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BROOKE REBELS OR IBAN NATIONALISTS? REVISITING IBAN ANTI-BROOKE STRUGGLES 1841-1941¹

Ooi Keat Gin

INTRODUCTION

From the historiography of the period of Brooke rule in Sarawak, the names of Rentap, Banting, Asun represented the outstanding examples of Iban² resistance to the White Rajahs. These Iban firebrands were variously depicted as recalcitrant opponents who persisted in refusing to accept Brooke rule despite efforts made to bring them within the orbit of authority. They were, therefore, labelled as "rebels" by the Brooke government, and expeditionary forces were launched to destroy them and their followers.

The question that I wish to raise is to what extent did the so-called Brooke court historians justified in labelling Iban warriors such as Rentap, Banting, and Asun as "rebels".³ At the same instance, examining this matter from the Sarawak-centric perspective as opposed to the European viewpoint, can we consider these three personalities as national leaders and their opposition as nationalistic struggles against Brooke imperialism and subjugation?

I shall present a brief sketch of the main events of each Iban opposition. The causal issues that spurred Rentap, Banting, and Asun in raising the spear of war against White Rajah rule shall be appraised. Likewise, what these warriors set out to accomplish, their aims and objectives, shall also be examined to uncover clues about their individual struggles. A brief introduction of Sarawak under the Brookes, the Iban, and Brooke-Iban relations will provide the background setting for this discussion.

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1841-1941¹

by

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SARAWAK UNDER THE BROOKES

The story of James Brooke and the establishment of the Brooke Raj in Sarawak have been adequately covered in general histories of Sarawak as well as being repeatedly told in the various biographies of the founder.⁴ A brief sketch of Brooke rule in Sarawak will suffice as a background to the main theme of this paper.

In return for his successful intervention in concluding an anti-Brunei revolt by a coalition of Sarawak Malays and Land Dayaks (Bidayuh), James was publicly installed as "Rajah of Sarawak" at Kuching on 24 September 1841, and granted the territory from Tanjong Datu to the Samarahan river by Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin II of Brunei. James emphasized the protection of native interests and the promotion of their socio-economic well being as top priorities of his government. This native policy became a Brooke tradition that was steadfastly held by his successors. During the first decade of his rule, James focussed on the suppression of raiding, considered by him as "piracy", along the north-western Bornean coast so that native trade could proceed without hindrance. The British Royal Navy rendered assistance in his campaigns.⁵ Headhunting was outlawed, and various forms of local oppression of the indigenous inhabitants, mainly towards the Land Dayaks, were curtailed. In 1853 the territory from the Sadong to Tanjong Sirik, including the Rejang but excluding the Igan, were transferred to the Raj with Brunei compliance. During the late 1850s and early 1860s, the young state of Sarawak survived two major threats on its existence. In February 1857, the Bau Chinese Hakka goldminers attacked and sacked Kuching, the capital. The Malays rallied to the Raj, and coupled with the arrival of Iban led by Charles Johnson, nephew of James, the Chinese were defeated. Three years later, a Malay-Brunei conspiracy to oust James's government was uncovered. This so-called "Malay Plot" was interwoven with political feuds at Mukah, the centre of the Melanau sago-producing districts, where rival Brunei *pangeran* struggled for control of the sago trade. These political manoeuvrings culminated in the "Mukah Crisis" of 1860 which was resolved in Sarawak's favour. Consequently in 1861 the territory from the Igan river to

Tanjong Kidurong was ceded to the Raj by Brunei. James died in 1868 and Charles succeeded as the Second White Rajah.

Charles's expansionist ambitions pushed eastwards the boundaries of the Raj at the expense of Brunei; by 1905 the territory of Sarawak resembled its present-day configuration. In 1888, Sarawak became a British protectorate. Britain handled the foreign relations and external defence of the country while internal administration remained in the hands of the Brookes.

Charles organized the administration of the Raj, promoted trade, encouraged the exploitation of mineral resources, initiated commercial agriculture, and developed infrastructure facilities. There was relative peace and prosperity during this period although pacification of the interior continued throughout Charles's reign. Slavery was gradually phased out, but headhunting occurred sporadically in the interior.

On Charles's passing in 1917, his eldest son, Vyner, became the Third and last White Rajah. Improvements were made in the social services, namely in public health and education. Progress in commercial agriculture and advances in infrastructure development were made. Sarawak braved the economic recession of the inter-war period without severe problems. On the centenary of Brooke rule in 1941, Vyner granted a "Constitution" to his people, which effectively abolished the absolute rule of the White Rajah.

Consistent with Brooke tradition, the advice and opinions of native leaders were constantly sought in the administration of the country. The Supreme Council, constituted in 1855, of Malay *Datu* and senior European Brooke officers, offered advice and guidance to the Rajah on major policy matters. The triennial General Council (forerunner of the present-day Council Negri) was instituted in 1867 comprising chiefs and heads of the various indigenous ethnic groups. Although a larger and far more representative native consultative body than the Supreme Council, the primary objective of the General Council was to further promote close and cordial relations between the Rajah and the leaders of his subjects. Administratively,

the country was divided into five "Divisions", each under the control of a Resident from their respective headquarters at Kuching, Simanggang, Sibul, Miri and Limbang. Each Division was further subdivided into "Districts" administered by District Officers and Assistant District Officers with the assistance of Native Officers. Both District Officers and Assistant District Officers were Europeans whilst Native Officers were Malays. In the central government at Kuching, a bureaucracy headed by the Chief Secretary (normally the Resident of the First Division) managed the day-to-day routine of government.

The Nature of Iban Society During the Period of Brooke Rule

According to the 1939 enumeration of population, the Iban comprised the largest single indigenous group accounting for almost half the indigenous population. They constituted 34 per cent of the total population of Sarawak which stood at close to half a million.⁶ On the eve of Brooke rule, estimates of the Iban population were about 1 000 in the First Division, 50 000 in their heartland of the Second Division, and a questionable figure of 30 000 in the Third Division.

The Iban were largely rural-based with concentrations in the Lupar, Saribas and Rejang river systems. Although a small minority practised wet rice cultivation in the lower reaches and deltaic flatlands of the rivers, the majority were shifting cultivators of hill rice in the hilly inland areas. Their economy combined subsistence swidden rice farming with the collection of jungle produce for trade.⁸ Fruit trees and some cash crops, like rubber, were grown to supplement their income.

The Iban were a relatively homogeneous community, sharing a common language, and certain characteristic cultural traits and social organization. They lived in a longhouse, which consists of several *bileks* (or "doors"), each a wholly autonomous and economically self-contained unit occupied by a family. Iban society is non-hierarchical, and basically, classless.⁹ Animism and pagan beliefs were influential in Iban daily life where omens and auguries played dominant roles.¹⁰ Despite the efforts of various Christian