Brookes, the British, and Christianity

Christian Missions and the State in Sarawak, 1841-1963

Tan Jin Huat

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Foreword

This book is an important contribution to our understanding of Sarawak's place in the history of Christianity in Malaysia. The story of its churches and people is part of the story of Malaysia itself. Sarawak has been the home of an indigenous Christianity since the Brooke regime, and as migration and employment patterns have brought Sarawakians to other parts of the country, Sarawakian Christians contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a Malaysian Christian today.

In *Brookes, the British, and Christianity*, the history of the foundational eras of Sarawak is told in terms of the relationships between the churches and the governing authorities of the day. In one sense it provides a classic "church and state" analysis in which overlapping and competing interests bring the church and the government together in areas of common concern, yet contribute to a creative tension. Dr Tan Jin Huat highlights these perspectives and the successive layers of policy of the past century and a half by drawing attention to the desire of successive administrations to ensure that a strong basis for religious peace exists in the state. Christians in Sarawak have always been in a situation where respect for authorities and those of different faiths and cultures is part of the basis of their presence. It has also been a situation where that respect was intended to be reciprocal.

The significance of this for today can hardly be underestimated. Like Christians, generally the churches in Sarawak have found their best sense of purpose when they have worked constructively with the situation they are in. As a result,

churches can draw on a long experience of what it means to be active in their mission in a context subject to constraints. This sort of situation is not unique to West Malaysia where similar principles have been seen to surface from the Treaty of Pangkor and the 1957 Constitution. Sarawak reminds us that the issues that all Malaysian citizens wrestle with are ones which arise out of who they are together as a nation of communities, and that engagement with those issues can be expected to continue.

Dr Tan's scholarship seeks to be fair to those involved and avoid being partisan in his concerns or sensationalist in his narration of the past. This is incredibly important for the health of a society. In his exploration of the archives and in weaving together this account, Tan acknowledges the work of others, and takes the story forward in a succinct, readable, and important way.

John Roxborogh
Dunedin, New Zealand

Editorial Preface

Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) is pleased to announce the formation of its publication division and the commencement of the STM Series, with *Brookes, the British and Christianity: Christian missions and the State in Sarawak, 1841-1963*. The format of the STM Series follows a similar line of the successful SPCK series known as the International Study Guides (ISGs) or its earlier predecessor, the Theological Education Fund (TEF) series.

The STM Series will publish books under various sub-sections namely, Biblical, Theological, Historical, Missions, and Pastoral. These books are intercultural and contextual in approach and are written mainly by the lecturers and friends of STM. Although these books cater to a wider public reading, scholarship and relevance to contemporary local issues will be addressed and kept up to date.

The STM Series is jointly published by Seminari Theoloji Malaysia and Genesis Books, an imprint of Armour Publishing.

