

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Greater Malaysia - II

Borneo's Primitive, Unwilling Pawns

12. Road 5/35

Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
Malaya

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

I went to the Borneo territories with the clear assumption that Greater Malaysia, the merger of Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei, and North Borneo, is certain to be realized in the very near future. I had known that there was opposition to Malaysia in the Borneo territories, an opposition that is not reported in the Malayan papers, but I was unprepared for the depth and the complexity of that opposition.

In all three territories there is a growing sense of protest that sometimes opposes and sometimes supports Malaysia, depending on the particular mixture of the highly variable conditions of peoples, governments, resources and political development that the territories display. An understanding of this protest, its variability, and its significance for Malaysia requires some exposition of the conditions in each of the three territories.

SARAWAK. Once ruled by the Sultan of Brunei, Sarawak was ceded to James Brooke, Englishman, in 1841 for his part in putting down an uprising of Malays and Dayaks near Kuching. This began the famous line of White Rajahs who ruled until 1946 when the country was turned over to Great Britain as a colony. With the Royal Navy, the White Rajahs helped clear the pirates that terrorized the Borneo seas and brought peace and a little development to the country.

Almost as large as Malaya (48,000 square miles compared with Malaya's 51,000), Sarawak is a vastly underdeveloped land of jungles, mountains, rivers, and pacified headhunters. Although it is developing rapidly, the road system is not extensive and most transportation is by river into the interior or by sea along the coast. (I traveled 90 miles upriver from Sibu to Kapit to visit some longhouses and to get the "feel" of the colony's transportation problem. It took me some days thereafter to get the "feel" of those 18 hours on hard board seats out of my backside.) The soils are not rich and apart from nearly depleted oil reserves in the north and some bauxite and limestone, the mineral wealth of the colony is not great.

The colony's total population of 744,000 is composed of a number of varied indigenous groups, a large minority of Chinese, and a very small group of Europeans. The Sea Dayaks, or Ibans, are the largest group, numbering about 237,000. Together with the Land Dayaks (58,000) and other indigenous groups (39,000), they bring the total non-Muslim population to slightly less than half the colony's population. There is a large Malay population (129,000) that has had some success in converting the Melanau (46,000) to Islam. There are also the ubiquitous Chinese, some 229,000, making almost a third of the total.

The Sea Dayaks are the old Borneo headhunters, still living in longhouses, still displaying a few dusty skulls, and still practising shifting cultivation

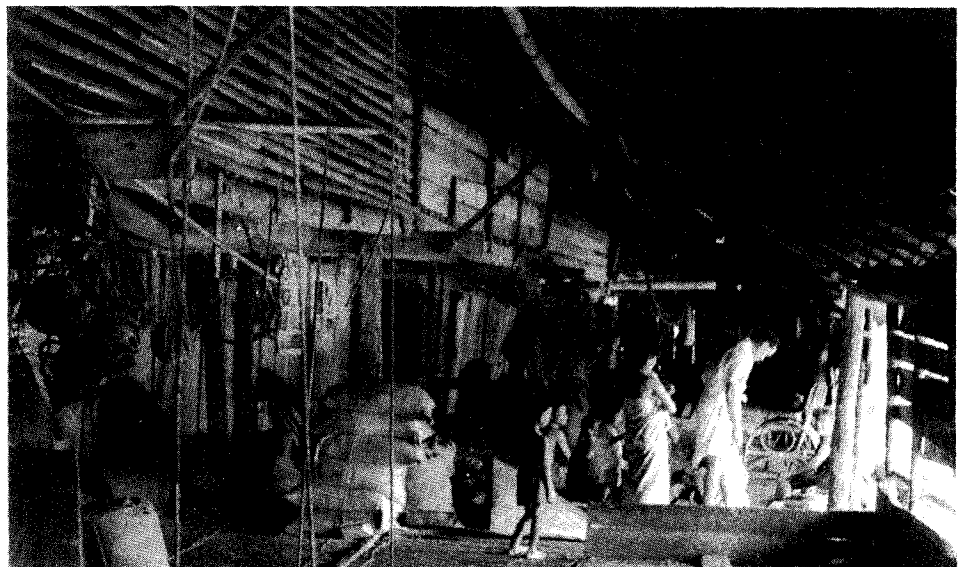
of dry hill-grown rice. A longhouse might contain from 10 to 90 families, each occupying a separate cubicle along the back of the house and sharing with others the wide covered veranda and the open porch along the front of the house. Hill rice is planted after the jungle is burned off and holes are poked into the ground with crude sticks. A plot is planted for one year only and is ideally to be left for 10 to 15 years before it is planted again. Thus one longhouse might have a wide area of land under native customary rights, over which the cultivators shift from year to year in a pattern that is as old as the Dayaks in Sarawak. Population pressures and sale of land, to the Chinese, have reduced the cycle in some cases to as few as three years.

