

History

Who Borneo belongs to has been a key question for much of the past 1500 years; internal contenders, neighbouring islands and Europeans all staked claims. Far from resolving the question, 20th-century nationhood left the island divided and created new levels of conflict.

SUNDALAND TO SRIVIJAYA

Geologists believe Borneo's land mass was joined to the rest of Southeast Asia 2.5 million years ago, as part of a continent called Sundaland. About 10,000 years ago, seas rose and Borneo became a large, remote island.

Despite separation from the mainland, Borneo retained contact with the outside world. Migrants arrived some 3000 years ago, probably from southern China, mixing with the descendants of the original owner of a 40,000-year-old skull discovered in Niah Caves to form some of Borneo's indigenous groups.

Traders from India and China began visiting Borneo as a sideshow to their bilateral commerce around the 1st century AD. Borneo's forest products including birds nests (which Chinese prized for soup and medicine), black pepper and animal skins were exchanged for textiles, beads and Chinese porcelain. From about 500 AD, Chinese traders began settling along Borneo's coasts.

Traders also introduced Hinduism and Buddhism to Borneo. South Kalimantan's Museum Lambung Mangkurat (see p264) displays artefacts of that influence. Traditional social principles known as *adat* are also a Hindu legacy (see p30).

Sumatra's Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya rose during the 7th century AD, and its influence extended to Borneo. Srivijaya controlled much of Southeast Asia's trade through command of the Strait of Melaka. Merchants from Arabia, Persia and India brought goods to Srivijaya's coastal outposts in exchange for goods from China and local products.

In Srivijaya's time, Brunei emerged as Borneo's centre for China trade. Sumatran pioneers established additional settlements along Borneo's coast, broadening the empire's reach and bringing more traders to the island. When Srivijaya's 600-year run ended, more Malays migrated to Borneo.

KINGDOMS COME

The founding of Melaka in 1400 (see p26) refocused regional trade. This harbour on Malay peninsula's west coast is half-way between China and India. In addition to their goods, Indian traders carried Islam to Melaka. These Muslim practices mainly absorbed, rather than erased, prevailing Hindu and animist customs. Muslims in Borneo today predominantly practise

this more mild, tolerant form of Islam. Travellers may notice it in Borneo's more pluralistic societies, with fewer women in headscarves and continued adherence to some pre-Islamic traditions (see p36).

Through diplomacy, often cemented by marriage, Borneo's coastal sultanates turned toward Melaka and Islam. Brunei's sultan married a Melaka princess; Sharif Ali, a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, married a Brunei royal and became sultan, introducing a legal system based on Islamic law.

By the late 15th century, Europeans sought a direct role in the rich Asian trade. Christopher Columbus failed to reach India by sailing west, but Portugal's Vasco da Gama found the way around Africa in 1498. In 1511, Portugal conquered Melaka in its bid to control the lucrative spice trade. Muslim merchants shunned Melaka after Portugal's takeover, moving much of their custom to Borneo's sultanates.

Brunei succeeded Melaka as the regional Islamic trade centre. Under Sultan Bolkia in the 16th century, Brunei was Borneo's most powerful kingdom. Its influence extended east to Luzon in the modern Philippines and on Borneo as far south as Kuching.

The sultanate let Portugal to establish a Brunei trading post to service its burgeoning spice trade in the Maluku. This link also helped check Spanish ambitions in the Philippines, but Brunei's reach exceeded its grasp. Facing a succession of rebellions, Brunei repeatedly turned to foreigners for help.

For assistance suppressing an uprising in 1701, Brunei ceded Sabah to the Sultan of Sulu (an island between Borneo and Mindanao). That cession is the basis for ongoing Philippine claims to Sabah. In the 19th century, a rebellion against Brunei led to a British foothold in Sarawak (see p24).

Brunei gave Britain a second front in Borneo more obliquely. In 1865, Brunei's ailing sultan leased Sabah to the American consul in Brunei. The rights eventually passed to an Englishman, Alfred Dent, who also received Sulu's blessing. In 1881, with London's support, Dent formed the British North Borneo Company, later called the Chartered Company, to administer the territory.