Rev Dr Ezra Kok Hon Seng
Rev Dr Anthony Y.F. Loke
General Editors

Author's Preface

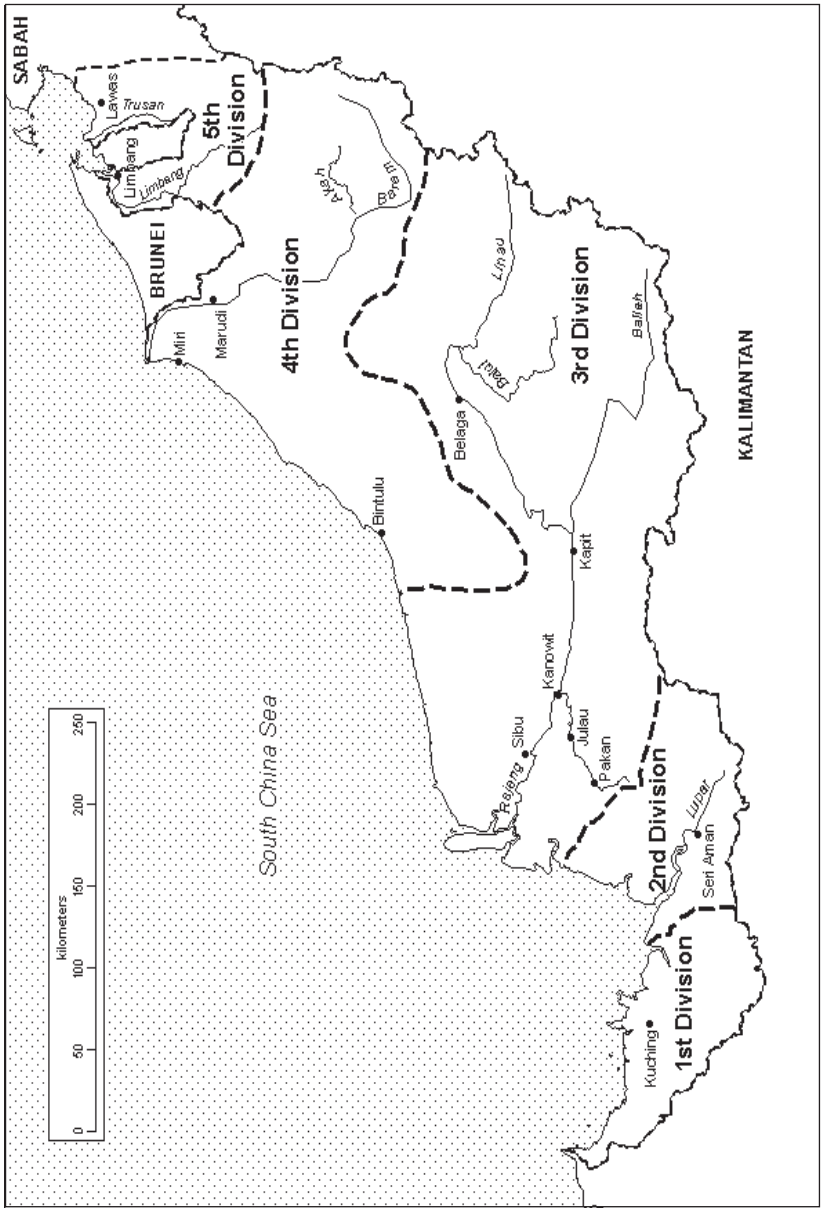
The inspiration for this study came when I started my research on a Christian mission in Sarawak some years ago. I had an interest in history but this interest was rekindled. But I found that there was a scarcity of writing on the history of Christianity in Malaysia. As a result, it has been my desire that more Malaysian Christians are encouraged to write their own history. The need for such writing is great and this piece of work is but a small contribution to that end.

It has been said that a person without a history is like a person without a memory, not knowing where he has come from and how it has shaped his present. A sense of history also gives us a sense of identity. There is a need to write and record the memories of the work of the Christian Church, noting the role and contribution of Christianity in this country. In doing so, it will help to clarify for many an identity for the Malaysian Church.

It is hoped that this small piece of work might serve to encourage others to venture into a largely uncharted but exciting field of writing on the story of Christianity in Malaysia.

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to King Shen, my wife, for her constant and practical encouragement. I must also acknowledge the help of Chang Tsyh Yong for proof-reading this script for publication.

Rev Dr Tan Jin Huat
Seminari Theoloji Malaysia



Sarawak and its Divisions during the Brooke and British colonial rule

Introduction

Christian missions needed permission to work in Sarawak from the time of the first Rajah, James Brooke. The Anglican mission first started work in 1848, the Roman Catholic in 1881, and the Methodist in 1901. During the Brooke era from 1841 to World War II,[1] the successive Brooke Rajahs assigned various Christian missions to different geographical areas. Broadly, the Anglican mission concentrated its work in the First and Second Divisions, the Roman Catholic in the interior of the Third Division, and the Methodist in the area around the coastal town of Sibu in the Third Division.

Lily Chan, in her thesis, "Christian Missions and the Iban of Sarawak during the Brooke Rule (1840s to 1940s)," considered that the Brooke government had a consistent policy of keeping Christian missions geographically separate from one another and using them for the political end of pacifying its unruly frontiers.[2] In *Bishops and Brookes*, Graham Saunders examined the relationship between the White Rajahs and the Anglican Mission from 1848 to 1941. He argued that despite some tension,

the mission supplemented the work of the government, acting almost as a branch of the government. The missionaries and the Brooke officials were partners in a common enterprise of gradually civilising the natives.[3] This study aims to re-examine the changing emphasis in the attitudes towards Christian missions of the three Brooke Rajahs and the British colonial government prior to Sarawak becoming part of Malaysia in 1963.

