sandakan to celebrate the King of England's birthday. These events included water and land sports, a parade, and a dinner, and they took up the entire day. The day started with separate boat races for Chinese fishing boats and Bajau prahus, respectively. These were followed by paddling races, which likewise were designated for separate ethnic groups. In this case, the separate races were for Malays and Bajaus, with a "strong team of muscular Brunei Malays" easily winning the Malay race. The rowing races were followed by a "duck hunt," which apparently required that people catch ducks that were swimming in water. And finally, there was a "greasy boom" competition which required that people climb up a greased pole to grab a flag at the top. Prior to the greasy boom competition there was supposed to have been swimming races for children and adults, but "so many of the eligible competitors for the swimming prizes had tired themselves out in the duck hunts" that the swimming races were cancelled. As for the Europeans, they observed the games from a distance. *The British North Borneo Herald* reports that "A splendid view. . . was obtained from the g.s.y. Petrel on board of which most of the Europeans had congregated, at H. E. the Governor's invitation, and light refreshments were served; the Chinese and native population had the Government wharf to themselves and watched the sports with true Oriental enthusiasm for sight-seeing."[52]

At 12 noon there was a full dress ceremonial parade of the British North Borneo Constabulary, some 27 individuals, and this was followed by tiffin. Then at two o'clock the athletic competitions resumed. There were events such as a sack race, a human wheel barrow race, and separate running competitions for Malays, Indians, Chinese and Filipinos, after which apparently the winners competed with each other in a 100 yard sprint. In addition to these events, there was a "full marching order race" once around the cricket ground for members of the constabulary that was won by a certain Delahil Singh. A "potato-into-bucket" race was "thoroughly enjoyed by the

[51] Ibid.

[52] "The King's Birthday," *The British North Borneo Herald*, November 16, 1883, 273-74.

five *booda-boodas* who entered" the competition. Meanwhile five Malays took part in a log cutting competition, including Genab, a Malay who worked for the North Borneo treasury, and a man who was not adept at cutting wood. The one athlete who was impressive was a certain Tengah who won the high jump, beating the head warder of the central jail, Roshan Khan. Described as a "left-handed warrior," Tengah also won the cricket ball throwing competition and the shot-put, in which he beat Sikhs and three Europeans. This is the only mention of Europeans competing with "natives." There was apparently supposed to be a tug-of-war competition with seven people on a side competing with each other. First Europeans, Sikhs, and Malays were to compete amongst themselves, and then the winning teams were to compete against each other. However, the sun set before that event could be held. *The British North Borneo Herald* report concluded by noting that "The ground presented a very picturesque appearance covered with throngs of varicolored people while here and there groups of Malay ladies clad in gorgeous-hued apparel gave a touch of color to the scene which is quite absent from similar gatherings of the *hoi polloi* in England."[53]

So for the king's birthday, the Europeans watched as the natives created a picturesque scene. On the one hand, the event was meant to include people of different ethnic groups, but on the other, this act of inclusion did not indicate equality. Instead, a definite hierarchy was established. Such a hierarchy was also evident on 20 November 1903 when T. C. H. Arensma, the general manager of a major tobacco plantation on the east coast of British North Borneo, Darvel Bay Estates, arrived back with his wife from a trip to Europe. A celebration was organized by some of the Europeans at Lahat Datu (now spelled Lahad Datu), but Chinese also participated. The governor of British North Borneo gave permission for the Constabulary Band to perform at the event, and when Arensma arrived at the wharf that had been "gaily decorated with palm-leaves and bunting," the band played popular airs as "the Chinese gave their General Manager a specially warm reception amidst the firing of crackers and the dinning of gongs." After having arrived, a dinner and concert were held in Mr. Arensma's honor. The dinner was served on the verandah of the "Kongsikong," the main meeting house for a Chinese organization, or "gongsi." There, we are told that 40 people "enjoyed a truly royal and hearty repast lasting till nearly mid-night."[54]

[53] Ibid.

[54] "Darvel Bay's Welcome to Mr. and Mrs. T. C. H. Arensma," *The British North Borneo Herald*, December 2, 1903, 286.

The account of this event in *The British North Borneo Herald* does not indicate what food was served, but the program for the concert is recorded. It began with a "Festival March" which is described as a "song and dance by all the Dutchmen." This was followed by a song called "Marching Along." There was then a trio (cello, violin and piano) performance of a Bach "Meditation," a rendition of the Teresa Del Riego ballad "O Dry Those Tears," a trio performance of a fantasy from Weber's opera Der Freischütz, and a duet performance of "Serenade" by Italian composer Gaetano Braga. This was then followed by a very special "serenade by torchlight by all the Chinese tandils [i.e., overseers] and coolies." The account in *The British North Borneo Herald* noted that "The torch-light procession of all the Chinese Tandils and coolies in the Estate which took to (sic) place at the conclusion of the first part of the programme formed a particularly striking feature, the long line of torches occupying over a quarter of a mile in length. On reaching the 'Kongsikong' they serenaded Mr. and Mrs. Arensma while the head Tandil addressed on behalf of all the Chinese a few words of welcome to which Mr. Arensma made a suitable reply, and with three hearty cheers all dispersed."[55]

