BORNEO SUNSET

This is a tale of tattooed headhunters and white rajahs, of fantastically rich sultans and weirdly demented princes, of spectacular natural wonders and their destruction, of Chinese Christians, Malay Moslems, and Javanese imperialists, of impossibly beautiful sunsets in the South China Sea.

This is a tale of Borneo. It is also a tale of Christians under siege.

The name of *Borneo* comes from how the first European explorers to the island, the Portuguese in the early 1500s, pronounced *Brunei*. This was an old Hindu kingdom whose rulers had converted

to Islam over a hundred years earlier. The Portuguese sailed away, and the Sultanate of Brunei became prosperous as a trading center between Southeast Asia and China.

And powerful, expanding its control over the entire western third of the huge island (the third largest island in the world, after Greenland and New Guinea, it's bigger than Texas). The expansion proved unwieldy, especially since the jungles of Borneo were inhabited by headhunters who wanted no part of Islam.

These were the *Dayaks*, the island's indigenous people who had been there for thousands of years. They had their own ancient culture and religion, a form of spirit and ancestor worship called Kaharingan. They had their own way of dealing with enemies: cutting off their heads with a long knife called a *mandau* and keeping the skull as a trophy.

The Sultans were continually trying to force Islam on the Dayaks, who continually rebelled against their attempts. Men who took Moslem heads became honored in Dayak society, and Moslem skulls became prized Dayak trophies.

In the 1830s, an especially violent Dayak revolt erupted in a region called Sarawak. The Sultan, Omar Ali Saifuddin II, was despairing of how to suppress it when a private yacht captained by an Englishman sailed into Sarawak's main port, Kuching.

The Englishman was James Brooke (1803-1868), who had served with the British Army in Burma where he was severely wounded. He recovered back in England, his mind filled with dreams of returning to Southeast Asia for glory and adventure. When his father died in 1835, he inherited enough of a fortune to purchase The Royalist, a 142-ton schooner fitted with cannons.

With his private warship and a well-armed crew, he set off to pursue his dream, arriving at just the right time and place to achieve it - August, 1838 in Kuching. Appraising the situation, he asked the Sultan what he would receive in return for settling the Dayak uprising. The Sultan's message came from his capital of Bandar Brunei: Brooke would be made Rajah of Sarawak if he succeeded.

The offer of his own private kingdom was sufficient to satisfy his dream. But rather than turning his guns on the headhunting Dayaks, he met with their chiefs and offered them a deal. After a demonstration of the destructive power of his cannons and muskets on some abandoned buildings and coconut trees in Kuching, he told the chiefs:

"If you will cease your rebellion, cease cutting off Moslems' heads and live in peace with them, I will force the Sultan to leave you alone. I will be your protector against his efforts to have you abandon your religion for his."

The chiefs accepted his offer.

Brooke then sailed to Bandar Brunei and met with Sultan Omar. He took the Sultan aboard The Royalist and asked His Highness to point out an abandoned building in the port. After the building was turned into rubble by his cannons, Brooke informed the Sultan of his peace settlement with the Dayaks.

"If you do not agree, Your Highness," said Brooke conversationally over a cup of tea, "I shall do to your entire capital what I just did with that old building."

The Sultan agreed. James Brooke became the White Rajah of Sarawak.

The British backed him up. From their city of Singapore, founded by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819 as a trading port for the British East India Company, they could see his rule in a portion of Borneo as quite useful in warding off their colonial adversary, the Dutch.

The Dutch East India Company had been established in 1602, and ever since, the Dutch had been expanding an island empire from the Moluccas (the legendary Spice Islands, origin of spices more valuable than gold such as nutmeg, pepper, and cloves) near New Guinea all the way to Sumatra.

Now they were colliding with the British, colonially expanding from India and Burma to Malaya. Creating Singapore at the tip of Malaya triggered an Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 delineating colonial boundaries - but it left out Borneo. The Dutch began claiming most all of it and the Sultanate of Brunei wasn't strong enough to repel them. James Brooke had come at the right time for the Brits as well.

He was made British Consul-General for Borneo, awarded a KCB (Knight Commander of the Bath), and given free reign to rule his kingdom. For he performed another valuable service for the entire region. He rid the west coast of Borneo of pirates. Sailing The Royalist along the coast, he blew up every den of pirates infesting the South China Sea shipping lanes.

The White Rajah ruled well. The Dayaks adored him, for he respected them while introducing a fair rule of law. He also introduced them to Christianity, inviting first Anglican, then Catholic missionaries to Sarawak. He made sure this introduction was gentle and invitational, not forceful and demanding like the Moslems - and the Dayaks responded.

