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BRUNEI NEW TOWN: SOCIAL CHANGE AND PROLIFERATING NETWORKS 1950-1983

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ABSTRACT

Based on scattered data acquired mainly from the distinct archives and the fieldwork and interviews of 1998/1999, this preliminary study focuses on the main players in rural developments. If migration traditionally became the common feature of all ethnic groups in Brunei, the centralization and the reforms in diverse fields launched during the Residency period made migration more limited and focused.

The development of Lamunin to a primary- not "primate"- town is located within this framework. By relating the general historical change in the country to the change in Lamunin, this study claims that the development of Lamunin to a town followed a line of convergence, local and central factors.

The dynamics of ethnic relations and social cohesion on the one hand and the formal support and facilities on the other made the formation of the town interesting. Indeed, the Lamunin area is a lively and growing social, economic, religio-cultural and political center.

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by

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Introduction

The most highly referred aspects of Brunei history include monarchy and oil economy. In terms of geographical location, the cradle and bastion of Brunei culture and center for the Brunei history belong to the Malay Water Village in the north, the capital, and oil production is centered in Seria in the

southwest. Not surprisingly, Brunei proper, the capital and the oil town of Seria have received intensive study.¹ This paper thus is an attempt to bring other parts and features of historical changes in Brunei into a relief.

Recently some scholars on Brunei have indicated new foci for historical research. Pehin Jamil has argued the importance of putting local dimension, especially local historiography, in the writing of a history of Brunei.² Despite the fragmented nature and incompleteness of the local sources, Pehin insists that they shed perspectives which may differ from external sources. Almost equal plea is put forward by Nicholas Tarling, even if in a different tone, concerning the importance of looking the history of Brunei in structure and narration combined. Yet, by comparing the history of Brunei with that of other similar political entities a better understanding of Brunei's past can be achieved.³

Moreover, Leonard Andaya suggests that in enriching and strengthening the national culture, it is important to have better knowledge of all histories in Brunei, including authentic histories of the ethnic groups. Echoing the call by John Smail in the 1960s, Andaya argues that since the prevailing study of the history of Brunei has focused on the dominant, and at times external, players, it is time to give more space to autonomous history of Brunei with its own colors, conflicts and resolution.⁴ Relevant to his suggestion to "begin exploiting the largely untapped oral resources of the many ethnic communities," this paper has positively responded.⁵ Benefiting from the fieldwork, interviews and questionnaires undertaken by History students and some archival study,⁶ I have developed a significant portion of this paper.

In studying a newly growing town in Brunei, this paper claims to some merits. The closeness of time factor to us allows historians to tap more representative, if not authentic, pictures of local development.⁷ The study of the new "town" of Lamunin is interesting for several reasons. It is a burgeoning rural center

that harbors several ethnic groups from quite early period of its development. The increasing ability of the state to distribute development support to rural areas has had reciprocal and positive effect by virtue of the local dynamism in the Lamunin area. Next, the study of this relatively unknown, but growing, entity will enrich our historical knowledge of an important segment of Brunei society in the second half of the 20th century. Lamunin is a facet of many comparable faces of rural-to-urban change in Brunei during the period. In other words, this study, even preliminary, will open new, complementary, fields to the existing concentration of historical study of the capital, the oil town, or, at the other extreme, the tribes. Moreover, with the power and ambition of the state to implement development program, the Lamunin area has been identified as a future growth point in the country. Indeed, a plan was drawn in 1995 to develop the area into a new urban center supported with all modern urban facilities, including a spacious and luxurious golf course. In the light of this planned change to the local dynamic and pluralist community, it is important to delineate the indigenous elements of urbanism, pluralism and dynamism.

Before launching into discussion of Lamunin town proper, it is important to locate this exercise within the context of related literature on social history of small towns in Borneo. Is it proper to call Lamunin as a town? With the population of some 2,500 inhabitants, Lamunin is not properly a town.⁸ It is not a weekly rural market either. Since it has some characteristics of town, including government offices, modern urban facilities and centralized spots, I shall use the term town with qualifications.

Some general statement about urbanism in Borneo can be found in Cleary and Eaton's work and others'.⁹ Following the early findings of urban development in Southeast Asia, they consider the formation of urban centers in Borneo resulting from two major forces colonialism in the past or national government after independence and the capitalistic interest throughout. Under this power design, local factors are relegated,

if not ignored.¹⁰ Indeed, the transformation from “traditional urban networks to more advanced ones” took place during the colonial period. Moreover, in the nature of general discussion of Borneo, Cleary and Eaton focus on the big cities, ignoring urbanization in smaller towns. Interestingly, in big cities the major forces of urban change in recent years have come from demographic change, or in-migration to be exact, mostly by less qualified job-seekers from the countryside or, more significantly, other areas.