Then the Europeans ate dinner. After dinner the performances resumed. While there was a cello performance of a fantasy from La Traviata, and a rendition on violin of Émile Waldteufel's waltz "Les Patineurs," most of this second session was devoted to singing, featuring such songs as "The Rowdy Dowdy Boys," "Here's a Health unto his Majesty," "Gipsy Song," "In Sweet September," and "I Don't Want to Play in Your Yard." Then as the evening drew near to a close, a certain Mr. Kershaw and a certain Mr. Lammert offered a rendition of a song that was popular at the time called "Chin Chin Chinaman."[56]

"Chin Chin Chinaman" was a song from a musical comedy called "The Geisha" that opened in London in 1896. The lyrics of the song are meant to replicate the broken English of a Chinese laundryman: "Chinaman no money makee / Allo lifee long! / Washee washee once me takee, / Washee washee wrong! / When me think he stealee collars / P'licee man he come; / Me get finee fivee dollars, / Plenty muchee sum!"

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

After that song had been sung, and as befit a celebratory event in 1903 attended by people from the Netherlands and Great Britain, the evening ended with the singing of "God Save the King" and "Wien Neerlands Bloed," followed by a supper.

So "Chin Chin Chinaman" was sung at this gathering at the "Kongsikong" in Lahat Datu to honor the return of T. C. H. Arensma, the manager of the Darvel Bay Estates tobacco plantation, an employer of many Chinese coolies, all of whom had reportedly serenaded Mr. Arensma and his wife by torchlight earlier in the evening, and then had "dispersed." Seeing the way that Chinese were important for this event – they welcomed General Manager Arensma with fire crackers, provided the venue of the Kongsikong to hold the celebration, and serenaded Arensma and his wife – and the way that they were "dispersed" and ridiculed, is a fascinating window into the complex, colonial, racist world that existed at that time and place. From accounts like these we can get a sense of what the Europeans thought, but it is much more difficult to ascertain what was in the minds of the non-Europeans. What song did the coolies sing? How did they know that song? Did they practice at the plantation? What were they thinking when they walked down to "serenade" the plantation owner? And was the involvement of the Chinese at the Kongsikong simply part of some plan to gain the favor of the Europeans, or did they really feel that they were part of a common society? If so, did they know the song "Chin Chin Chinaman"?

An Asiatic Country

None of the above questions can be answered with any degree of certainty. Nonetheless, when one reads through a source like *The British North Borneo Herald*, one finds repeated examples of the encounters and interactions of people from very diverse backgrounds, that is, people who were strangers to each other in multiple ways. And as time passed, even more strangers came. In the early twentieth century the United States established a consulate in Sandakan. Lester Maynard, the man whom we saw at the outset of this essay attending to the dying Adolf Muller, was the first American consul to serve there. In reading through the consular records, one can see that Maynard and his successors spent a good deal of time responding to letters from business people in the US

who were seeking to sell their products in Borneo. It is clear from these letters that Americans at the time had little idea what Borneo was like, and many sought to sell products that were inappropriate for the island. In explaining to American businessmen why their products would not likely sell well, these consuls explained a bit about British North Borneo, and here again, their descriptions provide an interesting glimpse at this society at that time.

A consul who provided a good deal of such information was one of Maynard's successors, Orlando Baker. Consul Baker provided some fascinating details about life in British North Borneo, although those details were expressed through a degree of dry humor, sarcasm, and racism, that is, through "colonial common sense." In his letters, Baker often referred to British North Borneo as an "Asiatic country." To Baker an "Asiatic country" was a land that was undeveloped, in terms of both its physical and human resources. And as a result, he felt that there were very few American products that could be sold there. For instance, in response to a letter of inquiry from the A. & F. Brown Company, a New York company that dealt in various types of machinery, Baker stated in a May 27, 1909 letter that, "I fear there is very little call for the useful articles to which you are calling attention. This is an Asiatic country."[57]

As difficult as it may have been to sell machinery, it was impossible, according to Baker, to sell automobiles. Thus, in his 13 January 1909 response to the Reo Motor Car Company, Baker stated that "The country is wild and mountainous; with a few roads on which a Motor [car] could run." He went on to note that "Sandakan and its approaches, has not more than ten or twelve miles of roads, worked and graded. Men who can afford it keep a two wheeled pony cart, and a pony. The sedan chair and jinriksha are in occasional use. There are few men here who could afford to buy and keep a motor car."[58]

So if automobiles were inappropriate for British North Borneo, we can therefore imagine what Baker must have thought when he received a letter from R. H. Macy and Company, or what is today known as "Macy's Department Store" in New York City. Here again, Baker sought to explain and educate in his response:

[57] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to The A. & F. Brown Co.," 27 May 1909.