The prospect of further fragmentation led the nearly ruined sultanate to become a British protectorate in 1888. Ironically, its 19th-century status as a dependent paved Brunei's path to becoming Borneo's only independent state a century later.

THE EMPIRE(S) STRIKE BACK

Portugal's success in the spice trade and as a coloniser drew European imitators. The British and Dutch began sparring over Borneo in the 17th century, extending a regional rivalry that began in Java and spread to the Strait of Melaka.

To more effectively exploit the Asia trade, the Dutch government amalgamated competing merchant companies into the Vereenigde Oost-Indische

The name Borneo comes from foreigners, and is either a mispronunciation of Brunei or *buah nyior*, Malay for coconut; Malays call the island Kalimantan.

Archaeological finds in western Borneo include glass beads from the Roman Empire.

TIMELINE

2.5 million BC

Borneo is part of Sundaland, attached to mainland Southeast Asia. The rising seas of a geological separatist movement about 10,000 years ago transformed Borneo into the world's third-largest island.

2500–1000 BC

Migrants from mainland Asia bring Dongson culture techniques for rice farming, metallurgy and buffalo sacrifice to Borneo. With ancestors of the 40,000-year-old Niah Caves skull, they form many of Borneo's indigenous groups.

c 1st century AD

Chinese and Indian traders detour to Borneo. Egyptian geographer Ptolemy's uncannily accurate descriptions of Borneo likely came from Indian voyagers. By 500 AD, Chinese are settling in coastal present-day West Kalimantan.

600s–1200s

Sumatra's Hindu-Buddhist Srivijaya kingdom dominates Southeast Asia's sea trade. Under Srivijaya, ethnic Malays immigrate to Borneo. Modern social values known as *adat* are a Hindu legacy.

c 1400

Ibans migrate from West Kalimantan's Kapuas River valley to Sarawak, displacing Bidayuh. Some Ibans ally with coastal Malays to become 'Sea Dayak' pirates. Ibans will be Sarawak's last group to renounce head-hunting.

1445

Islam becomes the state religion of Melaka, Srivijaya's successor as Southeast Asia's trading power. Merchants spread a predominantly tolerant, mild form of Islam that accommodates existing traditions.

MEANWHILE, BACK IN THE JUNGLE...

While regional kingdoms and Europeans tried to get pieces of Borneo, the island's indigenous people were developing their own societies. In most cases, we know little about this history due to the lack of written records, particularly about forest tribes.

It's known that Iban Dayaks migrated from the mid-Kapuas River area in today's West Kalimantan to Sarawak around 1400. But it's not known why they moved. Tribal wars are believed to have been frequent with some groups, such as Kenyah and Ibans, pitted in traditional rivalries, but details are scarce.

More is known about Borneo's coastal sultanates, such as Brunei, which dominated northern Borneo before the Europeans came. These coastal states were usually established by envoys from kingdoms across the Indonesian archipelago, setting up trading posts, intermarrying with indigenous people, and outlasting or outgrowing their distant sponsors.

In the south, Banjarmasin emerged as the major political power among the Islamicised former Buddhist and Hindu minikingdoms. Ethnically, the Banjars are a mix of Dayak, Sumatran Malay, Javanese and Bugis. Royal intermarriage with Dayaks helped cement good relations. The sultanate adopted Islam under Pangeran Samudera shortly after Portugal's conquest of Melaka. By the 18th century, Banjarmasin's influence stretched coast to coast, from Sambas to Berau.

Today, regional royalty often remains a point of local pride, and residents expect tourists to visit the town's palace, now usually a royal museum. The Kutai dynasty palace-cum-museum in Tenggarong, East Kalimantan, (see p276) is Borneo's best.

Compagnie (VOC; United East India Company). The VOC established a diamond-trading outpost in Sambas on Kalimantan's northwest coast in 1610, but its focus soon shifted to spices. Britain operated through its East India Company (EIC), building a flourishing pepper trade from Borneo that aroused Dutch jealousies.

The rivals' Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 carved the region into separate spheres of interest that were to become 20th-century national boundaries. The Dutch got what became Indonesia; Britain got the Malay peninsula and Singapore. (A legacy of the split is the more widespread use of English in Sabah and Sarawak than in formerly Dutch Kalimantan.) Britain did not include Borneo in the treaty, preferring its EIC concentrate on the Malay peninsula and Singapore, which it dubbed the Straits Settlements.

