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MATERIAL CULTURE IN SARAWAK: THE SAGO CONNEXION**Hang Tuah Merawin****THE SAGO CONNEXION IN HISTORY**

Sago was the staple food of the indigenous people of Sarawak long before the arrival of the rice culture. Banks, a former Curator of the Sarawak Museum, was often quoted as saying that the sago-eating tribes migrated to Sarawak before the rice eaters (Ong 1977: 113).

Legends abound as to the origin of sago. The Bidayus believed sago was brought to the Bidayuh country from a distant land called Mukah by a band of Bidayuh travellers returning from a sojourn there. Thus before a Bidayuh felled a sago tree he would sing incantations praising and thanking the benevolent spirits of yore for having interceded with these men to bring this life giving tree to the Bidayuh land.

The Melanaus, reputed for having mastered the art of domesticating sago, attributed the cultivation of this tree crop to their legendary giant-king Tugau who brought it from the land in the east called Likou Ambun (Morris 1991: 213). Wijandi (1980: 39) confirmed that most information on sago originated from Maluku (Moluccas), particularly Ambon (Amboyna) and processed sago known as 'sagu ambun' and 'sagu lempeng' are still widely traded and consumed in the island provinces of Maluku, Sulawesi and Nusantara.

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by

Hang Tuah Merawin

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Written record on sago has been found in Chinese writings dating as far back as 1200 AD when the eminent traveller Chau Ju Kua made reference to it on one of his voyages to insular Southeast Asia. Another traveller of great repute, Marco Polo, came across sago in Sumatra in 1298. The annals of Malacca recorded that sago was its first staple and had been manufactured there by the year 1416, a century before the Portuguese conquered the Sultanate (Tan 1980: 22).

In the chequered history of Sarawak sago, notably the sago trade, became a decisive factor between solvency and insolvency for the Brooke Government in the years after 1861 (Morris 1991: 232). These were the years of recuperation and reconsolidation after the prolonged struggle against local rebels and Malay rulers in neighbouring areas and the aftermath of the 1857 Chinese rebellion. During the period between 1864 and 1900 Sarawak depended heavily on the export of guttas and sago flour. This dependence was alleviated only after 1900 when pepper and rubber were cultivated on a commercial scale and oil was produced in Miri.

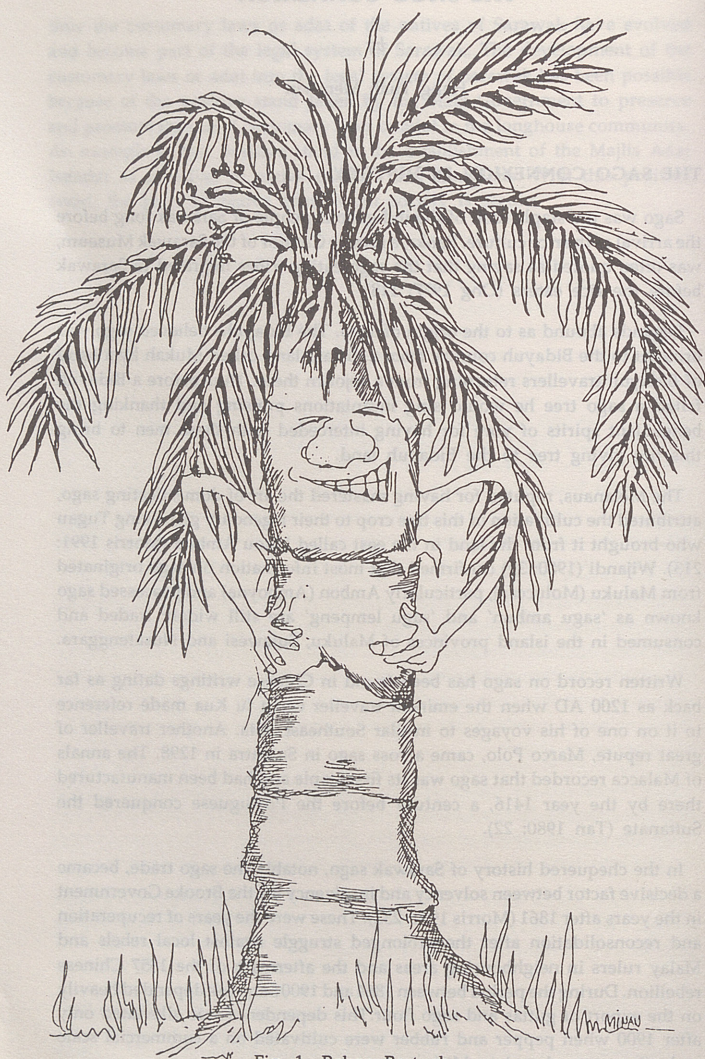


Fig. 1 Pohon Bertuah

Illustration: Courtesy of Paul Yiu (SEDC)