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HISTORICAL WRITINGS ON THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF SARAWAK SINCE 1945: A BRIEF REVIEW AND SOME PROPOSALS

Ooi Keat Gin

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly writings of the indigenous peoples that inhabited the north-western part of Borneo of what is presently the East Malaysian state Sarawak are fairly extensive. Ethnographic works and anthropological studies dominate the scholarly literature of the various ethnic groups. Writings of the historical development of the various ethnic groups are unevenly distributed; some of the minority communities are wholly neglected in the literature. This paper will focus on the historiography of the various indigenous communities in Sarawak for the period from 1945. A general overview of historical works of the various indigenous groups will be presented in an attempt to identify the lacunae in the literature and to suggest possible avenues of future research.

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The historical writings of indigenous peoples of Sarawak far surpassed that of its neighbour, Sabah. The interest in scholarly studies (including history) of the various native inhabitants of Sarawak owed to the initiative of Rajah Charles Brooke (r. 1868-1917) who established the Sarawak Museum in the 1870s and the publication of the *Sarawak Museum Journal (SMJ)* from 1911. Prior to the *SMJ*, Charles had launched the semi-official *Sarawak Gazette (SG)* with its first issue in 1870. It was Charles's wish that all important happenings and developments throughout Sarawak should be reported and recorded which was served by the *SG* where within its pages are a wide variety of non-official subject matter including articles of Borneo history and ethnography. A mine of information in the *SG* are

the monthly and yearly reports of administrative officers who, in line with Charles's wishes, put to paper all the going-on in his district/residency.¹ The scholarly-oriented *SMJ* offers a platform for the dissemination of academic discourse on 'all things of Sarawak'. A line of diligent Curators/Editors of the Museum and the *SMJ* ensured sustained attention to the scholarly affairs of Sarawak.² Historians numbered among natural scientists, horticulturists, zoologists, archaeologists, paleontologists, linguists, and other scholars that contribute learned articles to the *SMJ*. Post-War editors of the *SMJ*, namely the all-rounder and highly prolific Tom Harrisson (1949-66), and his successor, the Iban scholar and first non-European Curator of the Sarawak Museum, Benedict Sandin (1968-71, 1973) embarked on a quest of energetic scholarship of research and publication of 'all things Sarawak'.³ Like other fields of study, Sarawak historiography and particularly the writings on indigenous communities received attention from scholars including Harrisson and Sandin themselves. Harrisson enthusiastically studied archaeological artefacts (from Santubong to Niah), commented practically on every indigenous community therein in Sarawak (on their history, culture, religion, etc.), and also covered other scholarly pursuits (archaeology, flora and fauna, geography, etc.). Sandin, on the other hand, concentrated in collecting the oral tradition of the various indigenous communities, primarily focusing on the Ibans.

GENERAL WORKS

Historical works on Sarawak's indigenous groups before the 18th century are non-existent. As Pringle (1970) pointed out, the 'Iban country is nowhere mentioned in the slight amount of information available concerning the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century [Brunei] Sultanate,' and that tribute payments [to Brunei] affected only the primarily Malay settlements nearest the coast'. Understandably in his study of pre-Western Brunei, Sarawak and Sabah, Ongkili (1972a) only focus on the Brunei