THE WHITE RAJAS

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty didn't end British interest in Borneo. Brunei's decline in the late 18th century led Sarawak to assert its independence. The region was emboldened by a flourishing trade in antimony, a metal used in medicines and as an alloying agent; *sarawak* means 'antimony' in Malay. Brunei's sultan dispatched his uncle Raja Muda Hashim, but he

failed to quell the separatists. Seeing a chance to evict Brunei, the rebels looked south for Dutch aid.

In a case of impeccable timing, James Brooke, an independently wealthy, India-born son of a British magistrate, moored his armed schooner in Kuching. Raja Muda offered to make the Englishman the raja of Sungai Sarawak if Brooke helped suppress the worsening revolt. Brooke, confident London would support any move to counter Dutch influence, accepted the deal. Backed by superior fire power, Brooke quashed the rebellion, held a reluctant Raja Muda to his word, and in 1841 became sovereign of the Kuching region. As expected, the British endorsed Brooke's initiative, eventually knighting him, and Sarawak remained Brooke's personal fiefdom.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the white raja line survived Brooke for two more generations. Unlike British colonial administrators, Brooke and his successors included tribal leaders in their ruling council and honoured local customs. The white rajas discouraged European immigration and European companies from destroying native jungle for huge rubber plantations. They encouraged Chinese migration – despite a rebellion by Hakka immigrants in 1857 that Brooke brutally suppressed – and Chinese came to dominate Sarawak's economy.

Brooke's nephew, the less-colourful Charles Johnson – who changed his name to Brooke – took over in 1863. Charles succeeded in areas his uncle had lagged in, expanding Sarawak's economy and slashing government debt. In 1916, the 86-year-old second white raja installed his eldest son, Charles Vyner Brooke. A two-decade veteran of government service, Vyner professionalised Sabah's administration, preparing it for a modern form of rule.

OUT OF THEIR SHELL

An English ruler in Sarawak spurred the somnolent Dutch to cement their interests in Kalimantan, starting with new coal mines in South and East Kalimantan. Assertiveness bred disputes with indigenous groups, culminating in a four-year war between the Dutch and the Banjarmasin sultanate in 1859. The Dutch retained control but resistance persisted until 1905.

Dutch commercial exploitation of the archipelago reached its peak at the end of the 19th century with thriving rubber, pepper, copra, tin, coal and coffee exports, plus oil drilling in East Kalimantan. In 1907, Britain's Shell Transport & Trading merged with the Royal Dutch Company for the Exploitation of Petroleum Sources in the Netherlands Indies to form Royal Dutch Shell. By 1930, Shell was producing 85% of Indonesia's oil, lubricating Dutch control.

Sarawak's government website (www.sarawak.gov.my) has a balanced history of the state and useful contemporary information.

Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* depicts life in Borneo's interior during the 19th century.

1511

Portugal conquers Melaka in a bid to control the spice trade. Brunei succeeds Melaka as Southeast Asia's leading Islamic kingdom and trading centre, dominating northern Borneo and beyond.

1610

Dutch build a diamond-trading post in Sambas, West Kalimantan, beginning a period of more than 300 years of digging and ignoring the rest of Kalimantan's resources.

1701

Brunei cedes Sabah to the Sultan of Sulu, creating the basis for persistent Philippine claims on the territory. Meanwhile, sneezing mad over the pepper trade, the Dutch eject the British from Kalimantan.

1700s

South Kalimantan's Sultanate of Banjarmasin extends its influence to Borneo's east and west coasts. After initially accommodating Dutch colonists, the Banjar War erupts in 1859, with four years of battles and four more decades of resistance.

1824

The Anglo-Dutch Treaty divides the region into what eventually becomes Malaya and Indonesia. Although the Dutch are granted Kalimantan, they are too preoccupied with fighting in Sumatra and Java to pay much attention to it.

1841

After helping Brunei's local governor suppress an uprising and correctly surmising that Great Britain would welcome his presence to counter the Dutch in Kalimantan, Englishman James Brooke becomes first white raja of Sarawak.