

The Micropolitics of Statemaking: Practical Knowledge as an Instrument of Statecraft in the 19th Century Sarawak

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Abstract

In the context of traditional governance in the Malay Archipelago, statecraft was a style of governing characterised by the ruler's personality, charisma and wisdom. The era of colonialism ushered in a new governance method modelled after a modern state's bureaucracy. In Sarawak, the statecraft had shifted from one that was founded on the dichotomous relation between the coastal and upriver polities to the Brooke's governance that was based primarily on the incorporation of the nonstate people. This article investigates the strategy of state's incorporation through the role of native administrators and the perspective of the upriver groups involved in the statemaking. The article examines the function of knowledge in the micro-context of colonial administration by underlining the tension between the state-centric perspective upheld by the European officers and the native administrator's practical knowledge. The study employed interpretive method in the reconstruction of the natives' perspective from the district officers' reports that were published in the government periodical *The Sarawak Gazette*. The findings show that the natives' response in the early period of the modern statemaking took multiple forms of dissent, ranging from cynicism and indifference to rumours, foot dragging and factual manipulation. Their opposition was translated into avoidance from participating in the state's economy. By examining the daily order of the state from the activity of the native officers, the contradiction between the Brooke's state priority and the natives' interest was exposed. The findings were significant because the perspective from 'below' has produced valuable information about how the early modern state was perceived by the natives.

Keywords: Statemaking; Native Officer; Practical Knowledge; Micropolitics; Sarawak

Introduction

The ruler and his state formed the basis of Malay political identity. The Malay court literature represented the royal-centric perspective on state and statecraft. Among the earliest Malay-Muslim texts were political treatise in the form of advice to the ruler such as *Taj al-Salatin* (1603) and *Bustan al-Salatin* (1638). Muslim rulers were also known to retain the service of religious scholar in his court who advised him not only on the legal aspects of governance but also on religious conduct for the state. In West Borneo, Arshad al-Banjari (1710-1812) was a *mufti* in the court of Sultan Tahmidullah II (r. 1773-1808) of Banjar. Sharif Hussein al-Qadri (d. 1771) was a *mufti* for Sultan Muhammad Zainuddin (r. 1665-1724) of Matan and later, he was invited by the ruler of Mempawah, Daeng Menambun (r. 1740-1761), to be its first *mufti*. The interest in perfecting statecraft can be explained

by understanding the culture associated with statecraft. Anthony Milner's theory of Malay state in *Kerajaan* argues that the pursuit of wealth by the raja was a means for gaining and solidifying political influence. Milner cites an example from *Hikayat Pahang* which narrates the sultan's desire for foreign trade in his state so that he could "increase the population as well as the revenue of the place". The emphasis on gaining subject and followers became incentive for the raja to pursue wealth and to encourage trade and multinationals into his state.¹

A Borneo text presented another motivation for rulers to engage in trade and wealth notably to achieve fame and reputation for the *negeri*. An example that illustrates this point came from *Syair Pangeran Syarif*² penned by the Panembahan of Matan-Tanjungpura Gusti Muhammad Sabran (r. 1845-1908) in 1895. It was a literary chronicle of his observation of the splendour and wealth of his neighbour Pontianak who was ruled by Sultan Sharif Muhammad Sharif Yusuf (r. 1895-1944). The signs of the glorious state were described in the *Syair*: town centres bustling with trades and fertile land ("*Iaitu tanda negeri batuah/dagangan makmur makanan mewah/tidak putus bunga dan buah/ menjadi semua kebun dan sawah*"); the flocking of people from all parts of the world coming to the negeri to make their living ("*Banyak manusia begitu jua/sekalian bangsa adalah semua/penuh dan sesak di dalam Benua/entah berapa setatnya jiwa*"). As he reflected the contrasting situation with his own state the Panembahan expressed his sense of unfulfillment in being unable to bring good fortune to the people ("*Apalah guna hidup termasa/memegang negeri rakyat dan desa/jikalau tidak senang sentosa/baik mengembara senantiasa*"). For his state to be in reduced circumstances was a cause of embarrassment, of feeling undignified and disempowered ("*Serasa hendak pergi berlari/barang ke mana membawa diri/tidak kuasa di dalam negeri/memegang perkara sehari-hari*").³ The *Syair* demonstrated the norms of prestige in a Malay Muslim negeri was entangled with wealth; hence, the extent taken by the rulers in the Archipelago to encourage foreign trade in the ports. It was for this reason the first two rulers of Pontianak, Syarif Abdul Rahman and Syarif Kassim, allied to the Dutch forces at the expense of eliminating its neighbouring rivals Matan, Sambas and Mempawah.⁴

Bornean statecraft and hinterland tribes

Muslim chiefs in Borneo positioned themselves as gatekeepers for trades with the hinterland group. Their settlements were strategically placed at the entrance of major rivers which had enabled their posts to become the first point of exchange for trading boat coming from the coast and destination for jungle articles from the upriver. Hence, the interaction between the downriver and the upriver was shaped and implicated primarily from economic interest. We can gain some insights into the relationship through a Malay-Bugis text *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, which amongst others, retold the relation between the Muslim rulers and the Dayak groups in West Kalimantan.⁵ Gusti Jamiril, a son of Mempawah ruler Daeng Menambun, traded with the Dayak chiefs in the *hulu* after receiving permission from his grandfather who was the ruler of Pinang Sekayuk, Pengiran Dipati. Dipati was depicted as having a working relation with the Dayaks and was carefully guarding the alliance. In another example, Sharif Abdul Rahman, the ruler of Pontianak, led a ferocious trading expedition consisted of forty boats into Hulu Sanggau. The Panembahan of Sanggau prevented Abdul Rahman from entering the river and that had led to the two rounds of war between them, resulting to the defeat of Sanggau. Furthermore, the Muslim ruling elites needed the service of Dayak fighters to defend their precarious realm. The son of Pengiran Adipati, Raden Jaga, assembled an army of hundreds of Dayak men to attack a debt collector from Mempawah who had threatened the Dayak chiefs into paying their debts.

