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THE ORIGIN OF PATRON-CLIENTSHIP IN SARAWAK**Lucy Sebli-Seidelson****ABSTRACT**

Systems of patronage and personal rule have a long history in Borneo, and are deep-seated cultural element in politics and administration. However, in its preparation to withdraw from its colonies, the British introduced electoral politics, apart from modernising the Sarawak administrative services, which resulted in the formation of political parties by various ethnic groups in their determination to participate in the governing of their newly independent state. This led to a situation in which ostensibly democratic processes were grafted as to a long-established system of personal rule.

This article has two themes. Firstly, I will define patron-clientship and the underlying reasons for establishing these relationships in general, and in the context of Malaysian politics in particular. Secondly, I will trace the origin of patron-client relationships in Sarawak from the Brunei sultanate, followed by the Brookes' rule and colonial period.

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by
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Abstract

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DEFINING PATRON-CLIENTSHIP

Scott defines patron-clientship as follows:

The patron-client relationship – an exchange relationship between roles – may be defined as a special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to a patron (Scott, 1972: 92).

Hall provides a rather similar and more direct definition of patron-clientships as follows:

A patron-client relationship is a vertical dyadic alliance, i.e., an alliance between two persons of unequal status, power or resources each of

whom finds it useful to have as an ally someone superior or inferior to himself (1977: 510).

The superior member of such an alliance is the patron, while the inferior member is the client. However, a patron is only relevant in relation to a less powerful 'client' whom he can help or protect (*ibid.*: 510). The patron grants favours, security and support in return for loyalty, political allegiance and other services such as labour, from his dependent clients (*ibid.*: 124). In general, the relationship between the individual patron and his client is biased against the latter who is, economically and politically, far weaker. Scott further described the patron as one who "operates with resources he himself owns or directly controls and [...] of superior rank to his client" (1977: 126-127).

Lande has also drawn attention to an additional characteristic, namely that dyadic relationships pertain "to an individual rather than a broader category of persons...and they turn political cleavage and antagonism into a bridge uniting big people and little people" (Lande, 1964: 11). This is very evident in Sarawak politics in which dyadic relationships usually involve rich politicians or businessmen with 'poor politicians'¹ (especially in the Iban case), bureaucrats and so forth and they band together on the basis of shared instrumental goals. However, Scott noted that the "patron-client relationship is a basic element more distinguishable in any traditional society with a more or less pronounced social stratification." He also argued that "the relationships of patronage [have] acted to forestall class conflicts, and [have] diminished the importance of classes In fact, the institution of patronage worked to tie persons of different class positions together in particular relationships" (in Turner, 1977: 173-174). They also undermine the formal structure of authority.

Dyadic alliances have other properties. First, the obligations of the two allies are to each other, not to any higher body of which one or both are members. Second, these obligations depend on mutual need. The patron and clients are expected to have a genuine concern for each other's welfare and to do what can be done to promote each other's welfare without too precise a reckoning of the cost involved. In

particular, each is expected to help the other in extreme emergencies especially when aid is most needed. But what distinguishes a dyadic alliance from a contractual relationship is the expectation of altruism and the diffuse obligations which are associated with it (Lande, 1977: xv; Eisenstadt and Lemarchand, 1981: 271).

Secondly, dyadic alliance involves the exchange of favours, which are valuable in themselves and which serve as a means of maintaining the relationship, binding together two allies who can count on each other's help in time of need. It allows each ally to demonstrate his interest in the alliance and his willingness to make sacrifices for the relationship.

The third element of a dyadic alliance is the pursuit of particular private goals, because those engaged in dyadic trading are often individuals who in some respects are un-alike. Each has sought the other because they both need something that they lack. An example of this is an alliance between a businessman and a politician, one of whom supplies the other with money while receiving the benefits of political influence in return.

Finally, a dyadic alliance has no name, no agreed-upon procedure for making collective decisions and selecting leaders, and no common commitment to obey such leaders and act in unison in other specified ways.

Since a dyadic alliance involves the direct personal, face-to-face attachment of two individuals to each other for the purpose of exchanging favours and providing mutual assurance of aid, it is easy to create and it is flexible (Scott, 1977: 125-126 and Powell, 1981: 148). Its formation can be proposed by either of its two prospective members through the offer or request of a favour with the implied understanding that the favour will be returned, that further exchanges will ensue, and that in general each can look to the other for help in time of need. The alliance then becomes a reality and gains strength as the exchanges continue. However, when the exchanges cease and there is no intention of renewing them, or when an appeal for help in time of need is ignored, the alliance comes to an end (Lande, 1977: xvi). The relationship persists if "the two partners have something to