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THE HERITAGE OF THE SEGU BUNGALOW / BANGLO SEGU IN SARAWAK HISTORY

J.H. Walker

INTRODUCTION

The Segu Bungalow or Banglo Segu is a belian, two-roomed Bungalow, which sits at the top of a very steep driveway overlooking Kuching (Fig.1). Both of its rooms open onto an expansive verandah, the ceilings and walls of which are adorned with extraordinary Orang Ulu murals. It presently serves as a Museum Resthouse and as the headquarters of the Friends of the Sarawak Museum, whose coordinator also lives there. This paper explores the origins and history of the building, as well as aspects of the social and intellectual lives of some of the people who have been associated with it.

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The Segu Bungalow or *Banglo* Segu is a belian, two-roomed Bungalow, which sits at the top of a very steep driveway on a hill overlooking Park Lane in Kuching (Fig. 1).¹ Both of its rooms open onto an expansive verandah, the ceilings and walls of which are adorned with extraordinary Orang Ulu murals. It presently serves as a Museum Resthouse and as the headquarters of the Friends of the Sarawak Museum, whose coordinator also lives there. This paper explores the origins and history of the building, as well as aspects of the social and intellectual lives of some of the people who have been associated with it.

First, an explanation about nomenclature. Prior the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963, the building was referred to as the Segu Bungalow. Increasingly after Federation, however, it has been called, in Malay, *Banglo* Segu. In this paper, I shall refer to it as the Segu Bungalow when discussing events prior



Fig.1: *Banglo* Segu sits at the top of a very steep driveway. By kind permission of Mike Boon.

to Federation, in other cases calling it *Banglo* Segu, except when quoting directly. Similarly, the street on which the Bungalow is now located was originally called Pig Lane. Its name was changed, following Federation, to the less confronting (to Moslem sensibilities), Park Lane.

An earlier draft of this paper began by asserting, confidently, that the Segu Bungalow was built at Kampong Segu (which is now known as Kampong Benuk) by the third Brooke Rajah, Vyner, as a holiday cottage, and as a place to which he could take his European mistresses. This information is widely understood by many people in Kuching. Writing in the *New Straits Times* in 1990, James Ritchie reported that the Bungalow had been built for the third Rajah in 1930 by William Tan, who later became the Speaker of the Sarawak State Assembly. Tan, who was then 85, told Ritchie that he had built the Bungalow facing up the Sungei Segu (now known as Sungei Giam). According to Tan, only six years later, in 1936, the Rajah had the Bungalow reassembled on its present site. Tan also told Ritchie that when the Bungalow was at Kampong Segu it “used to be a holiday Bungalow for the Rajah, who used to bring a girlfriend to the Bungalow which at the time was deep in the jungle”.²

Judith Heimann had a similar understanding. Referring in her biography of Tom Harrisson to the Bungalow’s “glamorous, scandalous history”, Heimann reported that it had been “built as a place of assignation for the last Brooke Rajah, who had been a great womanizer”.³

Writing more recently in the *Borneo Post*, Patricia Hului also claimed that

Originally built at Kampung Segu, which is also known as Kampung Benuk about 30km at Puncak Borneo, the Bungalow was erected by the third white Rajah, Vyner Brooke.

Vyner had intended Segu Bungalow to be his summer house in 1924 but he hardly had time to visit it.

He then had it dismantled and brought piece by piece to be rebuilt at its current location on the hill top at Park Lane in 1937.⁴

There are a number of discrepancies in the accounts cited above. Ritchie quoted William Tan, who claimed to have built the Bungalow in 1930, and that it was moved to Pig Lane in 1936. Hului, however, (who did not identify her sources) had it built in 1924 and relocated in 1937.

Notwithstanding these discrepancies, such a history seemed likely, conforming to past Brooke practices in Sarawak in several important ways. First, Vyner Brooke’s

predecessors had both indulged themselves with the construction of holiday cottages. The first Rajah, James, had built a holiday cottage on Mt Peninjau, which, in addition to being cooler than Kuching, afforded him a magnificent view of the plain below.⁵ The second Rajah, Charles, built his cottage on Mt Matang. Although I have not had the opportunity of visiting the site on Mt Peninjau, in 2012 I saw the site of the second Rajah's Bungalow at Matang. The resources, which must have been used in creating the expansive garden terraces, which are still visible, belie the oft-repeated view that Rajah Charles lived an abstemious and ascetic existence.

