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## 'Annoying Requests': 'The Missionary Johann Michael Carl Hupe's Collecting in Borneo (1842-1847)

**Jutta Keling M.A.**

FernUniversität in Hagen, Universitätsstraße 47, 58097 Hagen.

[jutta.keling@studium.fernuni-hagen.de](mailto:jutta.keling@studium.fernuni-hagen.de)

### ABSTRACT

Sarawak's first missionary was Johann Michael Carl Hupe (1818–1861), from the German town of Halle. After working in southern Borneo for several months, Hupe eventually travelled overland from the west to the north coast of Borneo, where he tried to establish a mission school in Kuching. It is hardly known that he was collecting cultural artefacts and natural science specimens of various types in the Pulopetak region (at present, the region about fifteen kilometres northeast of Kuala Kapuas, Kalimantan Tengah) and in Sarawak this early. Today, only a signboard at the old Courthouse in Kuching memorializes him and the site of his mission house. This paper attempts to highlight Hupe's role as a source for European knowledge and images about Borneo drawing on archival material from the Francke Foundations in Halle. The focal point of the paper will be on the objects Hupe collected and dispatched to Halle. Many of them can still be found in the Kunst-und Naturalienkammer or Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities, the museum collection of the Francke Foundations. Others were circulated and passed on in different ways within existing networks. By examining the collecting project of Hupe, it will be demonstrated that, even in the first half of the nineteenth century, interest in Borneo and knowledge of this remote island in European circles was substantial, which connected the island to scientific and cultural circuits, and even into Protestant homes, with the traffic of its objects.

**Keywords:** Hupe, Francke, missionaries, collecting, Sarawak

*I presented an early version of this paper in the panel 'Borneo and Beyond' at the 2019 EUROSEAS Conference in Berlin.*

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# **‘ANNOYING REQUESTS’: THE MISSIONARY JOHANN MICHAEL CARL HUPE’S COLLECTING IN BORNEO (1842–1847)<sup>1</sup>**

**Jutta Keling M.A.**

FernUniversität in Hagen, Universitätsstraße 47, 58097 Hagen.  
jutta.keling@studium.fernuni-hagen.de

## **ABSTRACT**

Sarawak’s first missionary was Johann Michael Carl Hupe (1818–1861), from the German town of Halle. After working in southern Borneo for several months, Hupe eventually travelled overland from the west to the north coast of Borneo, where he tried to establish a mission school in Kuching. It is hardly known that he was collecting cultural artefacts and natural science specimens of various types in the Pulopetak region (at present, the region about fifteen kilometres northeast of Kuala Kapuas, Kalimantan Tengah) and in Sarawak this early. Today, only a signboard at the old Courthouse in Kuching memorializes him and the site of his mission house. This paper attempts to highlight Hupe’s role as a source for European knowledge and images about Borneo drawing on archival material from the Francke Foundations in Halle. The focal point of the paper will be on the objects Hupe collected and dispatched to Halle. Many of them can still be found in the Kunst- und Naturalienkammer or Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities, the museum collection of the Francke Foundations. Others were circulated and passed on in different ways within existing networks. By examining the collecting project of Hupe, it will be demonstrated that, even in the first half of the nineteenth century, interest in Borneo and knowledge of this remote island in European circles was substantial, which connected the island to scientific and cultural circuits, and even into Protestant homes, with the traffic of its objects.

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<sup>1</sup> I presented an early version of this paper in the panel ‘Borneo and Beyond’ at the 2019 EUROSEAS Conference in Berlin.

## INTRODUCTION

Around 1878, the first plans were announced to build a museum in Kuching, Sarawak. At that time Sarawak was governed by the dynasty of the English Brooke family, popularly known as the 'White Rajahs' of Borneo. The Sarawak Gazette published appeals addressed to the local population and Brooke's officers to contribute and collect for the foundation of the oldest museum in Borneo (Hornaday 1878; Chon n.d.: 42). The Sarawak Museum building opened in 1891, and it is now integrated into the New Sarawak Museum Campus, dedicated to reflecting Borneo's long history and diverse heritage.

The plans to build a museum in Sarawak were certainly part of the broad development of ethnographic museums and collections in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> These brought knowledge about the faraway and previously neglected parts of the world to the European public.