[58] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to Reo Motor Car Company," 13 January 1909.

> There are but few (50 to 60) Europeans in Sandakan – Governmental Officials and employees of the two European firms.
>
> Retail business is all done by the Asiatics, who have an association called the Board of Trade.
>
> There are from eight to ten thousand natives, using the Chinese and Malay languages; and the demand [is] for Oriental goods – their costume and style of goods are all different from American and European.
>
> You may therefore, infer what the prospect is of a trade here wearing apparel of American pattern.[59]

Baker thus doubted that the Asiatics would be interested in purchasing clothing from Macy's, and he seems to have doubted that one could even do business with most Asiatics. We get this sense in his response to a letter from Hoard's Dairyman in Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin requesting a "complete list of the dairymen throughout British North Borneo." Baker answered by saying that "the dairy business in North Borneo, and perhaps throughout the whole of Borneo is in the hands of Indians, Malays, and Chinese, and that these do business on so small a scale that they carry their milk to customers in a bucket, and do not speak or understand the English language. To send them your literature in my opinion, would be useless."[60]

Did this mean that Baker thought that it was simply impossible for American companies to do business in British North Borneo? No, it does not look that way. For instance he seemed to hold out some cautious hope for the Yonelle Exterminating Company in Annandale, New Jersey. This is what he wrote in his response to that company's inquiry: "We have rats and mice, and I am sure your 'Rat-Snap' would be useful here if it could be introduced." He cautioned however that

[59] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to R. H. Macy and Company," 13 January 1909.

[60] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to Hoard's Dairyman," 16 April 1909.

"The inhabitants are mostly Chinese, and slow to use anything new" and offered the advice that "Language for circulars should be in Chinese or Malay."[61]

Baker also saw potential for selling toothpicks. On 29 January 1909, Baker responded to the Cutter-Tower Company from Boston, Massachusetts, thanking the people there for their letter of inquiry and the sample tooth picks that they sent. He then said, "This is an Asiatic town, and retail business is done by them." Baker then indicated that M. Hadjee Adamsahib and Co. was the firm most likely to sell the Cutter-Tower Company's tooth picks.[62]

Baker was a character. His letters contain a dry humor, sarcasm, and a racist view of "Asiatics," but when we "read against the grain" of what he wrote, we can use his comments to nonetheless get somewhat of a picture of what life was like in the "Asiatic country" of British North Borneo in the early twentieth century. One of the reasons why this very diverse group of people could all inhabit the same area was probably in part due to the fact that they spent a lot of time ignoring each other. From Baker's condescending comments, we can get the sense that he did not spend much time interacting with "Asiatics." He was perhaps happy that way, as probably were the "Asiatics."

CONCLUSION

On November 1, 1883, *The North Borneo Herald* carried a small news item that went as follows: "Mr. Sun Kwon Long has removed his trading station from Pantow Pantow. . . The three Chinese he had placed there were unacquainted with the language and the peculiar customs of the rather wild and independent Sulus and Bajaus there located, and appear to have passed an unenviable existence of several months amongst them."[63]

[61] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to Yonelle Exterminating Co.," 26 May 1909.

[62] U.S. Consular Reports, Sandakan, "Consul Orlando Baker to Cutter-Tower Company," 29 January 1909.

[63] "Notes," *The British North Borneo Herald*, November 1, 1883, 3.

For a few months, some Chinese traders had attempted to do business with people whom they could not communicate with. Whereas this attempt to do business apparently failed, there were countless other people in British North Borneo who worked for, or together with, people whom they couldn't really communicate with. Peluans and Muruts "agreed" to be loyal to British stranger-kings. Sikhs "served" the British and held the peace among a population that they could not understand and who probably couldn't understand them. Chinese businessmen worked together with European merchants, and may or may not have understood the songs that the Europeans sang about them. Malays, Bajaus, Filipinos, and Sikhs competed against each other in sporting events, while Europeans watched them from the deck of a ship. Adolf Muller lived on a pearling boat with some Filipinos and Moros, perhaps eating sausages and baked beans together, and then again, perhaps not. And finally, nobody drove an automobile, because it was an "Asiatic country."

While these numerous examples may be anecdotal, I would argue that they nonetheless are informative. They point us towards relations that need to be explained. While by now we realize that the colonial relationship was never as simple as one between a unified "colonizer" versus a unified "colonized," the complexity, richness, and ambiguity of the many different relationships that we can see existed in British North Borneo challenge our ability to explain the past. Further, while British North Borneo may have eventually become a plural society like other colonial possessions in the region, the economic relations in the years immediately following the establishment of the colony were too rudimentary to be the source of social cohesion. Other factors were clearly at play. That some British officials served as stranger-king could be one such factor. Ambiguity in human relations, meanwhile, was clearly another.

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