

## The anthropology of the state and the state of anthropology in Brunei

Frank Fanselow

*This article provides a detailed account of the process of invention of a nationalist tradition for Brunei, the most tradition-conscious nation in Southeast Asia. It shows how Brunei's nationalist tradition emerged at the interface of colonial records, indigenous oral and written sources, ethnographic fieldwork, and anthropological theories. For this purpose the article traces the history of anthropological research in northern Borneo from its colonial beginnings to its postcolonial role in nation-building and shows how anthropology and anthropologists have — sometimes unknowingly, sometimes deliberately — played an active role in the shaping of Negara Brunei Darussalam.*

### Introduction

It would be difficult to find a state today that approximates Weber's ideal type of *traditionelle Herrschaft* more closely than Negara Brunei Darussalam. Brunei is ruled by one of the world's oldest dynasties and is one of the few surviving absolute monarchies today. As such it seems an anachronism in the twenty-first century: a nation-state in which the ultimate source of authority is the will of the king not that of the people, a constitution whose stated purpose is the protection of the rights of the ruler not those of the people, and a people who — on the whole — appear quite content with this state of affairs and see no contradiction between being subjects of the king and citizens of the nation. But where others see anachronisms, Bruneians see their traditions. It will not come as a surprise to readers that in this article I take the position that these traditions are neither anachronistic survivals that have stubbornly resisted change nor carefully preserved ancient customs, but that they are as invented as any other nationalist tradition. My main aim here is to put this process of invention under a microscope and observe how Brunei's national traditions

Frank Fanselow is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Zayed University Abu Dhabi. This article was written in 2012 while I was a Visiting Professor at the Institute for Research in Humanities at Kyoto University. I would like to thank Kyoto University, and in particular Professor Masakazu Tanaka, for hosting me. Correspondence in connection with this article should be addressed to: [frank.fanselow@zu.ac.ae](mailto:frank.fanselow@zu.ac.ae). I wish to express my gratitude to former colleagues at Universiti Brunei Darussalam who readily shared their knowledge of the anthropology and history of Brunei with me, in particular Donald E. Brown and the late Allen R. Maxwell, when they were Visiting Professors in the now defunct Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and B.A. Hussainmiya of the Department of History. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments.

emerged at the interface of colonial records, indigenous oral and written sources, ethnographic fieldwork, and anthropological theories.

Before gaining independence in 1984, Brunei had been a British Protected State for almost a century, including half of it under de facto rule of a British Resident. Official Brunei historiography maintains that Brunei was never a colony because the Sultan remained head of state and had merely transferred part of his powers to the Resident in return for British protection. When independence began looming on the horizon in the 1950s questions arose about the future political order of Brunei. The monarchy argued that Brunei's monarchical institutions and traditions had in essence been preserved under Indirect Rule and that the Resident's powers should rightfully revert to the Sultan. In support of this claim the monarchy began sponsoring scholarship into Brunei's political and social traditions by founding and patronising institutions that conducted historical and anthropological research. In the absence of Bruneian social scientists, pioneering research was initially carried out by a number of foreign researchers, but subsequently mainly by the first generation of Bruneian social scientists who were trained abroad. The latter formed an important section of the newly emerging Bruneian intelligentsia, several of whom rose to influential political positions.

Since there were few indigenous historical documents, the monarchy's claims to legitimacy were largely based on the assumption of an unwritten constitution, an implicit social contract built into the collective consciousness of the society to which vague references could be found in colonial records. This unwritten constitution needed to be documented and formalised as part of the process of modern nation-building. Given the scarcity of historical records, most of them colonial rather than indigenous, anthropological research had to fill the space that historical research could not fill. Ironically, through the intertextuality of colonial documents, indigenous sources, and ethnography earlier colonial representations of indigenous political systems were appropriated and reproduced by an emerging nationalist anthropology.

### **Anthropology as handmaiden of colonialism**

If one had to put a precise date on the beginning of modern anthropological research in Borneo, the year 1947 would probably be the best choice. This was the year in which Edmund Leach, soon to emerge as one of the most influential figures in postwar anthropology, spent half a year in Sarawak conducting an ethnographic survey for the Colonial Office. The previous year Charles Vyner Brooke, the last 'White Raja' of Sarawak, had decided on the accession of his realm to the British Crown, a century after his great uncle, James Brooke, had begun to carve out his own kingdom in Borneo at the expense of the Sultanate of Brunei.

Brooke rule in Sarawak had been paternalistic: the Brookes saw themselves as reformers of indigenous political institutions, not as pioneers of modern government. They did not want to be seen as foreign colonial rulers, but as enlightened guardians protecting the indigenous peoples from more rapacious forms of colonial capitalism as well as from each other.<sup>1</sup> Like the Brunei Sultanate itself, it was a paternalistic style

1 For the history of the Sarawak administrative service see: John H. Walker, *Power and prowess: The origins of Brooke kingship in Sarawak* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002) and Naimah S.

of ruling in which Brooke's officers (initially many of them James Brooke's relatives) were given considerable autonomy and the business of ruling was often a face-to-face affair. Brooke's insistence that his officers understood the languages and cultures of the people whom they governed gave rise to its own tradition of serious amateur scholarship among his colonial officers (starting with Hugh Low, Spenser St. John, and Charles Hose) that remained influential in Borneo Studies for a long time.

The Brookes' unorthodox ruling style had been viewed with suspicion by the British government, and when Sarawak became a Crown Colony in 1946 the Colonial Office lost no time in reorganising its administration along bureaucratic lines. These changes created tensions between the old hands of the Brooke administration and the newcomers from the Colonial Office who had served the Empire elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The new colonial bureaucracy sought to base itself on scientific foundations; in 1947 the first comprehensive census of Sarawak was conducted, and in late 1946 Sir Charles Arden Clark, the governor-designate of the Crown Colony of Sarawak, approached the Colonial Social Science Research Council (CSSRC) with the request to conduct a socioeconomic survey of their newly acquired crown colony.<sup>3</sup>

The CSSRC in turn approached Raymond Firth, who had succeeded Malinowski to the chair of anthropology at the London School of Economics (LSE). Firth's study of a Malay fishing village in Kelantan, one of the first modern anthropological studies in Southeast Asia, had just been published,<sup>4</sup> and he had previously been commissioned to produce a similar survey for Malaya.<sup>5</sup> Firth suggested that the Sarawak survey be conducted by a social scientist with 'training in the academic discipline of social anthropology' and proposed his former student Edmund Leach for the job.<sup>6</sup> Leach had already extensive experience in Southeast Asia, particularly in Burma where he had served during the war as a liaison officer with indigenous societies in the highlands. After finishing his doctorate under Firth's supervision, Leach had just taken up a lectureship at LSE. He spent six months from June to November 1947 in Sarawak during which Firth visited him in Kuching. Leach travelled throughout the first four divisions of Sarawak, but due to time limits and transport difficulties he was unable to visit the northern Fifth Division adjacent to Brunei.

Leach's arrival in Sarawak was met with resentment among the old hands of the Brooke *ancien régime*. They considered themselves to be the experts on Sarawak and saw no need to call in an outsider, however much of a 'modern' social scientist he might be. They derided Leach and the anthropologists who soon carried out the research projects he proposed as 'socio-comics'.<sup>7</sup> None had more reasons to be resentful at not being commissioned to conduct the survey himself than Tom Harrison, the

Talib, *Administrators and their service: The Sarawak Administrative Service under the Brooke rajahs and British colonial rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

2 H.S. Morris, 'Memoir', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 24 (1992): 145–51.

3 Edmund R. Leach, *Social science research in Sarawak: A report on the possibilities of a social economic survey of Sarawak presented to the Colonial Social Science Research Council [henceforth Report]* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office [HMSO], 1950), p. 3.

4 Raymond Firth, *Malay fishermen: Their peasant economy* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1946).

5 Raymond Firth, *Report on social science research in Malaya* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1948).

6 Leach, *Report*, p. 3.

7 Morris, 'Memoir', pp. 145–51.

newly appointed Government Ethnologist and Curator of the Sarawak Museum.<sup>8</sup> Harrisson had first visited Borneo fifteen years earlier as leader of the Oxford University Exploration Club expedition to Sarawak in 1932. He returned during the Second World War when he was parachuted into the central highlands to coordinate resistance against the Japanese occupation among the indigenous societies and is said to have encouraged a brief revival of headhunting for that purpose. After the War Harrisson succeeded Edward Banks, who had hosted the 1932 Oxford Expedition, as Government Ethnologist and Curator of the Sarawak Museum.