The relation between Muslim sultanates and the hinterland tribes was dictated by economic and political survivalism than an ideological imperative for subjugation. The extent of the alliance was defined and defended by mutual recognition of space and authority. Pengiran Mahkota Muhammad

Salleh felt safe to allow James Brooke to make his maiden visit to the Dayak villages in Lundu in 1839 at the same time when there was a civil war between Brunei and the Sarawak elites. In 1840, James Brooke reported that a joint-forces of Iban from Saribas and Skrang together with the Malay marauding fleets paid a visit to a Brunei *wazir* Pengiran Muda Hashim in his abode in Kuching seeking for his permission to use the river route and proceeded for the attack of the Dayak at Sambas border.⁶ In *Tuhfat al-Nafis*, the political unit of Dayak's longhouse was recognised as "*negeri*", a Malay term that refers to a self-ruling polity which possessed an authority in an autonomous space.

Furthermore, *Tuhfat al-Nafis* has used the concepts control ("*takluk*") and rule ("*pemerintahan*") to describe the political relationship between Muslim chief and the Dayak. When the ruler of Pinang Sekayuk Pengiran Dipati lost the war to Daeng Menambun, his rule of the Dayak was forced to be returned ("*dipulangkan*") to the granddaughter of the late Panembahan of Sanggau, Emas Indera Wati, also the daughter of Daeng Menambun. A meeting was organised between the winning coalition of the rulers of Mempawah, Riau and Sambas with the Dayak chiefs ("*kepala-kepala*") of thirty "*negeri*" with the agenda that was put gently as correcting ("*membetulkan*") the Dayak chiefs' allegiance to a new authority. Subsequently, the chiefs took an oath of loyalty ("*bersumpah setia*") to Menambun and swore not to break away from the rule of Mempawah.⁷ This allegiance was coveted by Menambun whom previous to this was denied access to the Dayak. The event described in the text made clear the element of consent as a critical factor because the Dayak chiefs had to be convinced into accepting the new political alliance. The seriousness of the Muslim rulers in securing the alliance meant that they recognised the importance such cooperation had for the security and prosperity of their own kingdoms.

Objectives of the study

There are two objectives of the present study. The first is to approach statecraft from 'below'. James C. Scott highlights the agency and perspective of the nonstate actor in responding to the state's effort at incorporation.⁸ Scott's theory of state formation in colonial Southeast Asia revealed the contentious relationship between these two. States had sought to increase the size of its settled population and to encourage food production and labour for the purpose of appropriation and regime stability, while the nonstate groups sought a mobile, flexible relationship. Hence, "the role of statecraft in this context becomes that of maximizing the productive, settled population in such state spaces while at the same time drawing tribute from or at least neutralizing the nonstate spaces".⁹

Scott's perspective represents a micropolitical approach to statemaking. This approach departs from the state-centric model to an examination of individual's interest and rationality. Micropolitics is a method of analysis which emphasises agency and practices in particular context and specific phenomena.¹⁰ This micro-level study is justified by the fact that much is yet to be explored about the response of social subjects towards statemaking. Hence, this study attempts to bridge the gap between the macrohistory and the micropolitics of statecraft by looking into the response of the native subjects towards the project of statemaking, specifically the expansion of the state's spaces and the incorporation of the nonstate people.

In its emphasis for a micropolitical perspective, the study fills the gap in the current scholarship on Sarawak pertaining to the history of statecraft, two of which should be mentioned. The first is a state-centric perspective represented by Sanib Said about the early history of Sarawak based on the evidence from a Malay manuscript relating to its Javanese founder Datu Marapati.¹¹ From the capital of Santubong, Datu Marapati ruled a vast realm on the Sarawak River basin and developed a system of government. Although Sanib's work was notable for constructing a history of an early state based on Malay manuscript, his approach remains faithful to the court-centric dimension

common in the narrative of Malay states. The other work is by John Walker about the statecraft in Borneo.¹² This was a study of historical states in Borneo drew on the Malay written sources, Dayak oral history and European documents. Walker's original contribution was in presenting statecraft from multiple angles to emphasise the multiple players involved in the states' historical evolution. His work demonstrates the narrative of *negeri* is not just the exclusive domain for Malay Muslim texts or European documentations, but a heritage of communities in Borneo. Both studies cited were important and exemplary, hence, the search for balance should motivate a new inquiry about the past and its different possibilities.

The other objective is to present a study of modern statecraft in colonial form by using Sarawak as a case study. A distinguishing element in the traditional and the modern statecraft arises from the difference in the norm of statemaking. In the traditional sense, there were two axes of political and economic relations defined by relative positionality between the downriver sultanate and the upriver, hinterland tribal groups. Ironically, the mechanic of the relation worked in such a way that the downriver axis had the most to lose should the upriver tribes decided to withdraw from the relationship or cooperate with a rival state. When Sharif Kassim of Pontianak was installed as Panembahan and ruled from the base on the lower reach of Mempawah following the Dutch attack in 1786, the defeated Bugis ruler Nata Kesuma moved his capital to the interior Sibukit and cut off the supply of products to the downriver.¹³ This rendered Mempawah deprived of the jungle resources and became unprofitable. After Sharif Kassim succeeded his father as the second Sultan of Pontianak, he returned the lower Mempawah to the Bugis in 1808.¹⁴

The modern-colonial statecraft operated under a different value system. It positioned itself as sovereign, absolute, and uncontested. To maintain this sovereign power, the Brookes government was determined to eliminate the dichotomy between the downriver and the upriver in two significant ways: the substitution of a downriver chiefdom with an administrative fort led by a European officer; and the transformation of unregulated spaces and unmonitored independence in the hinterland into their incorporation within the state-defined boundary.

