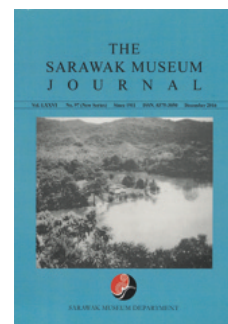




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FORT VYNER AND HUGH BROOKE LOW: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ADMINISTRATIVE CENTRE AND BAZAAR AT THE CONFLUENCE OF THE BELAGA AND BALUI RIVERS

Jayl Langub

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about a fort and a man. Fort Vyner was one of many forts built during the Brooke rule. It was located at the confluence of Belaga and Balui rivers. Hugh Brooke Low, Resident of Third Division, was the man who assembled a large number of people to build Fort Vyner. This paper looks at the historical events, during that period of Brooke rule, in the Rejang basin (Map , 1) and neighbouring areas. These events could have given rise for the need "to build a fort at this specific time, and at the geographically strategic location on the upper Rejang River populated by diverse ethnic minorities. As territory under the Brooke rule expanded, forts became useful for a number of reasons: European officers could be safely posted to outlying districts for longer periods of time, and the movement of people up and down major rivers could be monitored and controlled to maintain peace and order (Pringle 2010: 84). Once a fort was built, a small trading centre normally grew up there where traders could carry out their livelihood under the safety of the fort.

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Historical events

In 1845, there was a visit of emissaries from the Melanau population in the coastal area of the Rejang River to Kuching to complain to Rajah James Brooke of Iban raiding Melanau settlements. This meeting was an important historical landmark that had implications on future events in the Rejang River basin (Pringle 2010: 78-79). These Melanau settlements were, at that point of time, outside the boundary of the newly created state of Sarawak under Rajah James Brooke. However, the Iban raiders were from within Sarawak's territory coming via the Kanowit River to the coastal area of the Rejang River. Rajah James Brooke was in fact interested in protecting the Melanau sago-producing settlements of Matu, Paloh, Oya, and Mukah, as there was a plan to build a sago processing plant in Kuching.¹ However, these settlements were outside of his territory. In 1846 the Sultan of Brunei ceded the area between

Sadong and Oya to the Brooke government, enabling it to exercise protection. An extension of that protection was the establishment of Fort Emma at the confluence of the Rejang and Kanowit Rivers to control the movement of people into the Rejang River basin. The need to build forts as a way to keep peace and order in outlying districts became evident after the battle of Beting Marau in 1849 when defeated enemies moved in different directions to look for new alliances to advance their cause.

Not long after the extension of Sarawak's territory to Oya, a miniature civil war broke out in Mukah, the wealthiest of the Melanau districts. The war carried on from 1854 to 1859 involving two powerful Melanau families. It began when the Brunei governor, Pengiran Esrat, insulted the local Melanau aristocrat, Pengiran Matusin, who then murdered Esrat in retaliation; the Brookes sided with Matusin (Pringle 2010: 110-111). Upon the death of Esrat, his son Pengiran Nipa succeeded him, but Brooke placed Matusin in a position of power in Mukah. Matusin's appointment did not go well with a section of the Melanau community aligned with Nipa, and at stake in the area was the rich production of the sago starch. The principal anti-Brooke personality in the 1854-1859 crisis in Mukah was not Pengiran Nipa, but his brother-in-law, Sharif Masahor, the Brunei governor of Sarikei.

Astute, sophisticated, ambitious, Masahor had considerable influence among the Iban who had migrated into the Rejang basin. Gathering a force, which included Iban in the Rejang area to attack Mukah, he reinstated his brother-in-law to power and expelled Pengiran Matusin from Mukah. Masahor's Iban killed a number of Matusin's people. In retaliation, the Tuan Muda, Charles Brooke backed by his Iban followers from the lower Skrang, sailed to Mukah, fined Masahor and disposed him from his position as governor of Sarikei. However, he was later reinstated to the position after the Hakka uprising of 1857.

During the period that the Brooke government intervened in the Mukah crisis of 1854-1859, serious problems were occurring elsewhere. For instance, the Hakka uprising of 1857, speedily contained largely with Charles Brooke's force of Iban from Skrang and Balau and the Iban rebel, Rentap, still at large and posing a problem to the government. But a more serious trouble began on June 26, 1859 with the murder of Fox and Steele at Kanowit (Pringle 2010: 113-115).