Harrison, whose life has been the subject of a book and a film,<sup>9</sup> was by all accounts a colourful character: a natural historian more in the mold of a nineteenth-century explorer than that of a twentieth-century social scientist.<sup>10</sup> He had studied ornithology when he led the 1932 Oxford Expedition that had been proposed by Banks with the Raja's support. It was a typical nineteenth century-style undertaking during which thousands of samples of plants and animals as well as geographical and ethnographic data on 'the life and customs of the natives'<sup>11</sup> were collected. It followed in the footsteps of a similar expedition in 1899 by the Cambridge anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon (on his way to the Torres Strait Islands), which in turn followed in the steps of Alfred Russel Wallace, who at the invitation of the Raja spent nearly two years (1859–60) in Sarawak gathering data for his theory of natural selection and who had also written extensively on the 'natives of the Malay Archipelago'.<sup>12</sup> It was Wallace who first suggested to James Brooke the idea of establishing a museum in Sarawak.

Harrison developed a lifelong romantic fascination with the 'tribes' of the interior, particularly the Kelabit of Bario among whom he had lived, and whom he depicted — particularly in his bestseller *World within*<sup>13</sup> — as remote and largely untouched by the outside world. Most of his ethnographic research focused on these groups, and he never showed much interest in any of the coastal groups who had long been in contact with foreign civilisations,<sup>14</sup> although long after he had left Sarawak he published a book on Sarawak Malays.<sup>15</sup>

8 The feuding between Harrisson and Leach continued into the next generation of anthropologists who carried out the projects Leach had proposed in his *Report*. Harrisson's hostile attitude towards Derek Freeman and his student de Martinoir apparently caused Freeman's psychological breakdown in 1961 that led him to abandon his Borneo research altogether and fundamentally changed his theoretical orientation. He returned to his earlier work on Samoa and embraced a biologicistic approach to the study of human behaviour that culminated in his controversial attack on Boasian cultural anthropology in *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The making and unmaking of an anthropological myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

9 Judith M. Heimann, *The most offending soul alive: Tom Harrisson and his remarkable life* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999). David Attenborough directed a television documentary, 'Harrison: The barefoot anthropologist' (BBC 4, 2007). And the 1989 Hollywood movie 'Farewell to the king' is also said to be loosely inspired by Harrisson's life among the Kelabit.

10 Notwithstanding his role in the Mass Observation project that used anthropological methods to document life in Britain and was an early precursor of modern market research.

11 Tom Harrisson, *Scientific results of the Oxford University expedition to Sarawak (Borneo) in 1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. v.

12 Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago* (London: Harper, 1869).

13 Tom Harrisson, *World within: A Borneo story* (London: Cresset Press, 1959).

14 Benedict Sandin, 'Obituary: Tom Harrison', *Sarawak Museum Journal* 44 (1975): 311–12.

15 Tom Harrisson, *The Malays of south-west Sarawak before Malaysia* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

Much of his work consisted of description and classification — whether of plants and animals or of languages and cultures, ‘butterfly collecting’ as Leach<sup>16</sup> dismissively referred to this kind of anthropology elsewhere. Harrisson and other historical ethnologists sought to bring classificatory order into the bewildering kaleidoscope of languages, cultures, and societies in Sarawak by dividing them into ‘races’, ‘tribes’, ‘subtribes’, ‘clans’, and other categories derived from European historical experiences at home and in other colonies, particularly in Africa, that were indiscriminately and uncritically imported into Borneo. This resulted in a proliferation of categories, ethnic labels and vastly inconsistent demographic figures. Haddon, Hose and McDougall, Kennedy, and Harrison all developed elaborate classificatory schemes of Bornean societies.<sup>17</sup> A partial census in 1940 produced 51 different ‘races’, 3 of which were further subdivided into 84 ‘tribes’, and the more comprehensive 1947 census identified a total of 181 different groups. Once divided into races, tribes, clans, etc., they were then reassembled into a larger ethnohistorical canvas through (often rather speculative) historical reconstruction of common origins and past connections. But ethnic classification did not remain a speculative exercise, it created and reinforced social and territorial divisions when it informed administrative policies. The ethnography of Borneo is filled with census labels reified into ethnic groups and ethnic groups seemingly dissolved into different census categories. Ethnic classification imposed political and geographical boundaries on the fluid ethnoscape of Sarawak ostensibly in the name of preserving their respective cultures and maintaining peace between potentially hostile groups, but effectively served the implementation of the divide-and-rule strategy of the Brooke administration.<sup>18</sup>

An important part of Leach’s *Social science research in Sarawak: A report on the possibilities of a social economic survey of Sarawak presented to the Colonial Social Science Research Council* [henceforth *Report*] is a critique of such speculative historical ethnology as the following rather diplomatically worded statement illustrates:

Much of the work done in the past in the field of Bornean ethnology has been speculation rather than history, but there is a vast amount of genuine historical data awaiting investigation. This is however a field for the scientifically trained archaeologist and museum worker rather than the social anthropologist. I am not trying to show that one type of research is more important than the other, indeed there are many points at which the two fields overlap. But this report is concerned with social-economics — not history; an archaeologist would have put forward a very different sort of programme.<sup>19</sup>

16 Edmund R. Leach, *Rethinking anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1966), p. 2.

17 Alfred C. Haddon, *Headhunters, black, white and brown* (London: Methuen, 1901); Charles Hose and W. McDougall, *The pagan tribes of Borneo* (London: Macmillan, 1912); Raymond Kennedy, ‘A survey of Indonesian civilization’, in *Studies in the science of society*, ed. George P. Murdock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), pp. 266–97; Tom Harrisson, ‘Nomenclature of indigenous groups in Sarawak and Brunei’ (Kuching: Secretariat Circular, 22 Jul. 1947).

18 A good discussion of ethnic classification in Borneo from a more current perspective can be found in Victor T. King, ‘Ethnicity in Borneo: An anthropological approach’, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 10 (1982): 124–45.

19 Leach, *Report*, p. 7.

Leach proposes instead a sociological typology based on structural criteria, such as descent, kinship terminology, marriage rules, household composition, etc. which allowed him to identify seven broad ethnic categories: Malays and para-Malays (partially Islamised groups), Iban (Sea Dayak), Bidayuh (Land Dayak), the Kenyah–Kayan–Kajang complex, the Murut–Kelabit, settled Penan–Bukitan, and nomadic Penan. These categories have shaped much of the subsequent anthropological research in this part of Borneo.<sup>20</sup> As its subtitle indicates, Leach's *Report* was intended to lay the foundations for further detailed anthropological research. In the *Report* he proposes a number of research projects to be carried out by professionally trained anthropologists 'preferably at the London School of Economics where I would myself be in a position to supervise' them.<sup>21</sup> By the time Leach's *Report* was published by the Colonial Office in 1950, already four of the projects were under way. Derek Freeman carried out research among the Iban near Kapit, which resulted in the publication of his classic ethnography on the Iban, W.R. Geddes worked among the Land Dayak (Bidayuh), H.S. Morris among the Melanau (para-Malays in Leach's terms), and T'ien Ju-k'ang among the Chinese.<sup>22</sup>

But Leach's most significant contribution to the anthropology of Borneo was not a new typology, but a new methodology: Leach argued that these different groups should not be analysed in isolation from each other but as part of a single social system. He developed this theoretical argument most brilliantly in his pathbreaking book *Political systems of highland Burma*,<sup>23</sup> based on his wartime experience in this region, which predated his visit to Sarawak and which might have influenced his interpretation of the Sarawak data as the following statement in his *Report* indicates:

It is true that there are some areas in the world ... where communities live side by side in close proximity and yet have scarcely any social contact one with another. In such cases it is quite possible for each group to be discrete — a separate tribe forming a distinct social pattern on its own. But such conditions do not pertain in Sarawak. Despite a profusion of dialects neighbouring communities usually mix freely with one another and intermarry across the language barrier. Where this occurs, it implies the existence of a basic social system common to both communities.<sup>24</sup>

With reference to the various research projects Leach proposed in his *Report* this meant that these ethnic groups should not be studied from a conventional structural functionalist point of view as self-contained societies, but as part of a wider social

20 At a conference on 'Anthropology in Borneo' held at Universiti Brunei Darussalam in 2005, the Iban anthropologist Dimbab Ngidang described Leach's *Report* as the 'Bible of anthropology in Sarawak'.

21 Leach, *Social science in Sarawak*, p. 45.

22 Derek Freeman, *Iban agriculture: A report on the shifting cultivation of hill rice by the Iban of Sarawak* (London: HMSO, Colonial Office Research Study No. 19, 1955); republished as *Report on the Iban* (London: Athlone Press, LSE Monographs in Social Anthropology No. 41, 1970); W.R. Geddes, *The Land Dayaks of Sarawak* (London: The Colonial Office, 1954) and *Nine Dayak nights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); H.S. Morris, *Report on a sago producing community in Sarawak* (London: HMSO, 1953); T'ien Ju-k'ang, *The Chinese of Sarawak: A study of social structure* (London: Athlone Press, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, 1953).

23 Edmund R. Leach, *Political systems of highland Burma* (London: Athlone Press, LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, 1954).