This type of cultivation is extremely unproductive, giving only one-fifth the yields obtained in wet rice cultivation. The shifting cultivation is intimately tied to a complex system of native customary rights to land and together these form the single greatest obstacle to economic development in the rural sector.

A Dayak Longhouse

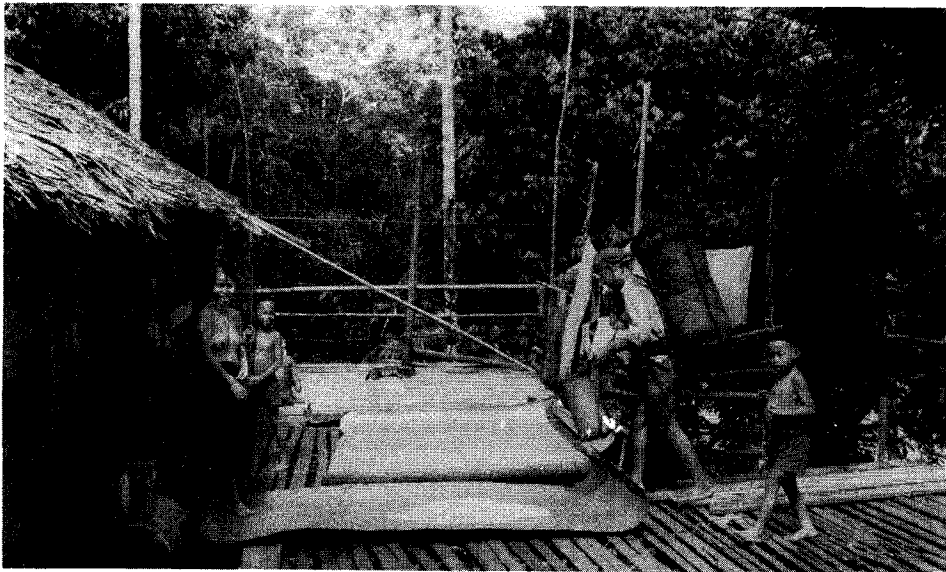


A longhouse veranda, complete with skulls taken from Indonesians fourty years ago

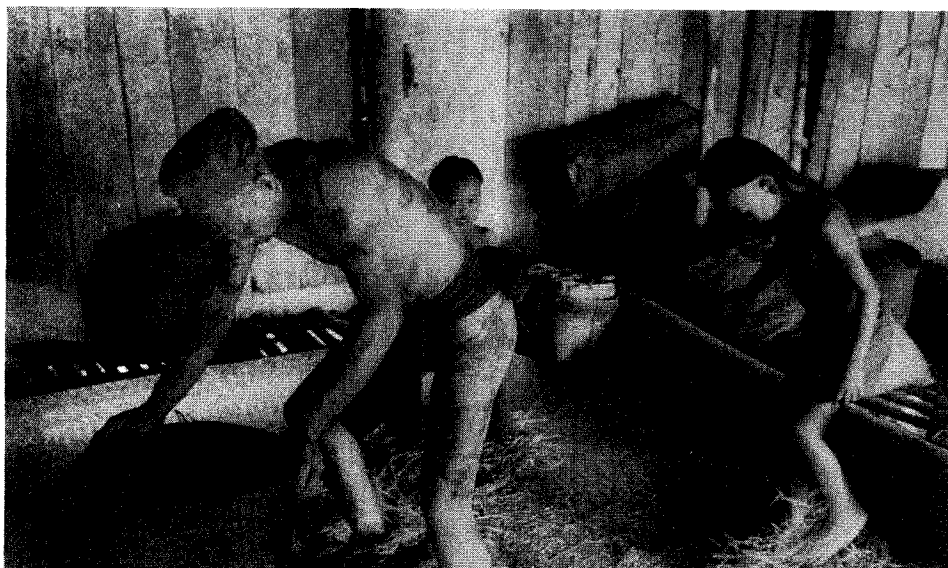


When the Colonial government took over from the Rajah, it agreed to protect native customary rights. Now the problem is to settle the shifting agriculturalists to make them more productive and to decrease their land requirements. Then customary rights can be extinguished by consent and land can be made available to others who will cultivate it intensively. The Agriculture Department is using the rubber to settle the Dayaks and better rice production with fertilizers to secure their food supply. In the coastal areas wet rice and coconuts are being used for the same purpose. With the colony's poor soils this is a long and difficult process and while it is going on there is growing resentment among some natives who see Chinese encroachments onto their lands. This is just one small part of the complex set of relations relevant to Malaysia.