1 James Brooke and Christian Missions in Sarawak, 1841–1868

"Great prudence and forbearance will be required."[1]

The Plans of James Brooke for Sarawak (1841-1868)

The views of an anti-colonial colonialist

James Brooke was an English adventurer seeking personal significance and knowledge of undiscovered parts of the world. When he made his journey to Borneo in 1838, he was 35 years old and had achieved very little in life. In Sarawak he did indeed find fame and significance when he became its Rajah in 1841.

The governing policies of his rule were derived from a quite deliberate vision and expressed in a "grand design." In October 1838, he set out his ideas in a prospectus on Borneo and the neighbouring islands. He was disappointed with British policy over the Eastern Seas and the failure of the East India Company to pursue Raffles' idea to ensure ascendancy over Borneo to

New Holland which had resulted in only a foothold of British interest in Singapore.[2] During the Napoleonic Wars, the British took over Dutch interests in the Far East. At the end of the war, Java was returned to the Dutch. In the view of Brooke, "The consequences are well known; all the evils of Dutch rule have been re-established, and the British watchfully excluded, directly or indirectly, from the commerce of the islands." Further, he urged the possession of these islands, agreeing with Raffles that a nation's commercial prosperity was dependent greatly upon territorial possession and he recommended widespread British acquisitions.[3] Yet, territorial possession as the best means of a direct and powerful influence in the Archipelago needed to have a "government instituted for that purpose ... directed at the advancement of the native interests and the development of native resources, rather than a flood of European colonisation to aim at possession only, without reference to the indefeasible rights of the Aborigines."[4] He did not advocate territorial possession *per se* with the attendant consequences of firstly, flooding the place with European colonisers and secondly, exploiting the rights of the natives.

Brooke viewed the Dutch presence in the Archipelago as weak and its rule as having caused chaos rather than harmony and prosperity. Their position in the Far East had only the appearance of strength, when in reality they were weak, and "their power would easily sink before a vigorous opposition of any European country." He considered that they were "masters of the Archipelago only because no other nation is willing to compete with them." He had clear views about the Dutch Government in the East:

> The policy of the Dutch has at present reduced this Eden of the Eastern Wave (i.e. the Malay Archipelago) to a state of anarchy and confusion repugnant to humanity as it is to commercial prosperity.[5]

James was critical of the effect of European colonialism in the Archipelago generally. There had been a strong government and thriving trade in the region, but the destructive actions of the European powers threatened the future of the local peoples.

> Their (local) governments have been broken up; the old states decomposed by treachery, by bribery and intrigue; their possessions wrested from them under flimsy pretences; their trade restricted, their vices encouraged, their virtues repressed, and their energies paralysed or rendered desperate, till there is every reason to fear the gradual extinction of the Malay race.[6]

For James, these "miseries immediately and prospectively flowed from European rule."[7] When he was at Singapore in July 1839, he reflected on the condition of Johore:

> Is it not sad to think that kingdoms are laid low, and the inhabitants oppressed and dispersed, whenever they come into the grasp of European civilization?[8]

James questioned the influence of British colonisation with regard to India, which was considered to be "the best and most uprightly governed of any European possession." He observed that, under the British, the Indians were not "more civilised than in the time of Baber or Akbar," nor "were their minds more enlightened" and "their political freedom more advanced." In terms of civilisation, he concluded that the Indian was "as low as the African!"[9]

His broad plan for Borneo had been summarised in a letter to his mother in 18 April 1841:

> I have excellent hopes that this effort of mine will succeed and whilst it ameliorates the conditions of the unhappy natives and tends to the highest promotion of philanthropy, it will secure for me some better means of carrying through these *grand objects*: I call them grand for they are so, when we reflect that *civilisation, commerce and religion* may through them be spread over so vast an island as Borneo.[10]