This study shows that despite the ambition to realize sovereignty, the early period of statemaking in Sarawak was epitomised by the government's incapacity and limited means in realising influence in the hinterland. The government's strategies at incorporation by subjecting the nonstate groups to a rule of law and free trade were largely unsuccessful. In this regard, the examination of the native officer's career was critical in exemplifying the challenge faced by the Brookes government, highlighting the reality of the interactions between the officer and the tribal groups in Sarawak. Key in the relationship between the native officer and the hinterland groups was the utilisation of practical knowledge as a rule of conduct. In this sense, practical knowledge became a new form of statecraft, which rationalises statemaking as a strategy for sovereignty in the era of foreign rule.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilises concepts in Scott's corpus to highlight the interaction between the colonial state's apparatus and the social groups whose existence lay beyond the effective control of the state. The understanding of this interaction in the early state formation was critical because of the political economy that framed the relationship from the point of view of the Brookes government. In particular, the charisma of native administrator became a conduit through which the state was established in the community. To decipher this interaction textually, several findings from Scott's works are instructive. In *The Arts of Not Being Governed*, Scott identified the main object of a modern and colonial state in "bringing the nonstate people and spaces to heel."¹⁵ To achieve this end, the project of making the people visible to the state was initiated administratively, as in the case of Brookes officers, in

collecting taxes, recording census, surveying lands and documenting laws. Hence, the study of the micropolitics of state can offer a perspective on the strategies of incorporation not only from the state's view but also the people's reaction to them.

Scott has also written about the problem in state's knowledge which almost often removed reality. In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott argues that early modern statecraft was unable to understand its own population because of its failure to account the complexity of the actual situation. Instead, it favours simplifying the knowledge through standardization in aspects like language, legal discourse and the establishment of survey and population register.¹⁶ Scott contrasted the state's simplified knowledge with knowledge "embedded in local experience", "practical skills" and "folk wisdom".¹⁷ Such knowledge was able to represent reality better than abstract knowledge because of its virtues in, "making the best out of limited resources are the kinds of skills that are hard to teach"¹⁸. The practical knowledge, or *metis*, was also thought to be better in reading the logic of situation, "The subtleties of application are important precisely because *metis* is most valuable in settings that are mutable, indeterminant and particular".¹⁹

The indigenous groups' response to statemaking in Sarawak can be adequately represented with the application of Scott's toolkit. There are three inter-related perspectives derived from his works which this study intends to pursue. First, the challenge involved in the incorporation of the nonstate people requires a context viewed from the position of the state's internal weakness. Secondly, the representation of the indigenous groups' anti-state's reaction should be viewed as rational and coherent. Finally, the elements of micropolitics which emphasised common sense and practicality of historical agents have the advantage in disclosing the early responses to the state's overture. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* Scott has coined the term "infrapolitics" ("political acts that are disguised and offstage"), to capture the strategies used by subordinate group in resisting the hegemony of the ruling class.²⁰ In the discussion that follows, the responses of the tribal groups were expressed in their exchanges with the native administrator. They used tactics like delayed response, foot-dragging, trade boycott, rumours and persuasion in order to maximise the outcome of their dealing with the state. From the perspective of the tribal elites, they were not the subordinates in the political system; rather, a political force to be reckoned with.

The study highlights the function of practical knowledge as a basis for micropolitics from the interaction between the native administrator and tribal groups. Practical knowledge encapsulates the pulling together of symbolic capitals understood to be able to enhance interest and position. Knowing the right people, familiarity with language and custom, empathy with the way of life and calculating risk and benefits were skills necessary in the interaction between the two different polities. Throughout the centenary of the Brooke's rule in Sarawak, the folk wisdom of its native officers was given due respect primarily because of the necessity in maintaining relation with the upriver groups.

There are few points which the article departs from Scott's works. Practical knowledge in the case of the Brookes' government was represented by native administrators who were integrated into the state's apparatus. The Brookes recognised from early on that the appointment of officers among the natives would add value to the government. The Malay administrators were previously part of the Brunei's territorial administration, hence, their familiarity with the arts of governing. The other reason was the history of relationship, both politically and economically, between the downriver and the upriver elites which did not diminished but reasserted with the coming of the foreign rule. Another point was the Brookes' governing philosophy constituted the character for which his administration was modelled after. James Brooke expressed the sentiment in his personal journal, "I so much desire, the attempt will and must conduce greatly to ameliorate the native condition and give them a taste for British manufactures, and some appreciation for a just and protecting government".²¹ A District Officer A.B. Ward, explained how the principle was carried out in practice, "The right policy was to

veto such native usages as are dangerous or unjust, and to ingraft western methods on eastern customs by a gradual and gentle process ...".²² As a result of this patriarchal sentimentality, the state's view of its subjects was often exaggerated and distorted. This paved the way for a paternalistic approach to society by presenting the state as protector of the purportedly miserable class.

The research utilises historical data originated from the reports written by the Residents and District Officers published in the government publication *The Sarawak Gazette*. It was in these reports that the natives' perspectives were constructed. The government source, which did not strictly intend to represent them, nevertheless, valuable. Furthermore, the use of materials from the *Gazette* was justified from the point of view of micropolitics through which the recovery of indigenous perspective was made possible. Ann Stoler states that colonial archive can be read from multiple perspectives because they contained not only the colonizers' triumphs and authority, but also their fears, anxiety and troubles.²³ Therefore, colonial archive remains an important avenue to gain information about the practices of governance and power-relation from below.