The Malays are coastal farmers and fishermen and are found in large numbers in the administration, where they once held a virtual monopoly. There is a long history of exploitation of the Dayaks by the Malays that began with the old Brunei Sultanate and was not fully eradicated under the Rajahs, nor does it



Bringing home the rice...



and threshing it by foot, a job for the whole family.

seem completely absent today. Malay government boatmen sometimes quietly turn up with a few chickens as they take government officers on the rounds of longhouses. Here is a legacy of Dayak-Malay animosity that provides another small piece for the Malaysia puzzle. In addition, for reasons of religion and economic disparity, there is the same Malay-Chinese animosity that is found in Malaya, although it is less pronounced in Sarawak where there was no Emergency.

As in the rest of Southeast Asia, the Chinese appear as the most industrious and enterprising race. They are largely urban dwellers, but where possible they have moved onto the land to engage in intensive cultivation of cash crops. They also show the same industry as all overseas Chinese in protecting their culture by erecting schools and temples and indulging in their strong sense of cultural superiority, not without its effects on Malaysia.



A Chinese New Year dragon dance on the streets of Kuching.

Of all the three territories, Sarawak appears most advanced in political development. For some years the civil service has faced growing political activities, especially among the Chinese where the Communists have made some gains. The government is now giving attention to economic development, with a new planning office under the Financial Secretary, and has recently turned its attention and priorities to rural development. The pace is not rushed, however, and some native leaders complain of a lack of a sense of urgency in the government. Nonetheless, real progress is being made, especially in development accompanied by a devolution of power to local councils. This may well turn out to be the most important development the colonial government will bequeath to the rising indigenous leaders.

NORTH BORNEO. Like Sarawak, North Borneo is a recently acquired colony of Great Britain. It became a colony in 1946 after 65 years of rule by the British North Borneo (Chartered) Company, better known as The Chartered Company.

Slightly more than half the size of Malaya, North Borneo is rich in soils, minerals, timber, and a primitive but industrious population.

The total population in 1960 was 454,000, of which the Dusuns (146,000) were the largest group. Together with the more primitive Muruts (22,000) and

other indigenous (80,000), they bring the indigenous non-Muslim population to about 55% of the total. The Bajaus are the chief Muslim peoples with about 62,000, or 13% of the total population. The 105,000 Chinese make up a final 23% of the population.

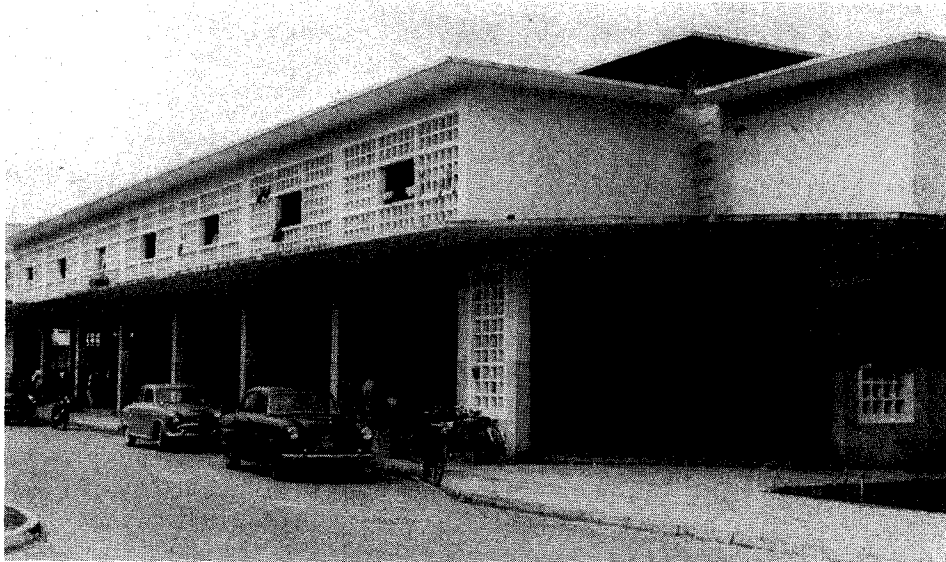
As in Sarawak, the indigenous non-Muslim peoples, concentrated on the West coast, practise shifting cultivation of dry hill-rice. The better soils and the less complicated land laws make the problem of settling the shifting cultivators simpler here than in Sarawak. The government's program of settling involves the use of wet rice and land development schemes, in which the indigenous peoples have responded with a willingness to change that, if anything, outstrips government efforts to provide the means of change.