The foundation for his views, as Robert Payne pointed out, came as a result of eighteen months of studies at Greenwich.[11] The inspiration for James' view came through the reading of books written by both Sir Stamford Raffles and George Windsor Earl.[12] As Graham Saunders argued, James' ideas were influenced through George Windsor Earl's writing, *The Eastern Seas*, published in 1837, which promoted the views of Raffles:

> … advancing rather a civilising mission, which aimed to combine altruistic humanitarian with practical economic benefits. ... He hated slavery, believed commerce would bring social blessing, admired the innate virtues of the natives of the indigenous peoples of the eastern archipelago, and disliked the Dutch political control and commercial monopoly, which inhibited not only the expansion of British trade but also the prosperity of the archipelago.[13]

Obviously, James was confident about the civilising power of the British. James was very much influenced by the example of Sir

Stamford Raffles in trying to extend British influence not only to the island of Borneo, but also northward towards China and eastward towards Australia.[14] He consciously sought to pattern his rule of Sarawak after the way Raffles governed Java:

> Sir Raffles, Mr Crauford and Colonel Farqhar especially the former are still remembered with affection by the elderly natives and in places where they were unknown they are respected and talked of ... Well, well we shall *see what the future brings for Sarawak*.[15]

He expressed his intention for Borneo thus: "to develop the island of Borneo ... to extirpate piracy ... I wish to correct the native character to gain and hold an influence in Borneo Proper. To introduce gradually a better system of government ... to remove the clogs on trade, to develop new sources of commerce. I wish to make Borneo a second Java."[16]

The reality of ruling Sarawak

In fulfilling his aim to make Borneo a second Java, as Graham Irwin noted, James Brooke needed "generous support from the commercial world and also from the naval forces."[17] The two pre-requisites of British protection and financial assistance were necessary for the success of his grand plan to create an environment conducive for civilisation, Christianity and commerce to take place. British protection was necessary to bolster his fledgling government. As a private individual with limited financial resources, he could not develop the country's resources. He acknowledged that, with British recognition, the potential for the required "greater means" were available and more importantly, would provide a "sense of confidence to settlers and capitalists."[18] He believed that, like in Singapore,

once "the British flag was hoisted" which "insures protection to life and property," the "same will be the result in any Malay country."[19] For commerce to be extended, it was necessary that "piracy be suppressed; the native governments be settled, so as to afford protection to the poorer and producing classes."[20] There was always the threat of piracy, despite his efforts to keep it in check. In a letter to JC Templer on 7 September 1845, James wrote, "What we want now is protection – English protection" especially to keep the Sarebas and Sakkaran Dayaks in check if necessary on a future occasion.[21] It is not difficult to understand his sense of anxiety when the British government had by December 1844 expressed its lack of interest in Sarawak. At that time, the British government maintained that "no part of the policy of Her Majesty's government was to establish any colony on the coast of Borneo."[22] Earlier, when there had been a report of coal in Brunei, James Brooke was hopeful that after the visit of Captain Sir Edward Belcher in 1843, Britain might make Sarawak a British Protectorate[23] and make him governor. He was disappointed when this did not materialise.[24] However, from 1845 to 1849, James had the advantage of the British navy ships supporting the pacification of Sarawak, especially in the suppression of piracy. However, after the Battle of Beting Marau, British public opinion turned against Brooke, the British navy began to shun Sarawak, and he became vulnerable to attacks.

James saw it as urgent to either cede Sarawak to the British or get British protection. Through James Gardner, his agent, James made an approach to the Secretary of State: "I have resolved to make a push, because the objects in view will be greatly advanced, if I can be placed above the hateful necessity of trading."[25] He was willing to surrender his rights to the British government if it would implement his ideas.[26] "My wish is to get the Government to assist me or at any rate to recognise the place,

and to *enter into my general view of policy.*"[27] Basically, James wanted British protection, commercial, and religious activity yet all to be subservient to his grand plan for Borneo.