There are several terms which are used interchangeably in this study. The upriver, the hinterland and tribal groups connote not only a geographical setting of the non-Malay Muslim groups in Sarawak history. These terms signify the political relationship between the downriver Malay and Muslim political functionary with the upriver groups. The political relationship was a carry-over from the Brunei sultanate era when the Malay-Muslim governors controlled the access of goods flowing from downriver to the upriver, while the tribal groups were the willing agents in the relationship which they too had a control in deciding access to the demands for forest articles and manpower. In the context of this paper, the main upriver group referred to was the *orang hulu* (upriver) who described themselves to outsider as "*Lepo kedaya*" (upriver people). The events described in this study occurred between the years 1881 to 1901, in which most of the *orang hulu* settlements were placed beyond the visibility of the state, hence, for the period in question, they inhabited "nonstate" spaces ungoverned by state. We follow Scott's definition of nonstate spaces as follows, "locations where owing largely to geographical obstacles the state has particular difficulty in maintaining and establishing its authority"²⁴.

Practical knowledge: The view from the state

The first of the Brookes' rajah, James, promoted a form of rule that was guided by common sense. This amounted to having familiarity with the language, culture and habit of the people and ideally, to use the knowledge in pursuance of state's objectives. The Brooke rulers emphasised governing by common sense which they considered superior to abstract Western principles. They believed that governance should be simple and accessible to the people. To accomplish this, administrators, both European and natives, were expected to possess knowledge about the people and to make themselves available where they were needed.

The inspiration for the common-sense rule was borne out of James initial experience. In his first venture in Sarawak in 1839, James displayed a self-indulgent fascination towards the non-Malay natives. His initial knowledge about them came from his erstwhile enemy Pangeran Shahbandar Mohamad Salleh. The Pangeran, whom James described as "the cleverest man here" taught him about the various Dayak groups inhabiting the rivers of Lundu, Saribas and Bintulu. The following day, the Pangeran introduced James to a Dayak Penggawa from Lundu, where James spent hours with, "to gain as much information" about the Penggawa's tribe, amongst others relating to their headhunting, the death ritual, blood ceremony and sacrifice custom. He was brought to Lundu to meet the leaders of the tribes there, conversing with them and observing their kampungs.²⁵ Through the experience, James believed that his knowledge about the people fostered his sense of sympathy and subsequently

excite his imagination into figuring out ways to improve their condition.

When James became a rajah, he made sure that his officers gained similar experience. His nephew and the future second rajah, Charles, was stationed in Banting in Sri Aman for ten years (1853 to 1863). Being a lone European, he had the company and assistance from a coterie of Malay administrators namely Abang Aing, Abang Tek and Pengiran Mohamad Ali who formed the nascent Native Officer Service. They accompanied Charles in his journey to various villages, participated in military expeditions and acted as his sounding board. They offered the appearance of a collective rule between the Brooke ruler and the native's ruling class. This impression was pertinent in the time when the people's memory of the destruction wrought by the *Iris* and *Nemesis* expeditions in 1843 to 1844 and 1849 respectively, was vivid. The continuing hostility towards the government was evident from Charles' recorded reaction of an Iban chief, "I could hear the old man talking in no complimentary terms of myself and other white men".²⁶ Without these native officers stood at the frontline, the existence of government in the outposts would fall into disrepute. The best of them were recognized by their superiors. One of Charles' officers in Banting, Pangeran Mohamad Ali who died in 1888, was described as having an "intimate knowledge" of Iban language and character, "His natural good temper and kindness of heart enabled him to listen to their complains for long hours".²⁷ The twin qualities of familiarity with people's culture and approachable to all were perceived as the idealized dispositions for a practical, common-sense rule in the outstation.

While the credits attributed to the native administrator's knowledge and skills seemed to corroborate with the Brookes extolled virtues, in reality, especially during the early period of a residency, their knowledge was often viewed secondary to the government's interest. In the discussion that follows, the application of the native officer's practical knowledge in the context of the incorporation of the nonstate tribes was set in contrast with the state's interest. Subsequently, the perspective of the incorporated groups towards the state and their reaction is presented as a rational response to a chaotic rule.

The establishment of Bintulu Residency

Critical to the Brookes' project of statemaking was the incorporation of various nonstate groups. For most of them, to come and live as subjects of the state was the only recourse available after the ruination of the indigenous polities. The Malays and Ibans of Saribas, whose villages were destroyed by the Brooke-orchestrated *Iris* expedition in 1844, were ordered to resettle close to the government fort eight years after the tragedy, "This was intended as a primary step to leading them to a better system of government amongst themselves".²⁸ In the upper Rejang, the zealotry of Rejang's Resident Hugh Brooke Low in forcing the upriver tribes to submit to the state authority became a *cause célèbre*, "His errand proved successful and the Sebops and the Lirong tribes living in the Murum have duly submitted renouncing their independence and consenting to pay revenue after the harvest".²⁹ In reality, the groups' submission was an outcome of an intimidation by Low who was accompanied by "a force of 200 men".³⁰ This particular conflict between the forced and voluntary incorporation is the main subject of the present discussion by referring to a case study of Bintulu residency, a territory annexed by the Brooke government from the Brunei Sultanate in 1861.