With the industry of the natives and the abundance of good lands, there has been little opportunity for the emergence of strong native-Chinese animosities. There has even been a fair amount of intermarriage between the natives and the Chinese and the resulting Sino-Dusuns are acclaimed by many to be the most intelligent and energetic ethnic group in the colony.

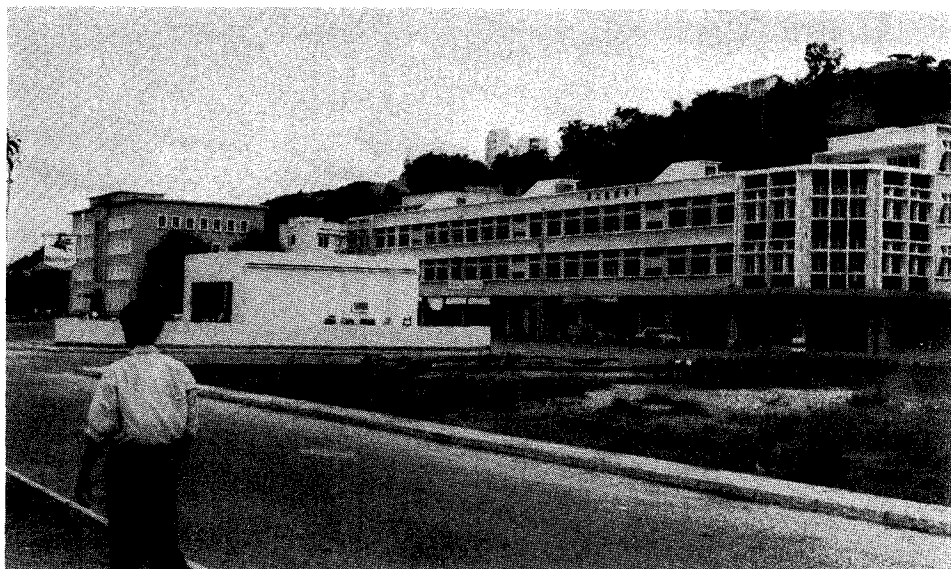
The Bajaus, descendants of the notorious pirates that terrorized these seas for centuries, now practise the more peaceful arts of fishing, largely on the east coast. Thus the geographic separation of the Muslims from the non-Muslims, and the absence of dominance of either group in the administration have precluded the kind of Muslim-non-Muslim animosity that is one of the lesser divisive influences in Sarawak.

Of the three territories, North Borneo suffered the greatest damage during the war. The Japanese occupation took a heavy toll of lives, including many local government people, and the liberation leveled the towns. The new colonial government set about the task of reconstruction with great activity and has produced some of the best planned and most modern towns and ports in this part of the world. In the past few years the government has begun to turn its attention to rural development and road construction; the latter was considered a luxury a few years ago when the colony was still conceived of as a collection of ports. As in Sarawak, local leaders argue that this comes late and with insufficient emphasis. Town and port construction did, however, provide the infrastructure within which private entrepreneurs could

Urban renewal in Jesselton: a new market.



Jesselton:  
modern shop-houses  
and apartments.



and did come forward with great vigor and today exports of rubber and timber are providing foreign exchange and government revenues to pay for rural development.

BRUNEI. A tiny enclave of just over 2,000 square miles with 85,000 people is all that remains of the once great Sultanate of Brunei. While the country has grown smaller, however, its wealth has increased immeasurably, for oil was discovered in Seria, south of the capital, in 1929. Since then Shell Oil Company has dominated the financial structure of the country just as His Highness Sir Omar Ali Saifuddin, D.K., S.P.M.B., D.M.N., D.K. (Kelantan), D.K. (Johore), K.C.M.G., dominates its political and social structure.