Henry Steele, the first European officer posted to Kanowit in 1851, and Charles Fox who took charge of nearby Sarikei in 1856, "originally came to

Borneo to work as catechists and school teachers for the Anglican Mission in Kuching, but decided government service was more appealing" (Pringle 2010: 89). The principal murderers were two local Melanau [Kanowit] chiefs, Sawing and Sakalai. Sharif Masahor was implicated in the murder.² Sawing and Sakalai along with their Melanau followers fortified themselves at Nanga Kabah a small tributary of the Rejang not far upstream from Kanowit.

The killing of Fox and Steele came as a terrible shock to the small European community in Kuching, especially as they were just recovering from the effect of the Hakka uprising of 1857. At this time Charles Brooke was responsible for the government as his uncle and older brother were in England. He reacted with characteristic vigour, and a month later in July 1859 he attacked the fortification with the help of local Iban, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. However, Sawing and Sakalai escaped, and took refuge among the Kejaman in the upper Rejang.

The Brookes did not immediately pursue Sawing and Sakalai in their flight to the upper Rejang. There were other more pressing problems elsewhere to deal with. For instance, the influential Iban rebel Rentap, hostile to the Brooke government still posed a threat; and Pengiran Nipa refused any attempt from Sarawak to reopen sago trade with Mukah. In October 1861, the Rajah finally defeated Rentap at Bukit Sadok (Pringle 2010: 129), and in August of that year, James Brooke obtained the cession of Mukah and other sago districts, as well as the coastal area northward as far as Tanjung Kidurong in Bintulu to Sarawak (*Ibid.* 2010: 124-125). A series of negotiations were held at a Melanau longhouse in Mukah in which Sharif Masahor agreed to leave Mukah for exile in Singapore. James Brooke established full control of Mukah, and a number of unfriendly *pengiran* were sent back to Brunei.

"The Great Kayan Expedition of 1863"

Now that Rentap had been subdued and the Melanau sago districts were under the full control of the Sarawak government, the Tuan Muda Charles Brooke had time to think about pursuing the principal murderers of Fox and Steele in the upper Rejang. Before making his decision he consulted with six trusted Skrang Iban chiefs on the advisability of an expedition to the upper Rejang to pursue the murderers. All advised the Tuan Muda to go ahead with the expedition because the current Iban fighters were still in their prime with their fighting spirits very much alive from previous expeditions (Brooke 1990: 231). Some people were apprehensive about the success of the expedition, not

so much about the fighting itself but the long arduous journey into the interior, sickness or even worse an outbreak of an epidemic. Among the sceptics was Charles Brooke's most trusted Native Officer, Abang Aing, who despite his scepticism agreed to join the expedition (*Ibid.* 1990: 232).

Charles Brooke and his party left his station in Skrang for the upper Rejang on May 20, 1863. When they assembled in Kapit, the combined number of the government force was fifteen thousand men in five hundred large boats (Pringle 2010: 131). The expedition penetrated deep into the interior passing through the Pelagus and Bakun rapids. The expedition was a disappointment: the Iban fighters did not actually come face to face with the intended enemy, but they killed many people including women and children. The main victims were the Kajang people comprising Sekapan, Kejaman, Lahanan, and Punan Bah. Charles Brooke was appalled to see unnecessary bloodshed, and remarked:

There had been more dreadful sights in this campaign than I had bargained for. Many women and children had been killed by our people, who state, with some degree of truth, that they had mistaken them in their excitement for men, as they wore head-dresses similar to the dress of men in their own country.³

He resolved that in any such future occasion, he would mete a heavy fine on people who committed such atrocities.

The expedition left Belaga June 16, 1863 without the murderers as they had fled further up river. As there was no conclusive result of the expedition, Charles Brooke released a woman captive giving her two tokens to take to the Kayan chief Oyong Hang:

I gave her a 12-pounder shot and a Sarawak flag, which were to be presented to Yonghang [Oyong Hang] for him to take a choice. The latter was an emblem of peace, which would provide him with a safe conduct to Kanowit, in order to open peaceful relation. The shot was an emblem of war, which we should conclude he had accepted, if he did not shortly make his appearance with the flag.⁴

About a month after the expedition a party of about seventy Kayan came down to Kanowit bearing the Sarawak flag, which was left with the female captive set free at the river bank (Brooke 1990: 303-304). They came to express friendship and the desire for peace. They also brought with them the heads of two of the murderers, Sakalai and Talip, the later being the third man implicated in the Kanowit murder, as a sign of their sincerity for peace.