Secondly, that the bungalow was relocated also had precedents in Sarawak's architectural history. The Brookes were innovative transporters of buildings from one site to another. In 1864, Charles Brooke had moved the fort at Skrang to its present location at Simanggang (Sri Aman), while in 1865 he moved the fort at Kalakka down to the river's mouth.⁶ The Brookes' preparedness to relocate forts stood in strong contrast to European colonial practice elsewhere in southeast Asia, in which the permanence of buildings emphasised the intended permanence of colonial power. As John Ting noted, for example, of Fort Cornwallis in Penang, "it would have been a potent visible symbol of permanence and power to indigenous groups in the settlement harbour".⁷

Ting traced the origins of the Brookes' preparedness to relocate buildings to indigenous (Iban) practices:

When entire Iban longhouse communities migrated due to over-farming, they often took the primary structural elements of the previous longhouse to the new location (if in reusable condition). These elements were considered as *pesaka* (inheritable heirlooms) like ceramic jars, headhunting trophies and other indicators of Iban prestige and achievement. The method of lashed connections used in Iban longhouses allowed the building to be dismantled without damaging the main structural members. The longhouse's secondary structure, cladding and roofing was discarded at the original site.⁸

In architectural terms, however, the Segu Bungalow is an unusual building for the third Rajah to have built. Rajah Vyner, in contrast to his predecessor, was a modernist, readily embracing the latest styles and technologies. As Ting observed of the memorial which Vyner erected in 1924 in front of the Court House to commemorate his father's reign,

The fashionably current art deco architecture of the monument contrasted with the tropical colonial architecture of the courthouse, perhaps indicating the differences in the approaches of the second and third rajahs.⁹

In contrast to *all* of the third Rajah's other buildings, the Segu Bungalow conforms closely to the earlier architectural traditions which emerged during the reign of the first Rajah and which were, mostly, maintained by the second Rajah until the closing years of his rule.¹⁰ These traditions, exemplified by the design of the *Astana*, drew heavily on Malay architectural practice.¹¹ Malay influences in the design of the Segu Bungalow are powerfully evident. It is raised on piles, conforming to typical Austronesian practice,¹² it has a high-pitched roof of *belian* shingles and it has timber shutters rather than windows (Fig. 2). The wide verandah with its expansive bay, however, reflects European influences, which the first Rajah introduced to Sarawak when he built his second house in 1843,¹³ influences which were quickly incorporated into elite Malay domestic architectural practice.

Heimann was correct in describing Rajah Vyner as a "great womanizer".¹⁴ His perennially indiscrete wife, Ranee Sylvia, considered what she described as his "outside loves" to be "his little foolishness, and, at the same time, a form of escape from his diffidence and shyness".¹⁵ Vyner's irregularities also had, however, precedents in Sarawak, with all three Brooke Rajahs enjoying idiosyncratic private lives. The first Rajah's emotions had been focused on a series of youths and young men, the most important of whom were Rajah Mudah Hassim's younger brother, Pengiran Budrudeen, and Charles Grant, who, at the age of 16, was persuaded by



Fig. 2: *Banglo Segu's* architecture conforms to typical Austronesian practice. By kind permission of Mike Boon.

the first Rajah to abandon his career in the Royal Navy in order to live with him.¹⁶ Prior to his marriage to Rane Margaret, Rajah Charles, in contrast, had lived with, and was probably married to, a Skrang Malay noblewoman, Dayang Mastiah, with whom he had a son, Esca.¹⁷ Charles enjoyed, additionally, relationships with a number of Iban *gundiks*, with at least one of whom he also had a son.¹⁸

Vyner seems, in contrast, to have taken particular delight in seducing the wives of his European officials. Sylvia sought to excuse Vyner's excesses by confessing that she was "to all intents and purposes, a frigid woman". She claimed to have known all of Vyner's mistresses, and that, throughout her marriage, she only ever asked him to discard three, who she catalogued as "a gold-digger, ... a thundering bore, and ... a nymphomaniac".¹⁹ Of the others she recalled:

They came in all shapes and sizes. There was one, I remember, who had a mania for turning somersaults, presumably in order to show off her very beautiful legs! There was an opera singer he took to Ascot Races, where she fainted over the rails; and there was one who liked being made love to over the back of a chair. I thought this somewhat unusual, but there is no accounting for tastes.

There was one in Sarawak whom Vyner used to meet in the churchyard. This seemed to me a little irreverent; but he would say, "Where else can I go, Mip, where I am not followed and spied upon and some damned sentry doesn't pop up from behind a hedge presenting arms?" There was another who lived in a Bungalow close to the Astana. My husband's footsteps wore a little path to the Bungalow, which, as far as I know, is still there.

There was yet another whom he met on board a ship. She had the most lovely, madonna-like face, though she was far from being an angel ...

The one I liked best of all was a young woman with a cheerful roguish face, who came round to our country house in England, selling flags for some wartime charity, accompanied by her little seven-year-old boy. Vyner was not very fond of children, and the little boy was a constant source of irritation to him. However, I told him, even the Rajah of Sarawak could not have everything his own way.

And then, more disturbingly, Sylvia continued,

As he grew older, so his girls became younger. He did not seem to mind their immaturity and baby talk; he said he liked guiding their innocent footsteps into the path of righteousness! Having read some of their letters to him, it seemed to me that in many cases he arrived on the scene too late for that.²⁰

Sylvia's amoral, cynical tone reflects not just her own, or her husband's, shortcomings, they reflect also the louche lifestyle followed by many of the