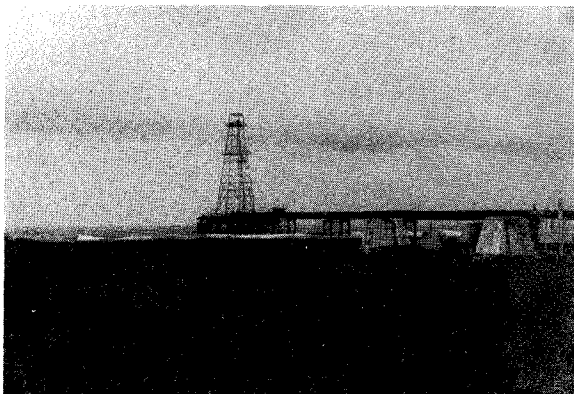
On the coast in the south oil wells dot the landscape and the seascape. Natural gases are flared off with a roar and a brilliant flame that can be seen in Brunei Town on a clear night. The field itself is rich and easy to exploit, yielding up about 40% of the oil in the ground compared with an average of 28% in the U.S. fields. Since 1929 more than 485 million barrels have been taken out, bringing an income to the Brunei government of more than M\$ 800 million in royalties and income taxes.

Over 90% of the 1959 state revenues of M\$ 130 million came from oil: M\$ 56 million from income tax (all but half a million paid by Shell), M\$ 39 million in royalties from oil, and M\$ 25 million in interest earned on the investment of past revenue surpluses. Export statistics provide an even more dramatic picture of the dominance of oil. In 1958 oil accounted for M\$ 300 million of the total M\$327 million exported. The only other figure of any size was M\$ 16 million for exposed cinematographic film.

Brunei is a country of mosque-and-movie-goers.

Accurate data are not fully available from the 1960 census but it is known now that the Brunei Malays (Muslims) account for about half of the population. Indigenous non-Muslims (Kedayans, Dayaks, Muruts, and Dusuns) probably account for one-quarter, and the Chinese for about one-third of the population.





Brunei - the dominance of mosque  
and oil wells.



The indigenous people are part-time peasants, growing wet-rice and collecting jungle produce for sale. The Chinese are generally disqualified from owning land so they are even more concentrated in urban commercial occupations than in the rest of Southeast Asia. The oil wells employ about 2,500 people, of whom only a third are Brunei Malays. Outside of oil, government employs about 2,100, of whom 2,000 are Malays.

Today Brunei is an independent country, a Sultanate under the protection of the British government. A new constitution was proclaimed in 1959 giving the Sultan full executive authority, who would act on the advice of a Privy Council, an Executive Council, and a Legislative Council. The once powerful British resident became the High Commissioner, but the old appellation still remains and local politicians argue that the country is still not fully independent.

Under the new constitution many of the old British civil servants left and their places were filled by Malay officers on loan from Malaya. This was an unfortunate turn of events for local civil servants smarted under new frustrations and the Malayan officers proved to be far more arrogant and far less competent than the British officers they replaced. This merely added fuel to the general contempt the orthodox Bruneis feel for their more westernized Malayan co-religionists, and the rift between Brunei and Malayan Malays widened. It reached a peak in 1960 when the Bruneis beat-up a Malayan forestry officer, ironically one of the best of the officers on loan, and Malaya's Prime Minister,

Tengku Abdul Rahman, was called in to help heal the rift.

Brunei had one five-year development plan that started when the government allocated M\$ 100 million for development in 1953. Despite the high level of waste and the great energies devoted to spending, the underdeveloped administration was able to get rid of only 60% of the allocation in the five-year period. Even that amount generated very little indigenous enterprise for it was largely spent on foreign technicians and foreign materials to build new government offices and a new capital to glorify the new M\$ 8 million mosque. Thus in 1958 things gradually came to a halt and Brunei languished back into its old, quiet, small-town atmosphere, with only some new buildings and a spruced-up town to recall its recent era of great activity. Now under the direction of Dr. Joseph Gould, new planning mechanisms and new plans are being formulated. If the Sultan buys this new five-year plan, Brunei may awaken again to a new round of development activity that will have an effect on the country far more profound than the last.

GREATER MALAYSIA. The threads of the Bornean reactions to Malaysia can best be drawn together by considering the reactions of specific groups.

The Chinese provide the most organized, most intelligent, and most consistent opposition to Malaysia. The slogans and the jargon leave little room for doubt of the Communist influence in this opposition, especially in Sarawak: "Resolutely Struggle Against Colonial Rule!" "Scientific Political Insight Can See Through Dirty Political Realities!" The reasons for this opposition lie primarily in the threat to Communism posed by the experienced anti-Communist Malayan government.

It is unfortunate for the Chinese that their opposition has become identified as Communist inspired, for this discredits the more legitimate aspects of their opposition. These include the fear that Malaysia will mean second class status for them and a threat to what they see as their way of life. To the Chinese Malaysia is simply a new form of imperialism in which they are being turned over to another, and more hostile, foreign power.