24 Leach, *Report*, p. 53.

system: '[...] the fieldwork that will result will consist of detailed studies of particular localities, which will lack to some extent the overall comparative view. I am particularly anxious that these several detailed studies should be viewed as elements of a single scheme'.<sup>25</sup>

### **African kingdoms and Malay sultanates**

As mentioned earlier, time constraints and transport difficulties prevented Leach from reaching the Fifth Division of Sarawak adjacent to Brunei which is made up of the two last territories it had lost to Sarawak, namely Limbang and Lawas.<sup>26</sup> In his *Report*, Leach had specifically excluded the Malays from the list of research projects because '[i]t needs to be remembered that the Malays of Sarawak are, as it were, provincials. The logical place in which to study the special features of British Bornean Malay Society would be Brunei itself'.<sup>27</sup> Leach's *Report* was only concerned with the newly acquired Crown Colony of Sarawak, and he therefore specifically excluded a study of Brunei Malays from the list of his recommendations for future research. Political realities on the ground thus stood in the way of his methodological insistence that the different ethnic groups must be understood as part of a single social system.

Precisely such a study of Brunei Malays was carried out two decades later by Donald E. Brown, the first anthropologist to work in Brunei. His research was conducted for a doctorate at Cornell University as part of the London–Cornell Project. Prior to his fieldwork Brown spent six months in London affiliated with the School of Oriental and African Studies reading Colonial and Foreign Office documents on Brunei.<sup>28</sup>

Although Brown came out of American anthropology, his work on Brunei was deeply shaped by theoretical influences from British social anthropology. In the foreword to his monograph he specifically acknowledged the influence of three British social anthropologists, namely M.G. Smith and Hilda Kuper, both of whom had taught him when he was a student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), as well as Victor Turner, one of his dissertation advisers at Cornell.<sup>29</sup> All of them had worked in Africa and were particularly concerned with the internal organisation of ruling elites in indigenous African kingdoms and chiefdoms and with the relation between indigenous states and tribes. These were characteristic concerns of British social anthropology in the 1950s and early '60s. Brown acknowledges that his theory is almost wholly derived from two works by Smith and beyond that

25 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

26 The first anthropologist to conduct research in this area of Sarawak was Roger Peranio who worked among the Bisaya of Limbang in 1958–59 for his dissertation, 'The structure of Bisaya society: A ranked cognatic social system' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, New York, 1977). Some ten years later (around the same time Brown was in Brunei) James Deegan worked among the Lun Bawang (Murut) of Lawas for his dissertation, 'Change among the Lun Bawang, a Borneo people' (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, Seattle, 1973). Both acknowledge the influence of Leach's *Report*. Peranio, in particular, was concerned with the typically Firthian issue of flexibility and choice in a bilateral kinship system.

27 Leach, *Report*, p. 80.

28 Donald E. Brown, 'How it came to be: Or how I wrote "Brunei: The structure and history of a Bornean Malay sultanate"', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 42 (2011): 308–13.

29 Kuper's research was on the kingdom of Swaziland and Smith's on the Zaria Emirate in northern Nigeria. In 1961 both joined the Department of Anthropology at UCLA. Victor Turner, who had worked on the Ndembu chiefdom in Zambia, joined Cornell in 1964.

from the work of the nineteenth-century lawyer Sir Henry Maine.<sup>30</sup> In his memoir<sup>31</sup> Brown also points to the influence of John Gullick's *Indigenous political systems of Western Malaya*,<sup>32</sup> a book that seeks to reconstruct the structure of Malayan sultanates prior to the 1874 Pangkor Treaty with Britain, and that is, despite the similarity of its title to Leach's classic, solidly in the structural functionalist tradition. In addition to these influences, Brown also acknowledges his debt to Tom Harrisson 'for detailed and lengthy criticism' of the ethnographic data.<sup>33</sup>

Given these theoretical influences it is not surprising that Brown employs a classical structural functionalist theoretical paradigm to analyse Brunei society and polity. He defines social structure as 'enduring social units and the relationships between them' and in turn identifies these social units as corporate groups. His aim as an ethnographer is to provide 'an inventory of corporate forms and the relationships between them'. Applied to the Brunei material, he identifies the strata of the society and the hierarchy of offices of the polity as various types of corporate forms. The strata included the nobility (*pengiran-pengiran*), the aristocracy (*awang-awang*), commoners (*ra'ayat*), subject peoples (*sakai*), and slaves (*hamba*). Brown acknowledges that 'compared with more fully developed corporate groups, the Brunei social strata lacked certain crucial features: exclusive common affairs and the autonomy, organisation and procedures to conduct these affairs', but rather than questioning the appropriateness of his analytical categories, he modifies his terms by referring to them as 'quasicorporate forms' or uses the oxymoron 'corporate categories'.<sup>34</sup>

At the heart of Brown's analysis is the notion of perpetuity, which he uses to separate what he defines as relevant sociological data from coincidental ones: 'Opinions vary on what is or is not relevant analysis. I have simply defined enduring social phenomena as the relevant objects of analysis', and according to him, there were a lot of such enduring social phenomena: 'In Brunei the prosperous present has not obliterated the usages, sentiments and forms of so great an antiquity [...] The social scientist [...] should not be startled by the considerable continuity with the past which is manifest in modern Brunei [...] There are many values that have endured in Brunei politics'.<sup>35</sup>

It is rather curious that Brown should have taken his theoretical cues from an already outdated structural functionalist paradigm that had emerged out of the colonial ethnography of African tribes and kingdoms, rather than from Leach's theoretically and ethnographically much more relevant *Report on Sarawak*. Brown gives the following rather odd explanation for his choice of theoretical perspective which goes back to Maine's theory of corporation: 'A considerable amount of nineteenth century data has been assembled here. It may seem fitting to call upon a nineteenth century scholar to help us understanding [sic] that data.'<sup>36</sup> Twenty years after publication of

30 Donald E. Brown, *Brunei: The structure and history of a Bornean Malay sultanate* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Museum, 1970), p. 165.

31 Brown, 'How it came to be', pp. 308–13.

32 John M. Gullick, *Indigenous political systems of Western Malaya* (London: Athlone Press, 1958).

33 Brown, *Brunei*, p. ix.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–7.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 165.



Leach's *Report on Sarawak*, and some fifteen years after his influential *Political systems of highland Burma*, which was an attack on precisely this kind of static structural functionalism, Brown's theoretical approach was not only seriously outdated but also out-of-place in its reliance on Africanist paradigms. To understand the background to his choice of theoretical framework, we now turn to the political and historical context in which Brown was conducting his research.

### **Anthropology as handmaiden of nationalism**

By the late nineteenth century Brunei's survival was threatened by the aggressive expansion of Sarawak and it was forced to seek British protection in 1888. In 1906 the Sultan entered into the Residency Agreement under which the British exercised power in Brunei until 1959 through a Resident whose advice the Sultan was required to follow.<sup>37</sup> The arrangement was a typical example of the British policy of Indirect Rule first employed as a cheap and effective way to bring African kingdoms under colonial rule.

The Brunei Residency came to an end with the 1959 Constitution. The country's official historiography insists that Brunei never was a colony, and that its status as a Protected State allowed the Sultan to retain his position as head of state and only involved the temporary and partial transfer of powers to the Resident. The British too had always been careful to show respect to the Sultan in public and never to show him in a subordinate position in front of his subjects. The monarchy therefore intended the 1959 Constitution to initiate the restoration of the Sultan's full authority by transferring the Resident's powers back to the Sultan in order to ultimately allow him to fully resume his 'traditional' role as rightful holder of full executive and legislative powers at the time of independence.

In preparation for decolonisation, the British in turn explored ways to put into place political institutions in their colonies that could be expected to have domestic, i.e. national, legitimacy, but that could also be relied upon not to undermine British political and economic interests. At the same time the Sultan was making plans to fill the power vacuum left by the British without having to share it. In this context the question of what constituted the 'traditional' social and political order of Brunei became central, because these were the political 'traditions' that the monarchy intended as the sources of its legitimacy in Brunei's future constitutional order.

The Sultan first announced plans for a constitution in 1953.<sup>38</sup> The following year the Colonial Office sent the Assistant Attorney General of Sarawak, R.H. Hickling, to Brunei to report on the 'traditional' Brunei political system and to make recommendations for the country's future political order.<sup>39</sup> Around the same time the Sultan established a consultative committee made up of seven advisers (*tujuh serangkai*)

37 In contrast to the Federated Malay States, where both matters of religion and custom (*adat*) were left to the authority of the Sultans, in Brunei only matters of religion remained under the Sultan's authority.

38 See B.A. Hussainmiya, *The Brunei Constitution of 1959: An inside history* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Press, 2000).

