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The Story Of Nakoda Hitam: Her Life and Ventures at Maritime Crossroads at the Turn of the 20th Century

Mayumi Ishikawa

ABSTRACT

Story about sea-faring Malays and their mercantile activities abound in the maritime histories of Southeast Asia. Though we tend to assume that most such traders were men, the following story is about a woman nakoda (master of sailing vessel and merchant-cum-trader) who settled in the coastal area of southwestern Sarawak around the turn of the 20th century. Originally from the Natunas, she was reputed to be a skilled sailor who skimmed across the South China Sea to places as distant as Singapore and Java. She belonged to the last generation of nakoda whose lifetimes coincided with the period of final, irreparable demise of the traditional merchant class. Like many of her contemporaries, she inevitably shifted her focus to agriculture and eventually became a pioneer coconut estate developer in Sarawak.

Based on historical as well as oral resources,¹ I wish to record here the fascinating story of Nakoda Hitam's life against the backdrop of changing socio-economic conditions of Sarawak. Her story exemplifies a rare convergence between "history from above" and "history from below". While people's memories center on her persona, family and work, the development of her coconut estates was surveyed and documented in colonial archives by Brooke government officials as part of the record of plantations in the region. The official recorded history and oral tradition of local residents thus complement each other and permit the reconstruction of her lifeworld through which we catch a glimpse of the dynamics of Sarawak Malay society.



THE STORY OF NAKODA HITAM: Her Life and Ventures at Maritime Crossroads at the Turn of the 20th Century

by

Mayumi Ishikawa

INTRODUCTION

Stories about sea-faring Malays and their mercantile activities abound in the maritime history of Southeast Asia. Though we tend to assume that most such traders were men, the following story is about a woman *nakoda* (master of sailing vessel and merchant-cum-trader) who settled in the coastal area of southwestern Sarawak around the turn of the 20th century. Originally from the Natunas, she was reputed to be a skilled sailor who skimmed across the South China Sea to places as distant as Singapore and Java. She belonged to the last generation of *nakoda* whose lifetimes coincided with the period of final, irreparable demise of the traditional merchant class. Like many of her contemporaries, she inevitably shifted her focus to agriculture and eventually became a pioneer coconut estate developer in Sarawak.

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I first learned about the *nakoda* from people in the village of Telok Melano, a Sarawak Malay village where I stayed with my husband for anthropological research from October 1993 to November 1994. We often visited elders in the vicinity and repeatedly heard about one prominent *nakoda* who opened a coconut/banana estate in the coastal area near Cape Datu. We eventually learned that the *nakoda* was a woman not a man, as we had carelessly assumed. She was something of a mythical character, and people talked about her with awe and pride.

With the story of Nakoda Hitam, local people also told us about the regional history of migration, the establishment of communities and pioneer settlers, and the web of relationships that stretched beyond the coastal area of southwestern Sarawak to West Kalimantan, the Natunas, Riau, Brunei, and all the way north to Mindanao. In a place considered far and peripheral in today's context, people communicated to us a strong historical and geographical sense of connectedness. I will elaborate and put such sentiments in perspective through an analysis of Nakoda Hitam's life.

NAKODA HITAM AND LABUAN GADONG BAY NEAR CAPE DATU

The coastal area adjacent to Tanjung Dato (Cape Datu), located at the western tip of the watershed that divides the Malaysian and Indonesian territories on the Island of Borneo, has recently been designated as Tanjung Dato National Park, Sarawak's newest and smallest national park, according to the Sarawak Tourism Board. The park headquarters are located at Telok Labuan Gadong (Labuan Gadong Bay), a small coastal strip of land on white sandy beach. The area is only accessible by boat and surrounded by pristine rainforest.² The nearest settlements, apart from the Indonesian community of Temajuk across the international border, are the Sarawak Malay villages of Telok Melano and Telok Serabang. Residents call the place "*hujung Malaysia*," situated at the edge of Malaysia (Map 1).



Map 1: Sarawak (Malaysia) and West Kalimantan (Indonesia).

Few visitors to the park know that there once was a successful coconut plantation in Labuan Gadong owned by a woman called Nakoda Hitam. By 1916, she owned the largest coconut garden in the coastal area between Sematan and Cape Datu with 6,000 coconut and hundreds of banana trees (*Sarawak Gazette*, May 16, 1916: 100). She is said to have employed Natuna islanders, Malays, Chinese, and Dayaks as workers. Today some tall, old, coconut trees and leafless tree trunks, relics of the days of Nakoda Hitam, still stand near the seafront in Labuan Gadong. Elders of Telok Melano and Telok Serabang villages also say they remember seeing remains of ironwood fence (*paga belian*) set up by her workers to protect young trees from wild pigs.

Nakoda Hitam was from Pulau Gamberan, the Natuna Islands, from which she brought coconut fruits with her. Situated off Cape Datu to the northwest near the maritime boundary disputed among Indonesia, China and Vietnam, the Natunas today belong to Indonesia. Many locals believe that coconut was unknown in this part of Borneo until she cleared the land to open her plantation.³