Prior to the takeover, Bintulu was neither a backwater and nor it being a lawless area. Instead, a system of native administration was in place. In the context of the *hulu* groups, the existence of a stratification and elaborate political process meant that there was a socio-political order that governed community and intercommunity relations and which had maintained peace and trading activities in the hinterland.³¹ Acknowledging the existence of a separate political order in the *hulu* had led to the agents of Brunei sultanate to realise the importance of granting titles and official role to the

chief as means to secure their cooperation. The territorial claims of Brunei royal were expressed in terms of rights over *kerajaan*, *kuripan* and *tulin* rivers, which also includes the people and resources surrounding the river. Due to the vastness of the territory, the owner of the river would appoint several officers to engage in trade and tax collection. A great-granddaughter of Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam (r. 1807-1826) Pengiran Anak Siti Khadijah Pengiran Sura Negara Badaruddin had the *tulin* right over Bintulu, Balingian and Bayan. She appointed officials who were awarded titles like Orang Kaya Pemancha, Orang Kaya Bandar, Orang Kaya Muda, Orang Kaya Temenggong and Orang Kaya Lela Raja.³² The Sultan had the right over *kerajaan* rivers which he earned by right of office and *tulin* river as his personal right. Due to his prestige, he was able to assemble more officers to govern his rivers. In the case of Saribas, the Sultan appointed a pengiran to administer the river, assisted by six ministers appointed among the local elites like Datu Bandar, Datu Laksamana, Datu Setia Raja, Datu Panglima Raja and Orang Kaya Pemancha. The creation of these office-holders was to establish peace and order in the respective river and to facilitate relation with polities in the hinterland.

There were attractions for the local elites to engage in the coastal states like Brunei.³³ The officers were granted permission to start a settlement and to trade in the river and received a cut from the taxation of goods. The prestige associated with royal court was another factor that draw not only the local Muslim elites but also the non-Muslim among the Dayak and *orang hulu*. The sultan and his emissaries appointed *menteri* among the Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau who were given titles like *Orang Kaya*, *Pengarah* and *Penggawa*. The chiefs appointed among the *orang hulu* groups in Baram were recognised by titles such as *Panglima Dalam* and *Menteri Dalam*. The non-Muslim *menteri* received similar rewards as the Muslim elite because of the services they bought to the kingdom. The decline of Brunei sultanate from the late 18th century had led to the tension in its relation with the Dayak and the *orang hulu* chiefs. The rebellion of the Sarawak Malay elites in league with the Dayak in Sarawak Proper in 1839 and the standoff between the Kayan tribes and the Brunei Sultan just outside the palace gate in 1855 and in 1857 shows the tenuous grasp of the Brunei overlords when the cooperation with the *hulu* groups broke down.³⁴

When the Brooke government took over in 1861, the circumstances in Bintulu became much reduced. The government hoped that Bintulu would rise as a trading capital that could lure the highly prolific, powerful tribes in the deep hinterland. Earlier in 1840, James Brooke was so captivated by the story told to him about the powerful tribes in the Rejang and Bintulu that he had asked the Dayak Penggawa of Lundu if he could be brought there to meet them.³⁵ Charles Brooke had also harboured similar exaggeration about the hinterland groups, “further to the eastward and centre of the island are found the heads of the Banjar Masin and Kutai rivers ... The tribes and branch tribes are very numerous and a rough estimate from 20,000 to 30,000 souls is the nearest approximation.”³⁶ In the minds of the Brookes rajahs, the nonstate groups could be effortlessly brought into the state’s realm. James envisaged a means for their incorporation, “to open a friendly communication with the different chiefs and with the interior tribes, by visiting them either once or twice a year and inspiring a confidence in our good intentions ...”³⁷

However, Charles Brooke who visited the Bintulu station in 1863 had noted its isolated feature. The European Resident and his native fortmen were the only inhabitants on the spot. The people refused to move and resettle at the mouth of the river despite being persuaded to do so.³⁸ The Melanau kampungs surrounding the vicinity and across the Kemena River, were doing much better than the fort, while the government-built bazaar was struggling. Despite being an administrative centre, the fort, which was built in 1868, was lifeless. The hope that the upriver people would bring down their produce to trade there remained mostly unachievable. Bintulu was unable to gather a sizeable working population which had led to the running of the station fiscally challenging. In 1884, Bintulu recorded a revenue of \$7716, lower than its expenditure amount at \$7811.³⁹ The poor finance

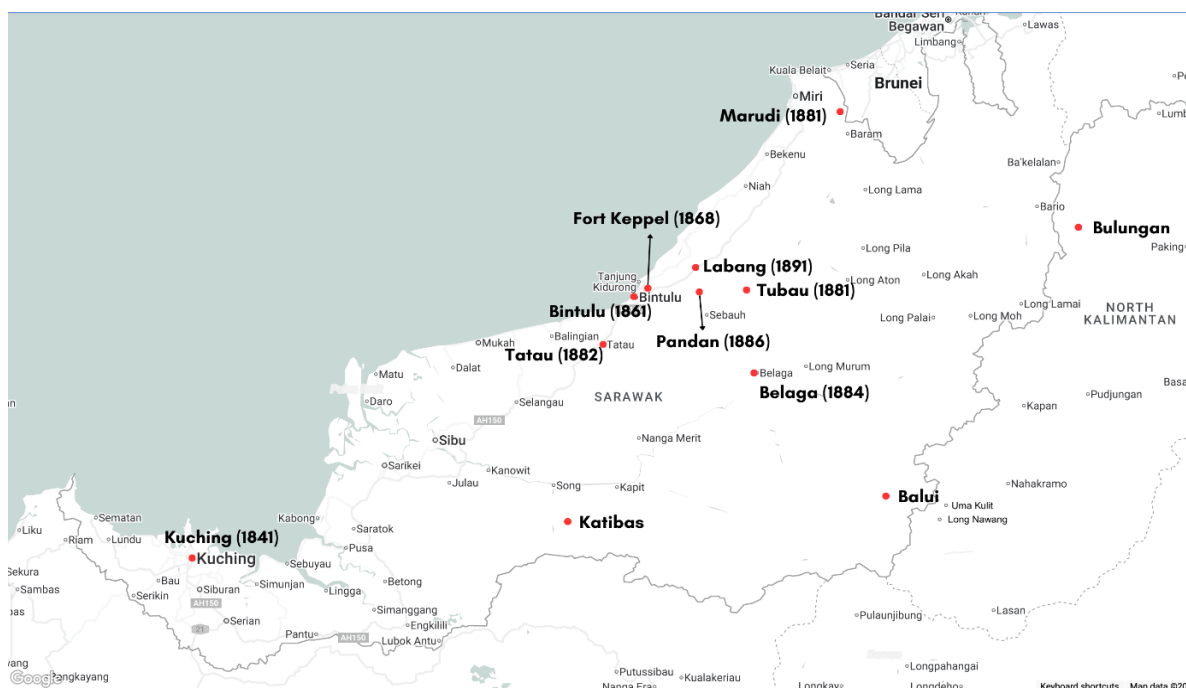
became a constraint for Bintulu to create a strong impression among prospective traders and natives.