> Two things I am peculiarly on my guard against: first, I must not place myself in such a position as to shackle my freedom without any positive assurance of increased means and power to carry out my views; second, I must not accept any appointment without power, for I should only in that case become an ineffective tool, and my labour, so far as advancing the interests of the country generally, would be inoperative. In one word, I must have power; and if power be not bestowed, I had better trust myself than to the government.[28]

He had hoped that if the British Government were to back his plan and to enter into a commercial treaty with Borneo and make him their resident commissioner, he would be "assured that perfect success would attend it."[29]

He believed that Sarawak needed the protection of a major European power for it to survive beyond his lifetime.[30] From 1859 onwards, he also considered the possibility of some arrangement with France,[31] and later with Belgium.[32] All the while, he hoped that Britain would change its mind.

His ambitions were expansionist: "If the British government accedes to my views, the entire coast of Borneo will fall under our influence, and our influence, properly used, will gradually open river after river to a direct trade."[33] Even without British protection, he expanded his territory from one river basin to the next, annexing the Lupar basin in 1853 and the Rajang in 1861. The ability to rule a larger area would no doubt add to his fame and prestige as he sought to realise his grand object

of bringing *civilisation, commerce, and religion* and that "through them be spread over so vast an island as Borneo."[34]

In James' view, nothing should interfere with the welfare of the natives of Sarawak. He felt that it was his mission to protect the "indefeasible rights of the aborigines." He had a fascination with the people of Borneo, particularly, the Dayaks. Despite the need to suppress the atrocities practised by the Dayak tribes,[35] he considered them gentle and an industrious people to be relieved from oppression.[36] Prevalent at that time, the concept of the noble savage caught the imagination of the British people.[37] Moreover, he believed that "these suffering people can be raised in the scale of civilisation and happiness,"[38] "by correcting their native character"[39] and by advancing native interests, developing native resources, and respecting native rights;[40] hence, leading to "the amelioration of an interesting but most unhappy aboriginal race."[41] In this venture, he showed great optimism "to plant a mixed colony amid a wild but not unvirtuous race, and become a pioneer of European knowledge and native improvement," believing that "a short time will so develop the country as to render the advantage clear to all eyes."[42]

His project of subjugating and civilising the natives

His experiment to civilise a native race was probably further influenced by his experience at Madras in 1830 shortly after he had resigned from the East India Company. There, he had a glimpse of the corrupting influence of the Europeans: [43]

> The natives were despicable, here and every place I have seen, have been corrupted by their intercourse with Europeans. They lose their particular virtues arising from their habits and religions and become tainted with the vices of those around them. ... But no Englishman can observe the deterioration of the native character from their intercourse with the whites, without a blush.

When he sailed to Penang on his way to China, he expressed with delight that the island was ideal for settlement as it had the combination of the industry and activity of the European and the *care of a fostering government.*[44] There seemed to be an apparent contradiction in his view about European influence. On the one hand, he saw the corrupting influence of the Europeans; on the other, he suggested that through the influence of the Europeans, there could be native improvement. For him, English civilisation was still superior as he was convinced that "no Asiatic is fitted to govern a country: under European guidance, yes – but alone, no."[45] The crux of his idea seemed to be that, only carefully selected Englishmen willing to share his general view were best suited for the task in Sarawak.

His intention to rule a native population in which no evil European influence, not even English, was welcome, made him an anti-colonial colonialist. His idea of "the care of a fostering government" meant there would be financial advances and the protection of Her Majesty's ships.[46] Most probably, he was thinking of the British government acceding to his idea of making him a resident commissioner and granting him legitimate power where he himself could carry out his grand plan and could exercise "the care of a fostering government," which would genuinely look after the interests of the natives. Implicit in his view was that there was to be no full scale involvement of the British government.

James did not want any large-scale commercial enterprise despite the need for western capital and enterprise to develop Sarawak. Outwardly, it was rightly claimed that large-scale