39 An annotated version of this report has recently been published in Brunei with a historical introduction: B.A. Hussainmiya and Nicholas Tarling, *Brunei: Traditions of monarchic culture and history — R.H. Hickling's Memorandum upon the Brunei Constitutional history and practice* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Press, 2011).

who toured Brunei as well as four sultanates in Malaya interviewing community leaders in an effort to document the 'traditional' Malay system of government in order to make recommendations for Brunei's future political order. The outcome of their research was compiled by the secretary of the committee, Pengiran Mohammad Yusof,<sup>40</sup> in an unpublished report entitled 'Adat istiadat diraja Negeri Brunei'.<sup>41</sup> Another important text published around the same time was *Sejarah Berunei*<sup>42</sup> co-authored by Pengiran Mohammed Yusof (under his pen name Yura Halim) and Jamil Umar, later to become Director of the Brunei History Centre.

The Constitution of 1959 declared Malay as the national culture, Islam as the state religion, and the monarchy as the system of government of Brunei. At the time of independence in 1984 this triad of culture, religion, and politics was formally declared the 'national philosophy' of Malay Islamic Monarchy (Melayu Islam Beraja, MIB). Between 1959 and 1984 the newly emerging nation-state began to consolidate itself both institutionally and ideologically. In pursuit of this nation-building project the monarchy established a series of institutions dedicated to the (re)discovery, (re)invention, and (re)production of the three components of the national identity. First was the Department of Royal Ceremonial Customs (Jabatan Adat Istiadat Negara) set up in 1954 to document, codify, and propagate the monarchical political culture (*beraja*). Next was the establishment of the Religious Department in 1959 which was upgraded after independence into the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The Language Board (Lembaga Bahasa) was established in 1961 and became the Language and Literature Bureau (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka) in 1965.<sup>43</sup> The Brunei History Centre (Pusat Sejarah Brunei), originally part of the Dewan Bahasa, became a separate institution in 1982 shortly before independence.

Most significant in the context of (re)inventing and institutionalising the national culture was the establishment of the Brunei Museum in 1965.<sup>44</sup> Plans to set up a museum go back to the final years of the Residency period. In 1957 a Brunei noble, Pengiran M. Shariffuddin, was sent to the Sarawak Museum for four years to be trained in museology by Tom Harrisson. After obtaining a diploma in museum studies from Britain, he became the first director of the Brunei Museum. Harrisson himself remained director of the Sarawak Museum until his retirement in 1966, but also served as Museum Adviser to the Sultan.<sup>45</sup> Following his expulsion from Sarawak the following year due to accusations that he had sold treasures belonging to the Sarawak Museum to the Brunei Museum, Harrisson joined the new

40 At the time often referred to as P.M. Yusof. His present day title is Pengiran Setia Negara Pengiran Haji Mohd. Yusof bin Pengiran Haji Abdul Rahim. He is currently a member of the Legislative Council.

41 P.M. Yusof, 'Adat istiadat diraja Negeri Brunei' (n.p., Bandar Brunei: Jabatan Adat Istiadat Negara, 1958).

42 Yura Halim and Jamil Umar, *Sejarah Berunei* (Kuala Belait: Brunei Press, 1958).

43 For an excellent analysis of language and national identity in Brunei that in some ways parallels the discussion of national culture in this article, see: Geoffrey Gunn, *Language, power and ideology in Brunei Darussalam* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997).

44 The Museum's mission statement is 'To protect and preserve our national and cultural heritage'.

45 During this period Harrisson also conducted important archaeological excavations at Kota Batu, the old capital of Brunei, and thereby laid the foundations for subsequent archaeological research by Bruneian scholars, such as P.M. Shariffuddin and Matussin Omar.

Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University as a senior research fellow, but continued to make regular visits to Brunei.

While the British were winding down their involvement in the region in the post-war period, American interest in Southeast Asia increased as a result of the Cold War and this was reflected in the expansion of Southeast Asian Studies in US universities during the 1960s. A meeting between the Sultan and the American political scientist George McT. Kahin, the doyen of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States who had set up the Modern Indonesia Project at Cornell University, opened the door for social research in Brunei.<sup>46</sup> At the time there were no professionally trained Bruneian social scientists, but within a few years three American doctoral students were conducting research in Brunei.<sup>47</sup> The first to arrive was Donald E. Brown from Cornell University. He had originally planned to conduct field research in Bali, but abandoned his plans due to the prevailing instability in Indonesia at the time. On Kahin's suggestion, Brown contacted Pengiran Mohammad Yusof, the author of 'Adat Istiadat Diraja Negeri Brunei', and obtained permission to conduct research in Brunei under the auspices of the Brunei Museum.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to his arrival in Brunei in January 1967, Brown spent six months in London reading Colonial and Foreign Office documents on Brunei in the Public Record Office covering the century or so of British–Brunei relations prior to 1936.<sup>49</sup> He also interviewed there Dato E.E.F. Pretty, who had twice served as British Resident in Brunei.<sup>50</sup> Brown found that the documents he had consulted in London were 'entirely absent and largely unknown in Brunei [...] Historical documents were scarce in Brunei, so that very much of what I ultimately pieced together came from sources that I consulted in archives and libraries far from Brunei.' However, these documents were not only of interest to him, but also to his informants: 'My having spent those months in London came very close to yielding gold for me. I brought with me copies of documents from the Public Record Office, a few old books I had found in bookstores, and

46 Brown, 'How it came to be', pp. 308–13. B.A. Hussainmiya, 'A brief review of anthropological research in Brunei', *Minpaku Anthropology Newsletter*, 4 (1997): 6–7.

47 In contrast to Brown, whose fieldwork took him right into the social and political centre of the sultanate, the other two anthropologists conducted fieldwork in the outlying district of Temburong (which is separated from the main part of Brunei by the Limbang corridor that belongs to Sarawak) in communities that had migrated there from the core areas of Brunei. Allen Maxwell worked among the Kedayan of Piasau-Piasau from 1968–71 and Linda Kimball among Brunei Malays in Batu Apoi from 1971–4. Moreover, unlike Brown whose work was shaped by British social anthropology, their work was deeply rooted in American cultural anthropology. Maxwell's dissertation on the ethno-semantics of Kedayan agriculture was influenced by his supervisor Harold Conklin at Yale, a pioneer of ethnoecological and ethnoscientific research. Allen R. Maxwell, 'Urang Darat, an ethnographic study of the Kadayan of Labu Valley' (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1978). Kimball's dissertation on the socialisation of Brunei Malay children loosely followed in the footsteps of Mead's culture and personality approach introduced into Borneo by her supervisor Thomas Rhys Williams of Ohio State University. Linda Kimball, 'The enculturation of aggression in a Brunei Malay village' (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, Columbus, 1975). Both in terms of the communities studied and research topics, Maxwell's and Kimball's work is therefore far less political in nature than Brown's. Whether this is accidental or not, is anybody's guess.

48 Brown, 'Memoir', pp. 308–13. Hussainmiya, 'Anthropological research in Brunei', pp. 6–7.

49 Given the thirty-year period during which official documents remain classified, Brown could not consult more recent records.

50 From 1923–28 and then again from 1948–51. When Brown interviewed him, he was the Brunei Agent in London.

snippets of information from Dato Pretty. Much of this was of very great interest to many Bruneians.’ As for his ethnographic fieldwork Brown goes on to note that: ‘people were wary of certain topics, given that the country had been rocked by a political revolt only five years earlier. Since I was very much interested in the nature of Brunei government — primarily the traditional government — many questions I had wanted to ask had to be approached with some caution or abandoned altogether’. As a result his dissertation ‘said little about contemporary politics, to the disappointment of my adviser Professor Kahin’.<sup>51</sup>

Brown’s memoir reveals three points central to my argument: first, the historical context that shows the political dimensions of his research, in particular, an avoidance of the contemporary situation and deflected focus on a search for the ‘traditional’ political system. Second, the complex dialectics between colonial records and local informants which shows that Brown was not just an observer and ethnographer collecting data, but unknowingly also became a participant in the politics of the time by providing his informants with data from the colonial records that were of great interest and use to them. And thirdly, the fact that he accepts these informants not only as fieldwork interlocutors but also, given their social science background, as scholarly authorities on the subject. These informants included prominent palace politicians and makers of Negara Brunei Darussalam, such as Pengiran M. Yusof himself (whose ‘Adat istiadat diraja Negeri Brunei’ Brown extensively cites in his dissertation), the Director of the Language and Literature Bureau (later to become director of the History Centre), Jamil Umar (with whom P.M. Yusof had co-authored *Sejarah Berunei*, which is also an important source for Brown), and the Director of the Brunei Museum, Pengiran M. Shariffuddin. His fieldwork assistant was Abdul Latif Ibrahim of the Brunei Museum, who later went on to study anthropology at Cambridge and subsequently occupied various important positions in the Museum and the History Centre before joining the national university and becoming Director of the Academy of Brunei Studies. Abdul Latif Ibrahim together with Jamil Umar and the latter’s younger brother Aziz Umar, who studied sociology at Birmingham University and who after independence became the powerful Minister of Education for many years, eventually became the intellectual and political godfathers of the ‘national philosophy’ of MIB after independence.