A change of strategy was conceived to address the fort's lack of appeal. New stations were created in Bintulu as means of availing the state to the people in Pandan, Labang, Tatau and Tubau (Map 1). Pandan was populated by Punan groups and had a government station, a bazaar and a police station that were built in 1886. Station and bazaar in Labang were completed in 1891. Tatau had seen more activity than the rest. In 1882, it was reported there were four shops in the bazaar and 500 piculs of gutta were exported from the station.⁴⁰ In October 1886, the Divisional Resident reported that there were 4000 bundles of rattan at the Tatau's bazaar awaiting shipment. The population of Tatau in 1887 was 1376 people, with the largest number consisted of the Iban of Rejang at 755 people.⁴¹ Their migration was orchestrated by the government to exploit the jungle for rattan. In 1884, Bintulu ranked the third highest exporter of rattans after Baram and Sibuh.⁴²

Of these three upriver stations, Tubau was the furthest from Bintulu. It was supposed to demonstrate the visibility of state's presence through the installation of its structures. It had a government station, a police station and a bazaar. A Kayan-populated area, Tubau was more audacious than the rest. The Resident of 3rd Division Q.A. Buck supervisory visit to Tubau did not carry a significant impression upon the Kayan chiefs. The visitor was riled to find the government station "in a very dirty state", while its police station was staffed by a "stupid" Chinese Muslim who was looking forward to an early resignation.⁴³ Earlier in 1883, a native officer reported that the two shops in Tubau bazaar presented "quite a deserted appearance".⁴⁴ The indifference echoing the sentiment of the people that the government structures did not meet their present need. They appeared to be the necessities for the state to impress the people about the new political order.

A fifth government outpost in Bintulu was Belaga. Belaga fort, later renamed Fort Vyner, was established in January 1884 and whose initiative was credited to Hugh Brooke Low. He organised a feast and invited 170 people to mark the occasion and of which the cost was covered "at his own expense".⁴⁵ In October, it was reported that a new Chinese and Malay bazaar had been built to facilitate the gathering of forest articles. In 1886, Abang Sutu was appointed as its first native officer. This was a unique scenario for it was the first time in Bintulu where a native officer was stationed regularly in an upriver post. The emphasis placed on Belaga constituted the sole aim at facilitating the incorporation of the nonstate people that for so long had been elusive.

Before the Brooke's rule, Belaga was already a trading post for jungle products destined towards Brunei such as camphor, dammar, rattan, bezoar stone and agarwood. Oral history spoke about a delegation of Kajang chiefs from Belaga who were invited by the Sultan of Brunei to his palace to explore a trading cooperation. A character mentioned in another Kajang source was Tama Tipong Tuloi who was appointed by the Sultan as a trading agent and he received a crown, flag, a drum and a weighing instrument.⁴⁶



Map 1: The trading stations in Bintulu and the year of incorporation.

Source: Ani Hafiffy Anil Yakin.

Native Officer: Haji Hassan, trade and Belaga from 1881 to 1901

In the timeline of the present study from 1881 to 1901, Bintulu had two fully dedicated native officers consisted of a Senior Native Officer Abang Galau and Native Officer Haji Hassan. Abang Galau was an old hand in the native side of the Brooke's administration and was a member of Council Negeri since its first inception in 1867. He was posted in Rejang before moved to Bintulu. The other native chiefs of Bintulu who also sat in the Council were Pangeran Buntar and Pangeran Panji.

Belaga presented a case study that exemplifies the paradox where practical knowledge did not matter to the state despite the purported value attached to it. To illustrate the argument, a career of Haji Hassan is examined. His background can be inferred from the reports published in the *Sarawak Gazette*. A report published in 1882 mentioned Haji Hassan, a trader from Sarawak proper (Kuching) who was responsible for quelling the rows between the Brunei-descent ward Burong Pinggai traders and the Chinese at the Bintulu bazaar which took place on 2 August 1882. The conflict involved people from the nearby kampungs who had "poured in from all quarters by thousands". Haji Hassan's timely interference, praised in the *Gazette*, had prevented "the whole town from pillaged".⁴⁷ The leadership shown by Haji Hassan had endeared him to the Resident of the 3rd Division Claude Crespigny who later retained his service in Bintulu, "Haji Hassan will be here almost continually and will I trust be able to prevent disturbance between the Chinese and others". Earlier, Haji Hassan had appeared in the Divisional Resident report published in May 1882. Here, he brought with him a person described as a "swindler" from Rejang called Ali who was chased down by the "three Kenyahs from Balungan" as he was making his escape to Belaga.⁴⁸ Haji Hassan's role in pacifying the clash in Bintulu had further consolidated his reputation by coming across as someone who was more dependable than the more senior Abang Galau. Resident Crespigny had a trust issue with Galau when just a year before the disturbance in Bintulu, Crespigny issued him a stern warning for abusing his authority in Tatau.⁴⁹ The riot incident had further tarnished Galau's reputation as the Resident reported, "The disturbances becoming so serious were owing to the defective management of Abang Galau and the lack of watch

of the police ...". Despite the Resident's issues with him, the old stalwart continued his service through to his retirement in 1901.