They have no confidence in the promise of the Malayan government to write safeguards of local autonomy into the constitution. They note correctly that the Malayan constitution has already been amended twice without reference to the wishes of the people and there is a legitimate fear that it could happen again to remove any safeguards.

Chinese opposition is now organized in two political parties: North Borneo's United Party and Sarawak's United Peoples' Party. Both are growing in strength and both try to be multi-racial as they claim membership and support of many indigenous peoples. The leadership is intelligent, articulate, and wealthy. The leaders claim to be free from Communist influence, but not anti-Communist; they argue they cannot afford to be anti anything except anti-colonialist. In long interviews I had with leaders of both parties, I was impressed with the lack of Marxist or Communist jargon.

Economically the Chinese feel they have nothing to gain from Malaysia. They are justifiably proud of their colonies' records of development and feel that Malaysia will dampen rather than stimulate further development.



Among the indigenous peoples the opposition to Malaysia derives largely from their unhappy relations with the Malays and their happy relations with the British. In Sarawak there is the old Dayak-Malay animosity. The Brunei Malays have had enough of the Malaysians, and the Dusuns of North Borneo do not view with equanimity the possibility of the imposition of Islam as a state religion, or of Malaysians taking over from the British officers.

There is a widespread desire on the part of all indigenous peoples that the British stay on, and a fear that Malaysia will mean that the British must leave. The natives have been well treated and the colonies well served by the British, and even I was impressed with the high calibre of the officers I met. The indigenous peoples genuinely want these friendly, competent officers to stay. One other reason for this is the clear realization that the alternatives involve the take-over of the administration by the Malaysians or the Chinese.

Perhaps the most ambivalent group of all are the British civil servants. Officially they are all committed to Malaysia, but individually they all chaff under that official commitment. For a number of reasons this is more the case in North Borneo than in Sarawak. More experienced with indigenous political movements and more aware of the threat of Communism, the Sarawak officers appear to have accepted the necessity and even the desirability of Malaysia far more than their brothers in the north. The Sarawak government, much to the consternation of the opposition, has been working effectively to dispel some of the misgivings and the misunderstandings the indigenous people hold for Malaysia.

The picture is different and far from flattering in North Borneo. There the civil servants talk of the good old days, less than a year ago, when there was not even the smell of a political party. It is easy to get the impression that Malaysia has come too rapidly for the civil servants. It disturbs them and they dislike being disturbed. Some local leaders have been quick to identify this as the normal reaction of people on top who see their superior positions threatened. That is only part of the story. The civil servants see the orderly and gradual process of transition to self government disrupted by crude Malayan politicians using the Borneo territories as pawns. They view with disdain the rapid rise of uneducated local leaders who claim to speak for large numbers of primitive, unorganized natives. Of course, what these civil servants see as the orderly and gradual process of transition to self government, others see as a horribly slow process that moves only when it is forced.

There is a more general form of opposition that can be detected in all groups. This is a sense of protest over change that is coming too rapidly, one that is forced from the outside, and one that is led and accompanied by what appear as blundering Malayan politicians.

Last summer Tengku Abdul Rahman visited the Borneo territories and left a staggering amount of ill will. A man who easily wins people with his affability and sincerity, the Tengku alienated many by his lack of knowledge and understanding of the territories and their peoples. He was ill-advised and displayed an astounding ignorance of even such simple facts as population figures and what the indigenous languages are. Nor have the Malaysians who followed come with any more knowledge or understanding. One gets the impression that Malaysia will materialize, but it will be something like a miracle and it will certainly not be to the credit of the Malaysians who have put their feet into it.

All is not opposition, however, and in some places the opposition is rapidly giving way to support for Malaysia. In the first place everyone is for Malaysia - in principle. It is admitted to be a good thing in the long run, but not now and not under these conditions.

It is the indigenous peoples, however, who seem to be swinging most decidedly for Malaysia. The Malays in Sarawak and the Bajaus in North Borneo look for the special privileges an Islamic Malaysia will bring. (I was struck by the constant references to "what the Tengku promised us..." in my talks with Sarawak Malay politicians.) The Sea Dayaks in Sarawak have their ill feelings toward the Chinese and look upon Malaysia for protection in land matters. Some of these Dayaks also fought the Communists in Malaya and have some idea of what a Communist threat is. All this the British civil servants can understand and are ready to point out.

More difficult for the civil servants to comprehend, however, is the growing sense of frustration and impatience in the natives with government development efforts. Native leaders, and some government people, keenly feel the lack of a sense of urgency on the part of government where rural development is concerned. In both colonies development is the responsibility of the financial secretary and development planning tends to be a fiscal exercise rather than a dynamic attempt to modernize the country. Agricultural development, road building, school construction almost inevitably lag behind the rising aspirations of new native leaders.