Brown’s 1969 dissertation at Cornell was originally entitled ‘Socio-political history of Brunei: A Bornean Malay sultanate’, but when it was published by the Brunei Museum the following year, apparently in a rush with only minor revisions (and a long list of errata), the title was changed to *Brunei: The structure and history of a Bornean Malay sultanate*. This change in wording may seem minor, but its implications are considerable: the new title no longer places the account firmly in the past but puts the emphasis on structure and perpetuity rather than on historical context. As Brown himself explains, the ‘Bornean Malay Sultanate’ that he describes had not been in existence as such since at least the late nineteenth century.<sup>52</sup> However, even by the middle of the nineteenth century — the period in which Brown locates his description of ‘traditional’ Brunei society — Brunei’s ‘traditional’ political order

51 Brown, ‘How it came to be’, pp. 308–13.

52 Brown, *Brunei*, p. 166.

had already fallen apart. Although Brunei had not been colonised, it had suffered the consequences of colonialism in the region since the sixteenth century. After losing its strategic role in the South China Sea trade, it was reduced to a backwater ridden by internal rebellions by its subject peoples and rivalries among the impoverished elite. In his 1904 Report on Brunei, MacArthur went so far as to claim that the country had ‘no government in the usual acceptance of the term — only ownership’.<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, in his description of the traditional government of Brunei, Brown does not refer to this important source that casts the political system in rather dysfunctional terms. It was this state of affairs that James Brooke took advantage of to carve out a kingdom for himself by taking over large parts of Brunei. The ‘traditional’ social and political order that Brown had described was not only a memory in the late 1960s when he was doing his fieldwork, but it had already been a memory a hundred years earlier at the time into which he projects his historical reconstruction. Despite its title Brown’s account is therefore not really a historical account of precolonial Brunei, but a structural functionalist reconstruction *à la* Gullick of a ‘traditional’ political system whose precise historical context remains obscure. Not only was Brown’s theoretical perspective outdated at the time he was writing, but his historical reconstruction was also rather anachronistic.

The anthropology of that time is of course replete with such (re)constructions of precolonial indigenous political systems seemingly preserved under Indirect Rule. But while elsewhere postcolonial scholarship has long since deconstructed representations of oriental kingdoms, the opposite has occurred in the case of Brown’s ethnography: it has been appropriated and elaborated by Bruneian nationalist scholarship and is cited as an authoritative source of knowledge of the country’s traditional society and polity. As mentioned earlier, Brown’s dissertation was published immediately after its completion in the Brunei Museum’s new monograph series and is still on sale there. Together with several of his other articles published in the *Brunei Museum Journal* and elsewhere<sup>54</sup> Brown’s work has become a standard source of reference for researchers, students, and outsiders, such as foreign diplomats based in Brunei. On the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the monograph Brown looks back on its impact:

It did and does serve as a rough introduction to Brunei society and history, though weighted toward ‘traditional’ society and to events little later than the 1930s. It was gratifying to see it assigned in college-level courses in Brunei and mined for material in lower-level school textbooks. I would like to think, but have little evidence one way or the other,

53 M.S.H. McArthur, *Report on Brunei 1904*, introduced and annotated by A.V.M. Horton (Athens: Ohio University Monograph in International Studies, Southeast Asia Series, No. 74, 1987), p. 126.

54 Donald E. Brown, ‘The social structure of nineteenth century Brunei’, *Brunei Museum Journal* 1, 1 (1969): 166–79; ‘Social stratification in Brunei’, *South-East Asian Journal of Sociology*, 3 (1970): 27–38; ‘Inter-hierarchical commissions in a Bornean plural society’, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 1, 1(1973): 97–116; ‘Tribe–Sultanate relationships: Traditional patterns of rule in Brunei’, *Expedition* 30, 1 (1988): 45–50; ‘Mechanisms for the maintenance of traditional elites in Brunei, to the eve of Independence’, in *From Buckfast to Borneo: Essays presented to Father Robert Nicholl on the 85th anniversary of his birth 27 March 1995*, ed. Victor T. King and A.V.M Horton (Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1995), pp. 408–19.

that it helped serious Brunei citizens to understand and put in perspective some features of the nature of their society, whatever use they might put that knowledge to.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed Brown's monograph proved to be highly useful in the process of nation-building. It is regularly referred to in lectures and in print by leading proponents of the state ideology of MIB, such as Abdul Latif Ibrahim<sup>56</sup> and Hashim Abd Hamid. Abdul Latif Ibrahim, who had been Brown's assistant in 1967/8, and Hashim Abd. Hamid were the first Bruneians to obtain doctorates in anthropology.<sup>57</sup> Both later served as directors of the Academy of Brunei Studies and as such were ex officio Secretaries of the Supreme National Council of MIB based at the Academy. Brown's monograph is also a foundational text in Brunei Studies, a Bruneian *Volkskunde* developed at the Academy of Brunei Studies at the national university to provide scholarly reinforcement to the state ideology of MIB.<sup>58</sup> Brown's work is therefore not just an ethnography for an academic audience — in fact, it has not received much attention from anthropologists outside Brunei<sup>59</sup> — but in Brunei it has acquired the status of a classic within the very society it seeks to document, not just about its past but also, insofar as it seeks to preserve its 'traditions', for its present.

The seminal nature that Brown's work acquired in Brunei can in part be explained by its pioneering nature. At the time Brown was writing, Brunei had no professionally trained social scientists and Bruneian scholars did not have access to colonial records. His work was therefore pioneering in two disciplines: he was not

55 Brown, 'How it came to be', p. 313. While teaching sociology at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, the present author often found it was difficult for students to conceive of social stratification in Brunei in terms other than those used by Brown. This is not surprising because the 'traditional' system of stratification and hierarchy of political offices is taught as part of the MIB course that is a compulsory subject at school and undergraduate level.

56 See, for example, the chapters 'Malay Islamic monarchy: A state ideology of Brunei Darussalam', 'National philosophy as education in Islamic society: A case of Brunei Darussalam', 'Ethnicity and religious issues: Experiences from Brunei Darussalam', in Abdul Latif Haji Ibrahim, *Issues in Brunei studies* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2003).

57 Both their dissertations examined an aspect of Brunei that, intriguingly, Brown had hardly mentioned at all, namely Islam. Hashim Haji Abd. Hamid's dissertation focused on Islam in Kampong Ayer, the centre of the Brunei state: 'Islam di Brunei Darussalam: Satu analisis sosio-budaya' (Ph.D. diss., Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1995). The dissertation was subsequently published in Brunei, minus some potentially controversial parts (Bandar Seri Begawan: Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2003). Abdul Latif Ibrahim's dissertation examined conversion to Islam by indigenous groups in the outlying Temburong district: 'Masuk Islam: Satu transformasi identiti sosial dan agama dalam masyarakat Melayu Brunei' (Ph.D. diss., University Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, 2001). An early version of the thesis earned him a terminal Master's degree from Cambridge. Given the political sensitivity of the topic, it may have been difficult to push the sociological analysis far enough. A recent sociology dissertation on conversions to Islam applies the psychological model of conversion developed by Lewis Rambo and generally avoids discussion of the sensitive political context. Asiyah az-Zahra Ahmad Kumpoh, 'Conversion to Islam: The case of the Dusun ethnic group in Brunei Darussalam' (Leicester: University of Leicester, 2011).

58 The way MIB has been woven into the education system since independence is discussed in Kathryn Anderson Wellen, "'Melau Islam beraja": Brunei's tripartite ideology', in *Reflections in Borneo rivers*, ed. Chong Shin, Karim Harun, and Yabit Alas (Pontianak: Stain Pontianak Press, 2006), pp. 227–41.

59 Brown himself acknowledges that 'published as a monograph of the Brunei Museum it was not quite a book and did not get the sort of critical examination that a publishing firm would have required.' (Brown, 'How it came to be', p. 313)

only the first anthropologist to conduct field research in Brunei, but also the first scholar to conduct historical research on Brunei in the Colonial Office Records in London. Interestingly, in Brunei Brown is widely considered to be a historian rather than an anthropologist, although he himself acknowledges that '[n]ot being a trained historian, there was much that I missed in that area'.<sup>60</sup> But apart from its pioneering academic role, Brown's research also fulfilled a political need at the time. As a professional anthropologist with access to historical archives in London and with some of the makers of modern Brunei as his key informants, Brown happened to be in a unique position to construct a seemingly authentic description of traditional Brunei that carried the authority of modern social science. It is therefore not surprising that it continues to hold attraction for nationalist ethnographers and historians, not because it is an accurate historical reconstruction of traditional Bruneian society, but because it is a pseudo-historical reconstruction of it. As such it edits the complex and fluid realities of precolonial political hierarchies, social stratification, and ethnic relations and glosses them over with a structural simplicity that imbues these relations with an aura of perpetuity which made them eminently suitable for the purpose of (re)inventing a neo-traditional future for the emerging nation-state.