Haji Hassan was a trader in raw sago, a common occupation for men of means in Bintulu. He reported to have come from a family with a sizeable trading connection. This was read from a civil charge brought by him and his brother Haji Aim against their stepfather a Brunei trader Haji Lair over the estate of his deceased mother, Bainun, worth between \$1300 to \$1400.⁵⁰ Haji Hassan's legal tussle with his stepfather continued in another civil case pertaining to the ownership of a female slave who was initially belonged to his late mother.⁵¹ As a trader, he had means and one that he continued to have after his appointment in the government. He purchased a native vessel from an auction of the estates belonging to an infamous "wizard" killed in an incident with the police.⁵² In terms of personality, the Haji came across a man firm in his act and was serious in asserting his authority. He made a formal complaint against the two men from his kampung "for publicly insulting him".⁵³ Haji Hassan was put into retirement in August 1901 because of his failing health caused by the frequent and demanding trips to the upriver. His successor, Haji Abdullah, was appointed a native officer in September and whose sterling career in Bintulu spanned across 28 years.

Haji Hassan was described as someone "conversant" in the language of the Kayan tribes⁵⁴, a skilled valued by his superior. As there was only one European Resident who led the fort the task of supervising the upriver fell on his native officer. The Resident felt assured in his thought that he was sending the right officer to undertake assignments as he could not fully appreciate the intricacies of the affairs in the faraway sites. Thus, the Resident, in spite of the pretension of state authority, was removed from the reality of the people he served.

Because of the constraint, the Resident's decision-making was biased by a fort-centric perspective. He was attuned in the running of an ordered, fiscally self-sustaining administration. Since he could not deal with the local matters which required an absence from the fort, a native officer in Haji Hassan qualities was necessary for the achievement of the district's priorities. The upriver visits involved routine tasks including supervising government works, collecting taxes and fines, settling minor disputes and getting updates on the economic activity. He also carried out specific instructions issued by the Resident, for example in gathering information on issue concerning public order, verifying rumours and bringing prisoner to the fort.

The work of the native officer left significant impression upon the people about what the government was about. One of the impressions gained was that the native officer did not carry the final authority. There was a Kadir a Punan from Pandan who came to the fort to appeal to the Resident against a decision made by Haji Hassan on a marital case where he was fined \$22 for deserting his wife. After probing, the Resident overturned the Haji's decision.⁵⁵ The perception that there was indeed a power difference between the native officer and the Resident was conveniently used by the people to their advantage. One of the ways in which this was accomplished through the shaping of information that favours an interested party. In one instance, Haji Hassan was persuaded by a faction of a Kenyah group in Belaga to accept their nomination of a successor to the late Aban Jalong who was an elder brother of the deceased Abeng Jok. However, the younger brother of the deceased was also aspired to become the leader. The competing claims was brought to the Resident's attention. During the conference, the Kenyah chiefs representing both factions decided before Resident Q.A. Buck that both brothers should jointly hold the vacant position.⁵⁶ There were times when the Resident's interference did not translate into advantageous outcome for the people. A Kayan chief of Tubau, Nipa, reported a murder of a Chinese man committed in Pandan. The Officer in Charge of Bintulu, Fred Drage, despatched Haji Hassan to the place to investigate the murder. The Haji returned to Bintulu and reported that his investigation yielded no information. Dissatisfied, Drage went there to investigate and gather information leading to the arrest of two suspects after he believed there was a

“strong suspicion of complicity”.⁵⁷

The emphasis given to order and trade signified the state’s intention of wanting to be seen by the people as the provider of security and promoter of trade. To increase trading activity new trading paths were worked on. Haji Hassan was given responsibility to organise communication between the Kenyah of Bulungan and the Kayan of Tubau to ease trading passage.⁵⁸ He was also assigned to mediate communicate between the traders from Katibas and the Kenyah from Belaga in regards to rattan supply.⁵⁹ The Haji was also directed to prioritise cases which could affect trade’s progress. A Kayan chief in Tubau, Akam Batu, disclosed an incident to Haji Hassan about a party of Iban intimidating his people who worked the gutta. The Haji reported to the fort that the alleged culprit had denied the charge. However, Resident Sommerville wanted to send a strong message against those who disrupted trade and had ordered Haji Hassan to return to Tubau and reinvestigate.⁶⁰

A native officer did not just execute instructions but had to interpret them in light of the situation as he perceived it. This led to a difference in perspective between the man on the spot and the man in the fort. Some of the reports from his superiors presented the Haji as being casual, “Haji Hassan reports all quiet in Belaga, but the trade is dull in that place”.⁶¹ When he was investigating an allegation of an attack against a gutta working party of the Lirongs and the Penans in Long Urun, Belaga, the Haji reported that the complainant was probably “fabricating” the story.⁶² In one of his visits to Belaga where he reported “all’s well”, he had foiled a potentially violent attempt against the lives of the travelling Kenyah of Madang by the two of the Kayan chiefs Aban Jok and Tama Jau Lidam due to the dispute over the passage tax.⁶³ His nonchalant outlook towards the affairs reflected his thinking about the extent in which a government should intervene in local matter. When he perceived something could turn into trouble, the Haji took immediate measure. In the early 1886 he was sent to Belaga to investigate a rumour of a huge war party said to be numbered “between 4000 to 5000 men” under the leadership of Oyong Ibo heading towards Baram and Belaga. When he found that a few of the Kayan chiefs who had suspiciously making their way towards the direction of the war party, he sent a messenger calling for their immediate return.⁶⁴