This study will show, however, that interest in Borneo and knowledge about this then remote island in European circles was produced even in the first half of the nineteenth century. Of course, there were a few individual researchers, such as Dr. Carl Anton Ludwig Maria Schwaner collecting in Borneo at that time (Maesel, 2009), but it is hardly known that Protestant missionaries from the German towns of Halle and Barmen were collecting and gathering cultural artefacts and natural science specimens of various types on Borneo at this early period. They had been working from 1836 onwards in Banjarmasin and the Pulo Petak region and were encouraged to collect, particularly for their mission societies in Germany.

The early missionaries on the island were no exception to numerous other male and female missionaries who provided Europe with knowledge about native peoples and distant areas (Jacobs and Wingfield, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Almost all missionary societies assembled collections with ritual objects, curiosities, artefacts from indigenous societies or natural history specimens. Also, European museums of natural history and ethnology have been keen on acquiring objects from missionaries from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Corbey and Wehner, 2015). Over the past fifteen or twenty years, a vast literature has been published dealing with missionary contributions to the natural sciences and European ethnology during the nineteenth and the early twentieth century (Wendt, 2001; Habermas and Przyrembel, 2013; Harries, 2017). However, Borneo has not been studied from this perspective thus far.

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<sup>2</sup> Two recent papers discuss several other influences that led to the Second Rajah's decision to have a museum. Both, Gerrell M. Drawhorn and Jennifer R. Morris, argue that Alfred R. Wallace's role in the establishment of the Sarawak Museum has been clearly overvalued in history (Drawhorn, 2018; Morris, 2019). • <sup>3</sup> One well known example for such collections is The Museum of the London Missionary Society (Seton, 2012; Wingfield, 2017). See also the collection of Rhenish Missionaries at the Museum auf der Hardt in Wuppertal (Vereinte Evangelische Mission, 2022).

One of the missionaries in Borneo from the period was Johann Michael Carl Hupe (1818–1861) from Halle. Hupe worked in southern Borneo for several months and eventually travelled to Sarawak and tried to establish a mission school there. Although there is some awareness of his linguistic work and his existence in Kuching, he remains an obscure person for a majority of Borneo researchers.

This research attempts to highlight Hupe's role as a source for European knowledge and images about Borneo, drawing principally upon archival material from the Francke Foundations in Halle. The focal point of the paper will be about the objects Hupe collected and dispatched to Halle. Hupe was, in fact, the first missionary in Sarawak and, notably, the first European who travelled the overland route from the west to the northern coast of Borneo.

This paper starts with the few references made to Hupe in literary sources. The second section aims to bring him out of the shadows with some biographical data and exploring his experiences in Borneo. Then, the study will detail how his objects and specimens were collected. The focus will be on exploring Hupe's instructions from Halle regarding collecting as well as his concerns over supplying an increasing number of scientific specialists. His attitude towards making collections for others was rather ambiguous. While many of his specimens can still be found in the *Kunst- und Naturalienkammer* or Cabinet of Artefacts and Natural Curiosities, the museum collection of the Francke Foundations, others circulated and were passed on in different ways within existing networks. Moreover, the work examines the 'new life' of the items from Borneo after they arrived in Germany. Finally, it will be demonstrated how various interests in Germany targeted Borneo in the first half of the nineteenth century and how the circulation of objects and natural history specimens produced knowledge about Borneo both to the scientific and scholarly community, but also to the general public.

## HUPE IN LITERATURE

Reports from contemporaries in Sarawak make only incidental reference to Hupe. James Brooke (1803–1868) for example wrote on 23 November 1844 to Henry Keppel (1809–1904) about a "*little German missionary*", who was both "*transcendental and disputative*" (Templer, 1853: 39)<sup>4</sup>. and that he had endless discussions with him about religious issues. Others highlight Hupe's connection with a prisoner, who was in his service after the first journey to Sarawak, or with his Malay guide (Reece, 2002: 49–50,

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<sup>4</sup> There is some confusion regarding the date. Hupe wrote in his travel journals about a year later in Banjarmasin that he arrived on 4 December 1844 in Kuching. James Brooke's post scriptum to his letter mentioning the German missionary is from 24 November 1844.