western commercial enterprises which were oriented towards profit-making, would operate to the detriment of native welfare. More likely, as Ooi Keat Gin pointed out, any wealthy and powerful commercial enterprise would pose a threat to his authority and position as Rajah if it were to acquire all his rights in Sarawak and develop the resources of the country.[47] If, as Graham Irwin had argued, James' chief concern was British recognition, the purpose of his writing to Henry Wise, his London agent, to attract British commercial interest[48] would be to serve his political interest. It was James himself who first suggested to Wise in early 1843 that a public company be formed to develop the resources of Sarawak.[49] But by 1846, when James' prestige grew as a result of the British Navy's action against the pirates and when Sarawak had a steady revenue, his interest and need for assistance from the commercial world declined. From this point of view, it revealed his opportunistic tendency to secure whatever assistance was needed to bolster his position as Rajah without losing real control. Hence, from 1847 to 1851, he began excluding European speculators (for example, Robert Burns, the adventurer-trader) and opposed the Eastern Archipelago Company which was formed in 1848 with Henry Wise as its managing director, operating in Borneo.[50] His only viable option then was to allow the gradual development of its resources by a small company; hence, his permission for the establishment of the Borneo Company Limited in 1856 to work the mines and pay royalties to the government. In this way, from James' perspective, not only were the native interests preserved but his as well. While wealth was not his goal in his Sarawak enterprise,[51] success, power, and fame were his main considerations. His maintenance of real power as Rajah was, therefore, vital. In short, he would not allow any individual or commercial enterprise to undermine his position.

His motive and style of governance

The underlying motive was personal fame and public recognition through the success of his experiment of ameliorating native conditions in a way that was different from other European colonisers. "The capabilities of the Sarawak country were very great. … To crown all, there were credit to myself in case of success,"[52] and he expressed his desire to his mother that he "wanted to be a knight."[53] While disclaiming higher ambitions, he noted that "any honour conferred on me in my present position is an indirect recognition of this place," and that "it would be important indeed" to his position in Sarawak "among the natives." "As a knight, I should have no equal; ... for it would proclaim me a chief, greater than the governor of Singapore, or any other on this side of Calcutta."[54]

By 1841, James Brooke had a clear idea about the type of government that would make his plan to govern the natives different from the way the contemporary European powers had done. He said that "when we desire to improve and elevate a people, we must not begin by treating them as an inferior race and yet this is too generally the style of our Indian rulers."[55]

He outlined what was to become the distinguishing characteristic of the Brooke administration: [56]

> *The experiment of developing a country through the residence of a few Europeans by assistance of its native rulers has never been fairly tried; and it appears to me, in some respects, more desirable than the actual possession by a foreign nation* for if successful the native ruler finds greater advantages, and if failure the European government is not committed. Above all, it insures the independence of the native princes and may advance the inhabitants further in the scale of civilisation.

The nature of this government meant the inevitable reliance on local chiefs to assert political authority on his behalf over the rivers they controlled.[57] Hence, maintaining their goodwill was vital.

The Brooke administration, as Charles Hose and William McDougall noted, had initially a conical structure with the Rajah at the apex, European Residents and officers at the middle, and the native chiefs at the lower level.[58] Generally, the Brooke administration of European residents and officers seemed to have replaced the Brunei governors and nobles without any radical departure from their rule in the pre-European era.[59] The Rajah ruled from Kuching with a Resident responsible for each division. At each major station, the European officers had the help of the native officers, who were mainly Sarawak chiefs. Brooke's policy of leniency to his defeated foes won for him their loyalty. In Kuching, a Supreme Council was established in 1855 which comprised two European officers (usually the Resident of the first division and the Treasurer) and four prominent Malay *Datus*, making it a permanent feature to consult native opinion.[60]

James worked at ensuring a firm control with himself as the benevolent despot. His policy in ruling Sarawak was the typical British method of "divide and rule." "My militia will consist of Chinese and Malays; 'divide and govern' is the motto. I must govern each by the other."[61] This included the use of one group of Dayaks (downriver Dayaks) to keep the others (Malays, Chinese, and upriver Dayaks) in check.

His first task in the pacification of Sarawak necessitated the suppression of piracy, the separation of the Malays from the Dayaks, and the gaining of the loyalty of the local inhabitants. Brooke felt it necessary to reduce Malay influence over the Dayaks. It was observed that Sharif Sahib and his brother, Mullah, at Skrang could mobilise the powerful Skrang and Saribas Dayaks

to attack weaker tribes for heads and for slaves.[62] It was believed that where they intermingled, Iban piracy was influenced by the Malays. As James wrote:[63]

> The Dayaks may be corrected but the influence of these sharifs must be entirely broken and their persons banished. This once effected, there is no other power, even including Borneo itself, likely to visit or annoy us, and the utmost good will result to every river along the coast, for they will then look and appeal to us, and we may gently influence their government.