Lockard focuses his study on social history of Kuching from the mid-19th century to 1970.¹¹ He is concerned more with the internal dynamism of Kuching than with the external players and powers. By putting aside, as far as possible, the hands of governments, Lockard expects to depict an authentic picture of social history of Kuching, especially the people who significantly played a major role in social formation of the urban environment – the Chinese and the Malays.

In his study of development and modernization in Brunei proper, Johannes Franz delineates important scenes and crucial factors in operation related to change in population settlement and urbanization.¹² More specifically, Franz presents interesting data and observation on the development of smaller towns such as Tutong and Bangar in Brunei. Being the newly created administrative centers, after 1910 the two rapidly grew as government offices and institutions were built. Service providers emerged with their shops and restaurants. Surprisingly, Franz does not address the growth of the towns in the context of the older settlements.¹³ In general Franz is more interested in exploring the major causes in urbanization. In Brunei, like what Cleary and Eaton suggest, urbanization has been augmented by political centralization and capitalistic enterprises.

Takong is interested in exploring the formation of land-based settlement in Bandar Brunei and the dynamism of Kampong Ayer after the Pacific War.¹⁴ He emphasizes the role of the government in the process of urbanization in Bandar

Brunei and the concomitant rapid social and economic change. By focusing on both the socio-economic change among the inhabitants of the older settlement and the formation of the new land-based settlement, the modern capital proper, Takong succeeds in pointing to interesting features of urbanization in the state capital before 1970.

In his study of social history of Seria, Johari shows that the town has developed primarily because of oil industry. The oil exploration in the 1920s and the eventual drilling of oil wells in the area after 1929 led to the sprawling of a new town.¹⁵

Lamunin is obviously irrelevant to all these studies. Yet, Lamunin is also part of such vibrant urbanism in Brunei. Being relatively a new settlement, Lamunin from the very beginning accommodated outsiders from different social backgrounds. The major ethnic groups consist of the Dusun, the Kedayan and the Tutong. The latter are locally considered late comers. On the basis of this pluralist root, I argue that Lamunin has from the very beginning strong potential to develop into vibrant center. This internal dynamism thus has responded positively to the external forces to change – the government and trade.

Seen in the perspective of a center-periphery constellation, the government had direct interests in several sectors of local development: security, political stability, economic development, social progress and justice.

During the early part of the Residency period, owing to the financial weakness of the state, the government focused its attention in stimulating local economic growth and enterprises. Security and political stability which never had been a serious problem to the central government, were quickly and efficiently managed and put under control, whereas social progress was pursued reasonably.

In the context of Lamunin, the government campaign for agricultural development, especially rice and rubber cultivation,

struck a responsive chord. Again, Lamunin was made an important center of agricultural test ground. Having been a rice growing area, Lamunin won the attention of the government in encouraging self-sufficiency and production of food-stuff. Moreover, the discovery of oil and its concomitant positive impact on the general financial conditions of the state facilitated more daring plan for social and economic development. Indeed, the idea of making the Lamunin area a nodal point of overland road gave the area an advantage edge. Road to the area was initiated in 1933.¹⁶ This is especially so since the Labi area across the hills from Lamunin attracted the attention of oil seekers around this period. Indeed, the Labi area had formed an important point of oil search, and facilities were developed there. Bringing the oil area of Belait and Brunei proper into direct link through Lamunin became the slogan of the government and the BMPC prior to the Pacific War.

After the Pacific War, the Lamunin area lost its previous advantageous position of strategic point and agricultural potential, as the road linking the oilfield at Seria and the capital and the Muara port was shifted to the coastal trunk road by the end of 1958 and its agricultural center lost its importance nationally after the late 1940s. Major rice cultivation schemes were undertaken in Mulaut and Wasan in the Brunei District proper.

Having benefited from earlier infrastructure Lamunin continued to progress. With the major development plan launched since 1953 Lamunin slowly regained its importance. By the mid-1960s, Lamunin won the attention of the government planners by virtue of its strategic location as link to forest reserve at the Ladan Hills. The Lamunin Road or officially known as the Kuala Abang Road was revived by hot-mix surface from 1967. The road was to serve the transportation of logs and timber from the forest at the Upper Tutong River forest. River transportation was relegated, even if continuously used for log transportation, in favor of road.¹⁷ Moreover, Lamunin, among a