It may be of some interest here to note that Brown never returned to his fieldwork in Brunei. Although he subsequently visited Brunei several times and continued publishing occasional articles on Brunei for some thirty years after his fieldwork, these are all based on his early research and he never picked up on his fieldwork and declined a suggestion by local historians to 'update' his book. Perhaps he felt that it would be next to impossible to update his material without dismantling the elegant structural functionalist model he had constructed. Interestingly, given Brunei's claims to uniqueness, Brown's interest turned to the opposite direction and he subsequently gained recognition for his work on human universals.<sup>61</sup> As a Visiting Professor at Universiti Brunei Darussalam in 1998 he gave a public lecture entitled: 'How unique are the Bruneis?' that subtly challenged notions of Brunei's exceptionalism.

### **The nationalisation of Brunei Malay culture**

The first cracks in Brown's neat functionalist model appeared when Allen Maxwell raised the issue of the position of another ethnic group in Brunei society, namely the Kedayan, among whom he had conducted fieldwork in 1968–71. In contrast to the dominant Bruneis of Kampong Ayer (water village), the Kedayan are also called *orang darat* (people of the land) because they were rice cultivators and as such historically peasant subjects of the Bruneis. Maxwell argues that the Kedayan were politically and economically an integral part of Brunei society and should not be seen as a separate ethnic group, as Brown implies.<sup>62</sup>

60 Ibid.

61 Best known is his book *Human universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991). Interestingly, Brown writes that it was his study of social stratification in Brunei that first led him to make certain assumptions about human psychological universals. His turn from Borneo ethnography to socio-biology in some ways parallels that of Derek Freeman whose criticism of Margaret Mead's cultural determinism Brown shares.

62 Allen R. Maxwell, 'The Place of the Kadayan in traditional Brunei society', *South East Asia Research* 4, 2 (1996): 157–96.

A more systematic theoretical critique of Brown's model along the same lines is presented by Victor King in a paper appropriately entitled 'What is Brunei society?'<sup>63</sup> King had earlier worked among non-Malay indigenous groups in the interior of Borneo and in 1985 spent five months attached to the Brunei Museum to catalogue material culture holdings from different indigenous ethnic groups in Brunei. He proposes an ethnically pluralistic model of Brunei society that in addition to the Brunei Malays embraces not only those groups that have been loosely assimilated into the Malay category, such as the Kedayan and Tutong, but also other indigenous groups, such as the Belait, Dusun, Bisaya, Iban, Murut (Lun Bawang, Lun Dayah), Penan, and Melanau, and other groups in the territories formerly part of Brunei that had been subject peoples of the Sultan of Brunei. Taking up where Leach's analysis had left off, King argues that Brunei society and history cannot be understood separately from these groups, nor can they be understood in isolation from Brunei Malay society. Although linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse, they have to be seen as part of single social system and their internal structure cannot be understood independently of their position in the overall system. King therefore pushes Leach's analysis, which had stopped at the borders of Sarawak, to its logical conclusion by reintegrating Brunei Malays at the apex of a sociopolitical system that transcends present national borders and seeks to position them at the centre of a pluralistic, multiethnic sociopolitical formation. King concludes that Brown's account of Brunei society is not really a sociological analysis, but merely the Brunei Malay folk model. Interestingly, the Academy of Brunei Studies published a shortened version of King's critique<sup>64</sup> and its Director, Brown's former research assistant Abdul Latif Ibrahim, invited Brown to respond to the criticisms.<sup>65</sup> In his short reply Brown conceded that Brunei was indeed a 'plural society', but argued that his monograph was only concerned with the *bangsa Brunei* (the Brunei ethnic group). He did not respond to the theoretical argument that the different ethnic groups should not be seen in isolation, but should be analysed as part of a single social system.

As we have seen earlier, the precolonial Sultanate of Brunei indeed included, at least nominally, much of the territory and most of the peoples that were subsequently taken over by Sarawak, including many of the ethnic groups Leach lists in his *Report*. Islam was the religion and Malay was the culture of the elite in Kampong Ayer which revolved around the royal court as the political and ritual centre of the Sultanate. They linked Brunei to other Malay sultanates in Borneo and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, but they distinguished its elite from its subject peoples whose language was usually not Malay and whose religion was often not Islam. What Brown presents is indeed a 'folk' model in the sense that it is a distillation and systematisation of an indigenous ideological model. Ironically it is not the indigenous model of the 'folk', but that of the elite: a royalist model from the perspective of the Malay court.

The great paradox in the anthropology of Brunei is that while King's Leachian reinterpretation of the Brunei data captures the historical reality of Brunei's complex ethnic and political landscape and the dynamic relationship between different ethnic

63 Victor T. King, 'What is Brunei society? Reflections on a conceptual and ethnographic issue', *South-East Asia Research* 2, 2 (1994): 176–98.

64 Victor T. King, 'What is Brunei society?' *Janang* 7 (1998): 65–84.

65 Donald E. Brown, 'Issues in the nature of Brunei society and polity', *Janang* 7 (1998): 85–90.



groups much better than Brown's static functionalist model, it has been the latter that has captured the imagination of nationalist scholars and thus come to dominate historical and anthropological discourse on Brunei. Anthropological discourse about present-day Bruneian society is largely limited to Brunei itself, very little occurs outside Brunei because few foreign researchers have been allowed into the country since the three early pioneers (i.e. Brown, Maxwell, and Kimball), and those who are in Brunei and do have access to the 'field' are often in a vulnerable position when it comes to official sensitivities — of which there are many, particularly when it comes to issues related to ethnic identity, religion, and the monarchy (i.e. MIB). In the official anthropological discourse the ahistorical and ethnocentric elite model presented by Brown, which he had intended to be a historical account of precolonial Brunei, has become the dominant narrative that provides the ideological foundation of the postcolonial nation–state.

The nationalisation of Brunei Malay culture has left little cultural space for other indigenous ethnic groups, especially those that are not Muslim. Given demographic realities, the new state could only be invented as a Brunei Malay nation within the Brunei Malay heartland. This required carefully defining territorial and legal lines separating Brunei from its former possessions and subject peoples in northern Borneo. Territorially, Brunei never sought to reclaim any of its former territories, except for the Limbang corridor which compromises Brunei's territorial unity because it divides its territory into two parts. Legally, the 1959 Constitution restricted Brunei nationality to the seven ethnic groups considered indigenous to that small fraction of former Brunei territory that had remained under the Sultan's control and in which Brunei Malays constituted the majority<sup>66</sup>: Bruneis (*orang Brunei*),<sup>67</sup> Kedayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya,<sup>68</sup> and Murut.<sup>69</sup> Only members of these seven groups are defined as indigenous groups (*puak jati*; equivalent to Malaysian *bumiputra*). In the new national order non-Muslim indigenous groups find themselves in the anomalous position of being Malay in so far as they are recognised as indigenous (*puak jati*), yet as non-Muslims they lack the defining characteristic of

66 Kershaw and Maxwell discuss the political, legal, and semantic complexities of defining who is a Bruneian and seek to disentangle Bruneian-ness from other ethnic labels. Roger Kershaw, 'Marginality then and now: Shifting patterns of minority status in Brunei Darussalam', *Internationales Asienforum* 29, 1–2 (1998): 83–106; Roger Kershaw, 'Ethnic minorities in late twentieth century Brunei: A survey of errors and imbalances in foreign analysis', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 41 (2010): 250–75; Allen R. Maxwell, 'Malay polysemy and political power: Census categories, ethnicity, and citizenship in Brunei Darussalam', *South East Asia Research* 9, 2 (2001): 173–212.

67 In the precolonial period communities were usually known by their locations near significant geographical features, particularly the rivers that constituted the main transportation arteries, including the Brunei, Tutong, and Belait, each of which gave its name to an ethnic group. The term 'Bruneian' therefore refers to the nationality of the citizens of the modern nation–state, not to the ethnic identity of the *orang Brunei* who originated from present-day Kampong Ayer. Pringle has argued that the term 'Malay' may not have been part of precolonial identity discourse in Borneo and was possibly introduced by James Brooke from Malaya. Robert Pringle, *Rajahs and rebels: The Iban of Sarawak under Brooke rule, 1841–1941* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. xix.

68 The Brunei Dusun are different from the Dusun of Sabah, but they are similar to the Bisaya both linguistically and culturally. This may be an example of the confusions created by colonial ethnic categorisation that institutionalised previously flexible ethnic boundaries.

69 Murut is another exonym. They are known as Lun Bawag in Sarawak and as Lun Dayeh in Sabah where they were converted to Christianity by American missionaries in the 1920s.