Forts were established at locations along strategic rivers where James Brooke gained or intended to gain territorial control. He placed trusted men, who were either relatives or sons of family friends, like Brereton with Alan Lee at Skrang in 1850, Henry Steele at Kanowit in 1851, and then with Charles Fox at Sarikei on the Rajang in 1856.[64] After 1851, when more forts (Lingga near Banting in 1852, Betong on the Saribas in 1858) were established, his officers began to influence the social and political alignments in the lower reaches of the Iban rivers, separating the Ibans from the Malays.

In 1850, the Rajah persuaded the Malays of the Paku who were then scattered up and down the river among the Ibans to gather at one place near the mouth of the river. It happened gradually over a few years with a Malay village at the mouth of Paku, now known as Spaoh.[65] There was a similar resettlement effort in 1852 involving Charles Brooke.[66] When Charles Brooke took charge of Lingga, he sought to separate the Malays of Banting Hills from the Balau Ibans, by moving the Malays who were then living thirteen miles upriver to the mouth of the Lingga near the Government post in mid-1853.[67] The result of

isolating the Malays from the Ibans meant the increasing control of the Government over the downriver Ibans, resulting in a new political alignment. Instead of being under Malay leadership, they now came under European leadership.[68] These outstations were effective in ending an era of Iban coastal raiding; thereby, putting the Brooke regime in firmer control of Sarawak.

The Attitude of James Brooke to Christian Missions

In 1842, when James Brooke wrote to James Gardner, he made a three-fold appeal to gain the interest of the British public: he highlighted the commercial, Christian and humanitarian interests of his venture. In helping the Land Dayaks out of their wretchedness, Brooke believed that the door will open for religion and later for commerce.[69] He appealed by portraying an optimistic picture of the ease of converting the Land Dayaks: [70]

> Christianity might easily be introduced amongst them; civilisation would advance, commerce be greatly extended, and this vast island laid an open field for the enterprise and knowledge of enlightened beings.

His invitation to Christian missions

There is no doubt that James took the initiative to invite Christian missions to Sarawak in 1841. But a response to his invitation only came in 1847 with the setting up of the Borneo Church Missionary Institution (BCMI).

There are differing views on the motive of James to interest Christian missions in his venture. According to Emily Hahn, Brooke's motives were pragmatic, using whatever means he could to achieve his purpose: "His attitude towards the church and her emissaries was utilitarian to a degree bordering on the

tactless. ... he knew that where missionaries went, public support was sure to follow and so without compunction he now used the conventional arguments."[71] If Brooke believed that where the missionaries went, public support was sure to follow, any appeal to Christian mission bodies, if successful, would serve his interest to make a success of his experiment to civilise the noble savages and make a name for himself. Hahn's assessment, even though it may sound harsh, might have a point worth considering. Whatever else that Brooke did was subservient to his plan of becoming famous through his self-perceived, novel experiment in ruling the natives.

The fact that the Commission of Inquiry of 1854 looked into his conduct in the Battle of Beting Marau left him highly dispirited, demoralised, and a broken man. He felt discredited and humiliated in the eyes of his own subjects and un-vindicated among his own countrymen. He had protested that the Commission should be held in England as the accusations were made in England. But the holding of the Commission in Singapore did somewhat discredit his standing among his subjects. One reason, among others, for the Chinese Uprising in 1857 and the Malay Plot in 1859, was the perception that James Brooke had lost the support of the British government. At the same time, the favourable verdict of the Commission did little to vindicate him at home.

There is also no doubt that his motive was political. When James Brooke was proclaimed Rajah, he agreed not to interfere with the religion and customs of the Malays: "No person is to meddle or interfere with my government on any pretense whether of politics or trade, and on my part, *I am to preserve their laws and not meddle with their religion* …"[72] His experiment of ruling a native race with only a handful of Europeans coupled with his limited resources necessitated the keeping of good relations with the