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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF COCONUTS IN SEMATAN, SOUTHWESTERN SARAWAK

Noboru Ishikawa

INTRODUCTION

Coconuts are extremely mobile and adaptive, found capable of germinating after having floated at sea for up to 110 days. A conservative estimate of the distance that might be traversed during that period, with a favorable current, is about 4,800 km (Child 1964:9). This durability is one factor responsible for the wide distribution of coconuts today on most of the islands and coasts of the tropics, and even in some places outside the tropical zone.

The wide distribution of the palms, however, should not be attributed only to natural proliferation: they were carried and planted deliberately wherever conditions were suitable. Many planters and peasants cultivated coconuts for commercial purposes. Their activities accelerated since the mid-19th century in response to the development of the industrial sector in the West, where there was a greater demand for copra (dried coconut) for the production of soap, cooking oil, margarine and so on.

Coconuts in Sematan, southwestern Sarawak are no exception. The coconut trees that line the coast from Sematan to Tanjong Dato (Cape Dato) did not grow spontaneously but are rather the product of interrelationships in space and time, i.e., the colonization by the Brooke government, the activities of nakodas (captains of trading vessels) in the Malay maritime world and the movement of numerous peasants across the Sarawak/Dutch Sambas (present West Kalimantan) border. A close look at the development of the Sematan coconut belt reveals a hidden social history of the Bornean maritime world¹.

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INTRODUCTION

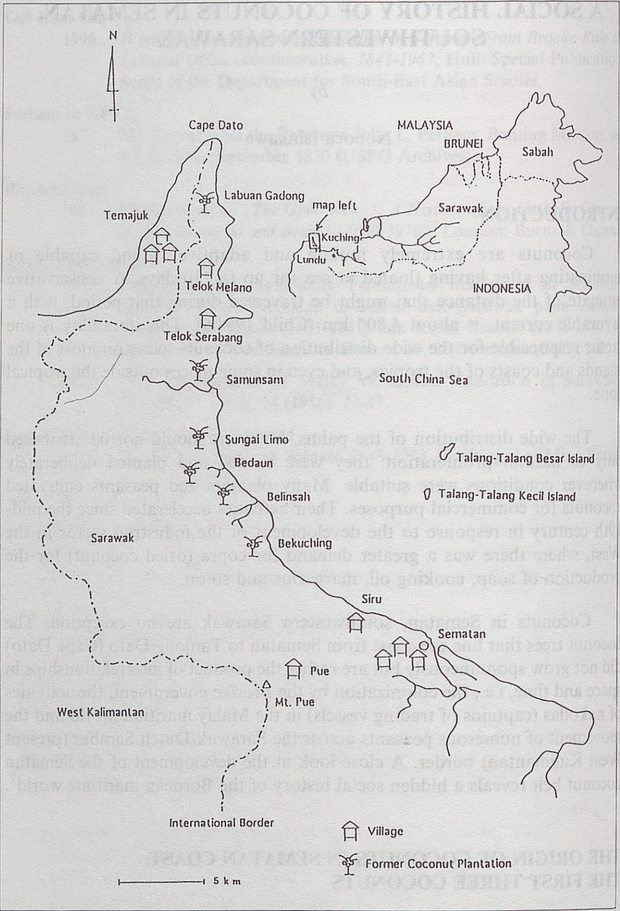
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THE ORIGIN OF COCONUTS IN SEMATAN COAST: THE FIRST THREE COCONUTS

The picturesque Sematan coast presents a fascinating scene (see. Map 1). Coconut trees cover virtually the whole coast stretching to Tanjong (Tg.) Dato, which separates Sarawak from Indonesian West Kalimantan. Some of these palm trees are quite old, only their leafless stems still standing, while others are too young to bear fruit.



Map 1: Cape Dato and Environs