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## THE HISTORY OF SARAWAK: WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Sanib Said\*

### INTRODUCTION

This is a kind of a love story. There is a Malay saying *tak kenal maka tak cinta* which has been used for the tourist promotion song, "to know Malaysia is to love Malaysia" and the Sarawak version should be "to know Sarawak is to love Sarawak". Undoubtedly to know the history of Sarawak is to love Sarawak. For the historians it is not that simple as falling in love. In the case for Sarawak we do not know where and when to begin. Sarawak has a fairly rich historiography, thanks to the Brooke. But unfortunately the present historiography of Sarawak begins with the Brunei Rule as the background for the Brooke period. My lecturer in the university, James Ongkili taught me this approach and in one of his articles he says:

"No historical study of Sarawak and Sabah can begin without that of Brunei; for Sarawak was part of the Brunei Sultanate until the adventurous James Brooke succeeded in implanting himself as the Rajah of Sarawak in 1841,..."<sup>1</sup>

This has a tremendous impact on my thinking and approach in looking at the history of Sarawak and northern Borneo as reflected in my book.<sup>2</sup> After trying to construct the history of the Sultanate of Brunei for my students at the University of Brunei, it struck me that there were some autonomous riverine politics in northern Borneo long before the emergence of the sultanate. This led me to challenge both my former teacher's and my own views.

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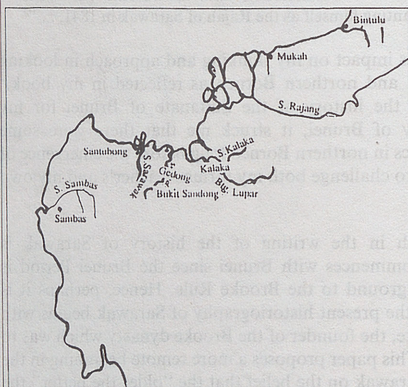
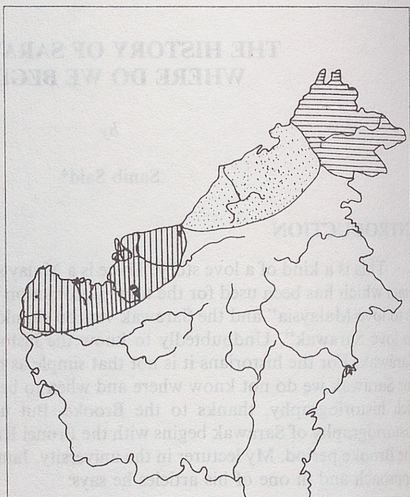
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The present approach in the writing of the history of Sarawak is unsatisfactory even if it commences with Brunei since the Brunei Period is treated briefly as the background to the Brooke Rule. Hence, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the present historiography of Sarawak begins with the coming of James Brooke, the founder of the Brooke dynasty which was to rule for almost a century. This paper proposes a more remote beginning in the writing of the history of Sarawak on the belief that the "older the better" the state will be. To do that there is a need for some definitions.

MAP 1

**ANCIENT POLITICO-CULTURAL AREAS OF NORTHERN BORNEO**

-  Ancient Sarawak Politico-Cultural Area (ASPA)
-  Brunei Politico-Cultural Area
-  Sabah-Sulu Politico-Cultural Area



MAP 2

**ANCIENT SARAWAK POLITICO-CULTURAL AREA (ASPA)**