Haji Hassan was less zealous when it came to collecting fines and taxes. Despite spending on average between 20 to 30 days in each visit to Belaga, the amount he collected was relatively small. In 1882, Haji Hassan collected \$75 in fine on the Seping of Belaga, with six more piculs outstanding.⁶⁵ Haji Hassan’s flexibility was seen to be not conducive to the government. Resident Sommerville reported that “a large number of Belaga revenue” for the year 1885 had not been paid up.⁶⁶ In 1886, the Resident of 3rd Division reported that Belaga had a considerable number of unpaid fines of over \$60.⁶⁷ Despite Belaga had not sufficiently contribute to the district revenue, Haji Hassan persisted in giving latitude to the people especially when he found the circumstances unfavourable in the upriver. The Resident reported that the Haji accepted a payment of door tax at a reduced rate from a Kenyah chief in Balui, Tama Padang Usang, “If the government accepts it will be put in considerable loss. As it is Haji Hasan brought down about \$500 less than what should be ...”.⁶⁸

Haji Hassan approach towards revenue collection speaks of his own incredulity about the government’s revenue. The district was dependent on charging the population through fines and taxes to compel them to work the jungle. In a revenue report for the year 1900, the highest amount of non-productive revenues came from the court fines at \$3127.09 and prison labour at \$1206.89.⁶⁹ The imposing of higher tax upon the Kenyah in Balui was a strategy devised to make them work rattan. Officer in Charge Fred Drage described rattan as the most important forest article in Belaga because elsewhere in Bintulu the jungle produces “becoming scarce”, “Should the rattan trade be satisfactorily opened up in the Belaga district as proposed no doubt a considerable impetus will be given to trade”.⁷⁰ Other upriver groups resisted the call to work the rattans as apparent in the case of the Kayan of Tubau, whom the Resident lectured at in derision, “I charged the above chiefs to throw off the lethargy

to which they have been wrapped for the last few years and seek jungle produce. For a long time, they have done next to nothing except plant their paddy”.⁷¹

There were rational reasons why the tribes did not see rattans work as worthwhile. The profit for its trade was not worth the risk. The price of rattans in Tatau plummeted because of the oversupply of rattan worked by the Iban. The Kenyah of Belaga whom Haji Hassan was in communication with agreed to work rattan “if the traders will buy at a fair price”.⁷² Apart from the low return, working rattans also carried security risk to the lives of the workers and trader. In regards to a proposed trade between the Kenyah of Bulungan and the Kayan of Tubau, the former expressed concern that certain demands for passage tax from the chiefs along the trading route would bring higher costs to them especially when they brought with them articles of higher values such as gutta, bezoar stone, rhinoceros’ horn, parangs, and mats.⁷³ The complexity involved in getting the tribes into mutual understanding proved to be a protracted matter which the Haji seemed content to let time took its course. Three months after the discussion, progress was yet to be reported.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The preceding discussion offers a glimpse into the everyday realities of early statemaking from the perspectives of native administrator and the tribal groups who were the subjects of the administrative measure. Since the Muslim elites were already incorporated into the state system since the reign of Brunei sultanate, the Brooke found it convenient to harness their services into the new state. The sharif and perabangan classes were appointed as governors in *kerajaan* rivers belonged to the Sultan of Brunei in Sadong, Lingga and Rejang. As the tide turned against the sultanate these governors became the subject of Brookes’ military expeditions. When their pacifications completed, the offspring of the sayyid governors held position in the Brookes government as native officers. The vanquished Sharif Shahabuddin of Sadong had his son, Sharif Putra, made into the government as native officer in Simanggang and his grandson, Sharif Hamid, was appointed in Baram. Sharif Bagus, the brother of Sharif Masahor of Rejang, served Sebuyau with dedication until his death in 1907.

These officers carried with them the reputation of their fathers and grandfathers into the new government. Muslim officers spoke the language of the upriver tribes and respectful of their customs. The tradition of trade between downriver and upriver communities, established during the sultanate era, formed the foundation for exchange, communication, and relationships. Haji Hassan exemplified the outgrowth of this tradition. He spoke the language of the tribes and was keen to represent their perspective to his superior. He was empathetic in his decisions, and had consequently, brought some limits in the state’s intervention into the life in the upriver.

The tribes found that under the new government they were not simply free to work and trade. Just as the Kayan in Tubau were told not to spent too much time planting paddy and for the Kenyah to collect rattan, they learnt from early on that their economic choice had been narrowed to the ones aligned with the state’s interest instead of their own. In addition, the Brookes’ government was determined to reduce the spaces for autonomy that the hinterland groups had in exercising a separate political existence. They turned into subjects to be governed and who were made to pay taxes and fines on a regular basis; even though the value might not appear excessive, they became the constant reminder of being ruled under a new system.

The native administrators were expected to implement government’s priority in the local situation. They were instructed to settle dispute, initiate contact, investigate cases, organise work and explain rules which was not part of the society’s *adat*. This was the point where the native officer played an unrecognised but influential role in mediating between the unfavourable orders from the fort and the reluctant participants. Haji Hassan had exercised a considerable degree of personal

judgement in carrying out the business of government in the upriver when estimating the amount of pressure to apply on taxes and which matters in the *hulu* to be reported to his superior. Importantly, he was exposed to the persuasion of the people of whom he owed hospitality and safe passage to the *hulu* and back. The hospitality culture in the upriver was remarkably generous and warmth for outsiders who came to trade or to relay communication from the downriver. Haji Hassan and successive officers after him were beneficiaries of the *orang hulu* goodwill. Therefore, the subjective component in the interaction conditioned the officer's perception. In his judgement, a right decision was one that required minimum supervision from the state. In a time when the concept of state itself was troubling and chaotic, putting a boundary between the government and the subjects was a practical statecraft unique for the native officer in Haji Hassan.

The findings offered a specific context in the general picture of statemaking and statecraft in colonial situation. The issue of governing arose again in Sarawak during the period of the formation of Malaysia but with new emphasis on modernisation and development.⁷⁵ On a final note, the problem of statecraft was not only a subject for colonial and postcolonial studies but should be a constant examination of the unresolved tension between the state apparatus and the population it continually tried to subdue.

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