Malayness.<sup>70</sup> More than being just an anomaly in the dominant ideological scheme, their ambiguous status is potentially subversive insofar as it can be construed to contest Malay claims to being the original inhabitants of the land. The main purpose of the Islamic Propagation Centre (Pusat Dakwah Islamiah), established immediately after independence, is to resolve this anomaly by converting non-Muslim indigenous ethnic groups.<sup>71</sup> The Kedayan and Tutong had already been Muslims long before independence, and the Belait are almost completely Islamised today, but only about half of the Dusun are Muslims. The two smaller groups, the Bisaya and Murut, remain predominantly non-Muslim, probably largely because they are settled in the border area and are branches of larger Bisaya and Murut (Lun Bawang) concentrations in neighbouring Limbang and Lawas respectively.

Apart from their declining numbers in census statistics, non-Muslim indigenous groups also rarely make any symbolic appearances in the public sphere. They do not figure in history and social studies schoolbooks which focus on the Malay roots of Brunei, nor are they part of the 'Brunei Brand' that markets the country as a tourism destination overseas. Unlike neighbouring Sarawak and Sabah, where ethnic diversity has been successfully developed into a tourism product and exotic pictures of indigenous groups figure more prominently in international advertising campaigns than those of Malays,<sup>72</sup> Brunei markets itself as a destination for nature tourism (ecotourism *sans* people) and religious tourism (mosques and religious exhibitions). In the Museum, which serves the education of students and edification of tourists, most exhibits of non-Muslim ethnic minority groups are kept in storage and displays in the public galleries focus on Malay culture<sup>73</sup> and Islamic art.

While there is little evidence of non-Malays in the museum galleries, they do have a token presence in its office corridors. Both the current Director and the Curator of Ethnography are Dusun anthropologists trained in Britain.<sup>74</sup> It seems

70 There is no room here to go into the extensive literature on Malay identity, e.g. Anthony Reid, 'Understanding "Melayu" (Malay) as a source of diverse modern identities', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, 3 (2001): 295–313. This article focuses on the *beraja* aspect of MIB, another article on Islam and Malay identity (about both of which Brown strangely has very little to say) is currently under preparation by the author.

71 Although there are also Chinese converts to Islam, the conversion of Chinese is not a strategic target because they constitute a non-indigenous minority group, whereas the indigenous non-Muslim minorities are an anomaly sometimes classified as Malays, sometimes not.

72 The former Minister of Tourism and current Minister of Land Development of Sarawak, James Masing, is an Iban anthropologist who earned his Ph.D. from the Australian National University under the supervision of Derek Freeman.

73 While displays in the Ethnography Gallery of the Brunei Museum are built around Malay life-cycle rituals, the smaller Malay Technology Museum displays replicas of the traditional dwellings in Kampong Ayer and also those of some ethnic minority communities.

74 Another former Curator of Ethnography at the Brunei Museum, who is also not a Malay, is Lim Jock Seng, an LSE-trained anthropologist. His Master's thesis on the Brunei Malay fishing village of Batu Marang was similar to the 'Coastal Fishing Project' Leach had proposed for Sarawak that was intended as a test case 'on a comparative basis, under Sarawak conditions, of the economic conclusions of Firth's Kelantan fishing study' (Leach, *Social Science Research in Sarawak*, p. 42). As a graduate student at LSE Lim was in contact with Firth, but his thesis contains little theoretical analysis and casts the relationship between the Malay fishermen and the Chinese middlemen and merchant class (*towkay*), from which Lim himself originates, in unproblematic and mutually beneficial terms. Lim Jock Seng, *The inter-relationship of technology, economy, and social organisation in a fishing village in Brunei* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Brunei Museum, 1986). Soon after returning to Brunei, Lim was transferred from the Museum to the

rather ironic that their official positions in the culture bureaucracy put them in charge of an institution primarily dedicated to the display and propagation of Malay and Islamic culture. Their personal research interests, on the other hand, focus on the documentation and preservation of their own 'traditional' Dusun culture<sup>75</sup> although their strategies differ: some of Pudarno's work is salvage ethnography trying to snatch Dusun culture from oblivion,<sup>76</sup> whereas Bantong has explored its folklorisation as a way to adapt Dusun culture to the modern world by organising occasional cultural shows. In either case Dusun culture appears as an object of research in the form of a museum-piece, decontextualised and depoliticised from its contemporary reality. The pursuit of a past, 'traditional', authentic cultural heritage insulates Dusun culture from its present political context. Pudarno, who is also a writer, has chosen the genre of the novel to explore the experience of the loss of culture among young Dusun, although he has described his novel *Janji Gintamini* as essentially an ethnography.<sup>77</sup>

The depoliticised approach that Bantong and Pudarno take in their study of Dusun culture has been criticised by foreign researchers who are less subject to political constraints. Roger Kershaw uses the footnotes of two somewhat esoteric articles<sup>78</sup> on Dusun bird auguries to launch a bitter attack on Bantong and Pudarno, accusing them of making their accommodations with the dominant cultural politics in pursuit of their personal career interests and becoming part of the bureaucracy in charge of administrating culture.<sup>79</sup> More seriously, he accuses them of being 'minders' trying to control outside researchers, including Eva Kershaw's and Jay Bernstein's fieldwork among the Dusun. Eva Kershaw's<sup>80</sup> monograph on Brunei Dusun religion, subtitled 'Ethnic priesthood on a frontier of Islam', is sharply critical of government policies aimed at assimilating the Dusun. Similarly Bernstein, who in 1992/3 worked together with Bantong on a project documenting Dusun indigenous (ethnobotanical) knowledge, predicts in an article with the ominous title 'The

Foreign Ministry in whose establishment he played a key role and in which he currently is the powerful Second Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the only non-Malay in the cabinet.

75 Bantong bin Antaran, 'The Brunei Dusun: An ethnographic study' (M.Phil. thesis, University of Hull, 1993) is a conventional ethnography of traditional Dusun society written under the supervision of Victor T. King at Hull University. Pudarno Binchin, 'Siram Ditaan: The performance of epic tales of Derato in Brunei Dusun Society' (M.A. thesis, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, 2002) is about a specific genre of traditional Dusun oral literature (*siram*) that is no longer performed.

76 Pudarno Binchin, "Race against time": Problems and prospects of anthropological research on Brunei Dusun' (n.p., no date).

77 Pudarno Binchin, *Janji Gintamini* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1997). The novel's nomination for a literature prize by the Language and Literature Bureau was met by objections on the grounds that, although it was written in Malay, neither its subject-matter nor its author were Malay.

78 Roger Kershaw, 'Brunei-Dusun omen birds and the rice-sowing zodiac: Some ambivalent portents for autochthonous research', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 29 (1998): 29–56; Eva Maria Kershaw and Roger Kershaw, 'Messengers or tipsters? Some cautious though concluding thoughts on Brunei-Dusun augury', *Borneo Research Bulletin* 38 (2007): 50–96.

79 Roger Kershaw worked for the Ministry of Education's history curriculum development unit for ten years until 1994. Perhaps he felt similar career anxieties himself when he published a highly critical monograph under the pseudonym G. Braighlinn, *Ideological innovation under monarchy: Aspects of legitimation activity in contemporary Brunei* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1992).

80 Eva Maria Kershaw, *A study of Brunei Dusun religion: Ethnic priesthood on a frontier of Islam* (Phillips, ME: Borneo Research Council, Borneo Research Council Monograph Series No. 4, 2000).

de-culturation of the Brunei Dusun<sup>81</sup> the disappearance of the Dusun as an identifiable ethnic group within the next few decades and their assimilation into Malay society as a result of the government's 'cultural modification policies'.

Brunei Malay cultural hegemony casts the nation firmly in a Malay and Muslim mold and makes any attempt to view it through an alternative Bornean prism problematic. The latter would draw attention to the indigenous dimension and thereby reveal commonalities and continuities that transcend political and ideological discontinuities and cut across borders of contemporary nation-states, thus touching upon nationalist sensitivities on both sides of these borders. Externally, it would raise concerns about political sensitivities of Brunei's neighbours for whom secessionism in their marginalised Bornean dominions is still a sensitive political issue given that in East Malaysia non-Malay *Bumiputras* form the majority of the population. Internally, too, it would touch on equally sensitive issues concerning the position of the dominant Brunei Malay majority vis-à-vis non-Malay minorities that can lay claim to greater indigeneity than the Malays. Any attempt to contextualise Brunei in a Bornean sociocultural framework could therefore go to the foundations of present nation-states and reopen the as yet not fully resolved issue of ethnicity and nationality in Borneo.