This is perhaps most apparent in the field of education. In both colonies education is defined as a social service and highest priorities are given to economic services. But the natives want schools. In parts of North Borneo the primitive, unorganized natives are forming to build and manage their own native voluntary schools twice as fast as the government is building its own primary schools. Last year there were 84 of these schools compared with 90 government primary schools, and the government is converting the native to government schools at the fantastic rate of three per year.

The Malayan government has been active in increasing native aspirations by bringing the Borneo leaders to Malaya to view the development here. The efforts have been effective for the differences in the character and speed of development are easy to see. One cannot drive ten miles in the Federation without seeing some sign of new development: new roads, new schools, land clearing, irrigation, and more new schools. It is easy for the visitor to see that Malaya provides free primary education for all, and does have virtually all of its 6-12 year-old children in school. It matters little that standards may have fallen a bit in the great rush to mass education. For people willing to build their own crude schools, even the lowest standards represent an improvement over what they have.

Brunei is a special case. The opposition there cannot be won over with promises of more schools or more development. The country already spends twice as much as Malaya on education and has more than it can possibly spend on development. But the opposition leaders can be bought off in a pattern of intrigue and counter-intrigue that is reminiscent of 19th century Malay politics. The Malaysians were recently eased out of positions of power when a right wing opposition emerged within the government. It was directed against the Sultan and his programs and virtually brought the government to a halt, but it was led by close followers of the Sultan and even appears to have been engineered by the Sultan himself.

Last year there was a strong sense of opposition, with some well organized mass demonstrations, when the Sultan broke his promise to hold general elections. This combined with the ill-feeling over the Malayan officers and Brunei looked like one of the most angry young countries in the world. Now the anger is gone. Leaders of the opposition sport new cars, subsidized businesses, and go off on world tours (it is rumored that the top man in the opposition will not return until Malaysia is settled). There is still some spirit of opposition,

but it is dominated by apathy and resignation. The leaders acknowledge that the Sultan is still supreme ruler and that his loyal subjects will fall in with whatever he decides about Malaysia. And it is an open secret that the Sultan has been promised that he will be the next King (each state Sultan serves five years as King in Malaya) of Malaysia if it goes through.

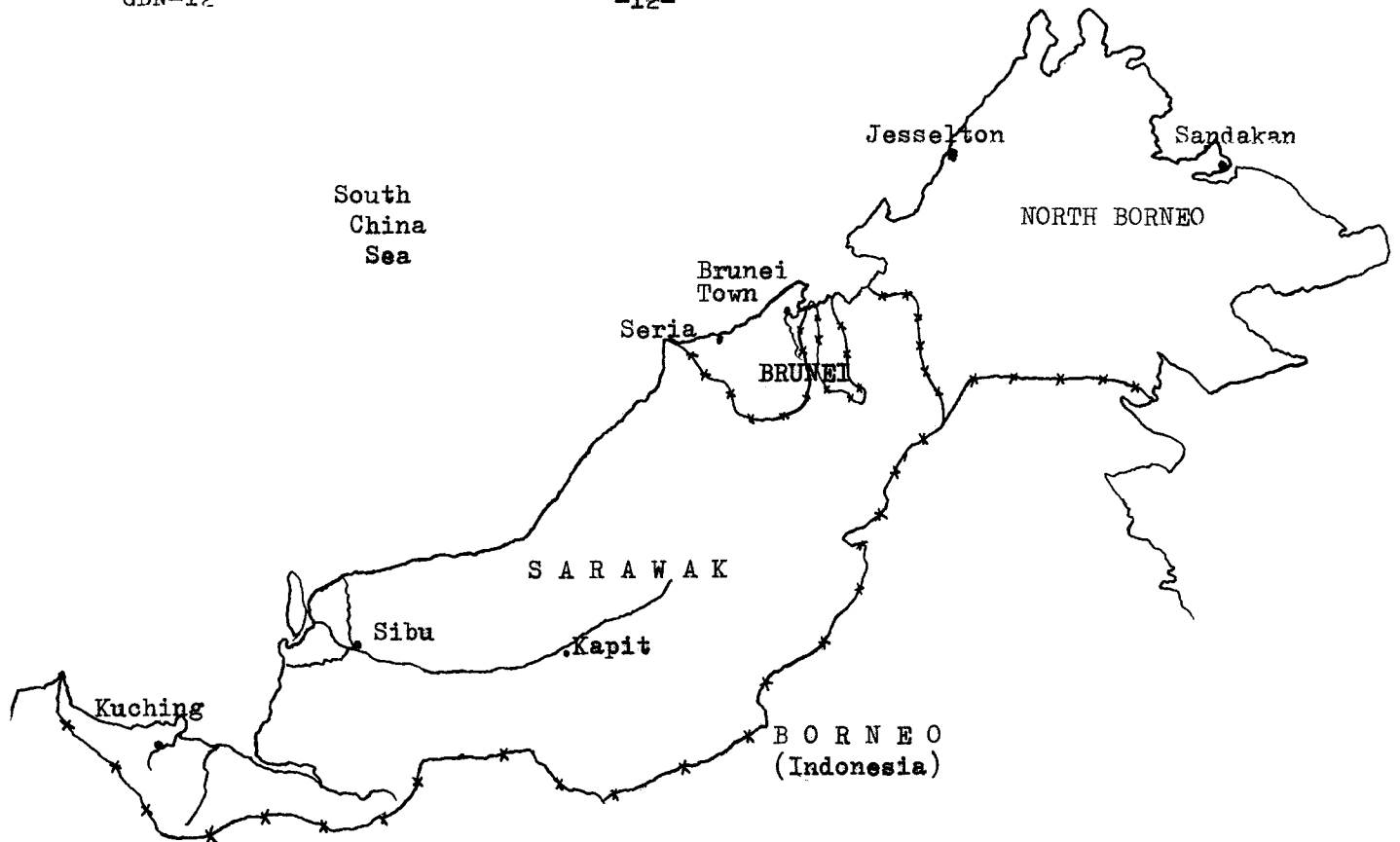
There is a new dimension added to Malaysia, one that was not present in any past political changes in the Borneo territories. Governments are turning to the people to ascertain their wishes and to legitimize policies by referring to the will of the people. Brunei has its own commission to convey the desires of the people to the Sultan, and Great Britain has just appointed a commission under Lord Cobbold to seek out the views of the peoples of Sarawak and North Borneo. This naturally gives new stimulation to political organizations, which now have a definite job to do. They have been collecting signatures on petitions, drafting memoranda and making recommendations. On the basis of these the commissions will make their recommendations concerning Malaysia.