With this political context in mind it is instructive to look at the problematic relationship between Borneo Studies and Brunei Studies. In June 2012 the biannual conference of the Borneo Research Council (BRC) was held at the main national university; although Borneo researchers from all over the world attended, not a single researcher from the University's Academy of Brunei Studies participated in the conference. Intriguingly, on the very same days the newly established Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (until 2007 the Faculty of Islamic Studies of Universiti Brunei Darussalam) held a parallel conference under the theme 'Knowledge and the Greatness of Islamic Civilisation in Borneo'. In a country where, as Brown has so clearly demonstrated, status hierarchies and royal patronage are of great importance, it is significant that the guest of honour at the opening ceremony of the Islamic conference was the Crown Prince, whereas at the BRC conference it was merely a Deputy Minister. The timing, location, and symbolism of the Islamic conference were clearly designed to upstage the BRC conference. Given the context of our discussion here, this is a rather ironic illustration of how the kind of pluralistic anthropological perspective taken by Leach and King that seeks to understand Bornean cultures not in their splendid isolation but in terms of the dynamics of intergroup relationships is subject to official suspicions of potentially undermining dominant monolithic representations of Brunei society.<sup>82</sup>

81 Jay Bernstein, 'The deculturation of the Brunei Dusun', in *Indigenous peoples and the state: Politics, land, and ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*, ed. Robert L. Winzeler (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

82 Attempts to introduce Borneo Studies at the national university have consistently run into difficulties, partly because its institutional relation to Brunei Studies remained unresolved. The present author was hired as the first anthropologist outside the Academy of Brunei studies in 1997 despite, or perhaps because of, having at the time no background at the time in Borneo or even Southeast Asian research but specialising in Arab and Muslim societies.

## Conclusion

History almost took a different turn. In the early 1960s a number of different future scenarios opened up for Brunei.<sup>83</sup> The first scenario would have seen Brunei reunited with the territories — and peoples — it had lost the previous century to the Brookes and to the North Borneo Chartered Company. The anti-British, pro-Indonesian Brunei Peoples Party (Parti Rakyat Brunei or PRB) proposed the formation of the United North Borneo Federation (Negara Kesatuan Kalimantan Utara or NKKU) made up of the territories formerly part of Brunei. Its constitutional head of state would have been the Sultan, but its government was to be democratically elected. Within such a pluralistic, multiethnic North Borneo Federation, Brunei Malays would have been in a minority and, as the proposed name (Kalimantan Utara, North Borneo, instead of Brunei) indicates, the Federation was not to be defined primarily in terms of a Brunei Malay national identity. Although Brunei would have been reunited with its former territories, that would have been at the expense of the hegemony of Brunei Malay culture. Support for the PRB was particularly strong among the non-*orang Brunei* indigenous groups, such as the Kedayan, who had been subject peoples of the Bruneis. The PRB won the 1962 district council elections overwhelmingly, which would have allowed it to occupy all the 16 elected seats in the 33-seat Legislative Council (the other 17 seats being filled *ex officio* or by appointment). In the first session of the Council the PRB intended to submit a motion demanding that the British Government return Sarawak and North Borneo to the sovereignty of the Sultan and that the three territories be federated. The Speaker's refusal to allow the motion to be discussed triggered a rebellion which was put down with the help of the British,<sup>84</sup> who were worried about growing Indonesian influence in Borneo.<sup>85</sup> The Constitution and Legislative Council were suspended and Brunei eventually became the only Commonwealth country to gain independence as an absolute monarchy. For the British the Sultan's insistence that the imposition of a constitutional monarchy would be alien to the monarchical traditions of Brunei political culture was rendered more compelling by the threat of growing Indonesian influence in northern Borneo made real by the 1962 Brunei Rebellion.

The second scenario was the alternative British-backed Malaysia Proposal which would have seen Brunei become part of East Malaysia together with Sarawak and North Borneo (Sabah). Although this proposal was not popular among his subjects because the Malaysia Federation was widely seen as a British ploy to limit Indonesian influence in the region, the Sultan seriously considered it, but after lengthy negotiations decided to resist British pressure to join Malaysia for a number of reasons: First, it would have meant the same political fate for him as for the Malayan sultans, namely the transformation of Brunei into a constitutional

83 A very detailed historical account of the Sultan's manoeuvring between these alternatives is contained in B.A. Hussainmiya, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddin III and Britain: The making of Brunei Darussalam* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995).

84 According to Tom Pocock's *Fighting general: The public & private campaigns of General Sir Walter Walker* (London: Collins, 1973), Tom Harrison, at the time still Curator of the Sarawak Museum, joined in the effort to crush the rebellion by organising the Kelabit to cut off the rebels' retreat across the Indonesian border.

85 Graham Saunders, *A brief history of Brunei* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 146.

monarchy. Second, it meant the eventual loss of control of the oil revenues which gave him the unique economic clout to underpin his absolute political power. Third, it would have changed the demographic profile of his subjects (*rakyat*) because it would have given citizenship to non-Malays, in particular to the Chinese as well as various indigenous groups not included among the *puak jati*, who at the time constituted a significantly higher proportion of the population than today.

The Sultan therefore opted for the third scenario: a sovereign Brunei Malay nation–state in which he could reassume his ‘traditional’ role as ruler and in which he could retain control over the oil revenues on which the reinvented monarchy depended. In reality, far from simply reverting to the ‘traditional’ system of government, the concentration of powers that the Sultan inherited from the British Resident was much greater than the powers the Sultan had ever held ‘traditionally’. Even at its height, the Brunei empire was a decentralised feudalistic state over much of which the Sultan only had a tenuous grip. His authority over peoples and territories beyond the immediate environment of the capital was more symbolic than real, enacted in rituals and ceremonies rather than acted upon in reality. As we have seen, by the late nineteenth century even his limited powers had become largely defunct, hence MacArthur’s impression that there was no government in the sense in which he understood the term. Because tax farms in land and in trading rights had been sold off, the first priority of the British Resident after 1906 was to establish territorial and financial control in order to build an effective administrative system. When the Residency came to an end in 1959, the Sultan therefore inherited a powerful centralised administrative apparatus over which the British Resident had exercised near absolute power only constrained by the Colonial Office in London but not accountable to the people under his authority. The concurrent transformation of Brunei’s political economy into a rentier state gave the monarchy the necessary economic dominance over society to transform the powers the Sultan had inherited from the Resident into an absolute monarchy. What the newly emerging state still needed was ideological legitimacy as a Brunei Malay nation–state, but one in which the Sultan’s power was not merely ideologically represented as absolute and ceremonially enacted as such, as was the case in Geertz’s Balinese ‘theatre state’, but one in which the Sultan’s authority was everyday political reality. One of the chief ideologues of MIB has summarised the process as follows: ‘In drafting a more viable and permanent pattern of Brunei political and sociocultural structure as an independent and sovereign nation, the loosely structured “sultanate” was modified to a more centralised and concrete political entity of “monarchy”.’<sup>86</sup>

The monarchy thus had to reinvent itself in a world in which the modern nation–state was the norm. In this pursuit anthropology served the purpose of nation–building not only in the instrumentalist, social engineering sense of promoting national integration and assimilation through ‘culture modification’, but also in the epistemological sense through the scientification (*Verwissenschaftlichung*) of tradition. Historical and anthropological research methods and theoretical models served to constitute the national history and national culture as objects of scientific inquiry and thereby conveyed scientific legitimacy upon them, much as nineteenth-

86 Abdul Latif, *Issues in Brunei Studies*, p. 196.

century *Volkskunde* and *Nationalgeschichte*<sup>87</sup> had done in Central and Eastern European nations.

While the role of anthropology outside Europe as a ‘handmaiden of colonialism’ is well known, it is less often remembered that within Europe anthropology acted as a ‘handmaiden of nationalism’ in the form of its nineteenth-century precursor, folklore (*Volkskunde*), and as such played a crucial role in the invention of national cultures, particularly in central and eastern Europe. As Gellner<sup>88</sup> has pointed out, in Britain it was the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, and one might add the German Franz Boas in the United States, who turned *Volkskunde* from its provincial romantic-nationalist origins into an empirical social science for the comparative study of human cultures outside Europe, where it then became a useful instrument of imperialism. But whereas in Europe *Volkskunde* played a crucial role in the invention of new national traditions that challenged old patrimonial feudal states, in Brunei it served the reinvention of precisely such a state as a modern nation-state. It was not the fluid lowly ‘folk’ cultures that were reinvented and institutionalised as the national culture, but the ‘high’ culture of the Brunei Malay court that was ‘nationalised’ with the somewhat paradoxical results discussed in this article. As stable and harmonious as Negara Brunei Darussalam may appear today, a question mark continues to hang over the long-term sustainability of the current political set up which, among other paradoxes and unresolved contradictions, depends on the capacity of a state wholly dependent on export revenues from nonrenewable carbon resources to continue orchestrating itself as a neo-traditional theatre state.

87 For a critical discussion of Brunei national history, see Johannes L. Kurz, ‘Pre-modern Chinese sources in the national history of Brunei: The case of Poli’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 169, 2–3 (2013): 213–43.

88 Ernest Gellner, ‘The coming of nationalism and its interpretation: The myth of nation and class’, in *Mapping the nation*, ed. G. Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 98–145.