The terms of the Cobbold Commission strengthen the view that Malaysia is imminent. The Commission is not asking the people what they want; it begins with a statement of what is proposed and then asks people what they think of this imminent action. This does not mean that the form or the phasing of Malaysia are predetermined. It is acknowledged (confidentially) that the only thing to which the colonial government is committed is getting some kind of representation from the Borneo territories in the Malayan parliament as soon as possible. The actual terms and timing can be worked out at a later time. The representation appears necessary to keep the Malaysians behind Malaysia so that the merger with Singapore can be effected. As I explained in my last newsletter, this is primarily to avert the threat of Communist subversion in Singapore and Malaya.

The task of the Cobbold Commission must indeed be difficult. They will listen to and read thousands of representations and have set the goal of producing their recommendations by the end of May. More than the sheer quantity of work must weigh heavily upon the Commission however. It does appear that the Commission is committed to Malaysia, but in the mass of hearings it will hold, it will be faced with an intelligent argument in opposition to Malaysia, while the support will largely come from people who want, "what the Tengku promised us...."

It appears that the Commission will have to sift through this great mass of opinions and to come up with a workable solution for Malaysia, and the impression is strong that it will do this in time for Malaysia to be celebrated in August of this year, along with Malaya's fifth anniversary of Merdeka (Independence). The prevailing (and somewhat cynical) opinion is that however primitive and unwilling, the pawns have been moved and the game will go on.

Pawns have been known to revolt, however, and in the Borneo territories there is talk of another Syria. While it appears certain that Malaysia will materialize, the final outcome of the merger will not be settled for some time. Undoubtedly the most important player in this part of the game will be the



Federation of Malaya government. If it plays intelligently, allowing maximum freedom to the territories while lending its weight to the stimulation of rural development, the prospects for success seem bright. There is even hope that if the Borneo territories are treated well, the Sumatrans across the Straits, long suffering under an over-bureaucratized, overcentralized Indonesian government, might take the plunge and join an even Greater Greater Malaysia. Then the Tengku will have the third inning of his Merdeka. The Federation government has not yet displayed any real urgency in gaining some understanding of the conditions of the Borneo territories and the aspirations of their peoples. If the Malayan government wants to make a success of Malaysia, it will have to act with far more restraint and understanding than it has yet displayed.

Sincerely,

*Gayl L. Ness*  
Gayl L. Ness