Sir James never married, however, so in 1865 he named his nephew Charles his successor. Upon James' death in 1868, Charles Brooke (1829-1917) became the second White Rajah of Sarawak. He ruled for almost 40 years and as well as his uncle, expanding Sarawak's borders at the expense of the Sultanate, encouraging (again, gently) the Dayaks to be good Christians and cease headhunting. The Dayaks adored White Rajah Charles as they did James.

As the Brunei Sultanate shrunk, it left a vacuum of power in Sabah or northern Borneo, ready to be filled by the Spanish who ruled their colony of the Philippines right across the Sulu Sea. Warding

this off, a British North Borneo Company was formed in 1882, and Sabah made the British Protectorate of North Borneo in 1888. Not so with Sarawak, where the White Rajahs' rule remained unhindered.

Upon Charles' death in 1917, his son Vyner Brooke (1874-1963) became the third - and last - White Rajah. Sarawak prospered under Rajah Vyner, who made sure the growing rubber and oil industries benefited the Dayaks with roads, schools, and hospitals. Then came the Japanese, who seized Kuching and invaded Sarawak right after Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

Rajah Vyner fled to Australia with his family, returning after the war only to be forced into ceding Sarawak as a British Crown Colony in 1946. The fabulous rule of the White Rajahs was over.

Yet the Brits didn't know what to do with Sarawak, nor with Sabah either. The problem was the Javanese.

The Dutch had created a monster. Their Dutch East Indies now stretched in an arc comprising over 17,000 islands that, from the western tip of Sumatra to New Guinea, was as far as London to Tehran. Their capital was the city of Batavia on the island of Java, and therein lay the problem.

Java was (and is) one of the most densely populated regions on earth. Thus the Javanese made up (as they remain) by far the largest percentage of the Dutch colony's population. So when the Javanese leader Sukarno (1901-1970) declared independence for the entire colony, calling it Indonesia, and himself as president, the Dutch gave in - and in 1949 the place morphed from a Dutch Colonial Empire into a Javanese Colonial Empire. Sukarno changed the name of the capital from Batavia to Jakarta.

Not satisfied with this huge empire he did nothing to create, like most imperial dictators, Sukarno wanted more. So he claimed that all of Borneo, not just the (now formerly Dutch) two-thirds but Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei.

The just-installed (1951) Sultan of Brunei, Omar Ali Saifuddin III, refused to be like his namesake and told Sukarno to go to hell. Sukarno responded by forming a guerrilla army that tried to seize the Sultan and take over the country. The Sultan pleaded for British help, which came in the form of British Army Gurkhas who chopped up the guerrillas with their *kukri* knives.

Sukarno then organized guerrilla groups to create mayhem and take over Sarawak and Sabah. The Brits tried to give them independence, but then decided they couldn't stand on their own. So they sold them out to the Moslems of Malaya.

It was a sell-out because like the native tribal people of Sarawak, those of Sabah - called Kadazan and Dusun - were now predominantly Christian who did not want their lives controlled by Moslems, whether from Brunei or Malaya.

Nonetheless, Sarawak and Sabah were forced by the Brits to merge with Malaya (itself a bunch of sultanates stitched together by the Brits and given independence in 1957) in 1963. The merger was now named the Federation of *Malaysia*.

To give them credit, the Brits thought this a better deal than merging them with Moslem Brunei, much less turning them over to Sukarno, because Singapore was also part of the merger. Singapore was Chinese and mostly Christian, which would provide Christian back-up and protection for Christian Sarawak/Sabah.

No such luck. Singapore pulled out of Malaysia and declared independence in 1965. The Christians of Sarawak and Sabah were at the mercy of the Malay Moslems.

It was the Chinese who came to their rescue.

There are so many Chinese running little shops and stores and businesses in the towns of Sarawak and Sabah who eat pork and drink beer and wear what they want (don't try to put a Chinese woman in a burqa!) and insist on being Confucian or Christian that the Malay Moslems have to play get-along nice.

Thus the Dayaks and Kadazan and Dusun get to stay Christian without a lot of hassle. And yet their culture is being slowly and inexorably extinguished.

This was explained to me by an Iban (a Dayak sub-tribe) chief, Angol Ak Ubin, in his longhouse near the Baram River in the jungles of northern Sarawak.

The Iban, like other Dayak sub-groups such as the Kayan, Kenyah, and Kelabit, live in *longhouses* which can be several hundred feet long and houses dozens of families:

Life in his longhouse is good. Every family's living area is very spacious. There is electricity, with television (although I never saw a satellite dish at any longhouse) and refrigerators (but no air conditioners!). They grow rice, plus all kinds of vegetables and fruit, and raise pigs and chickens (the roosters can crow all night long). No one has to work a lot to have enough food.

There is a good school for all the longhouses in the area, where the kids are taught about the outside world - and that world beckons. Thus they leave the longhouses and their tribal life for the big city lights - big cities like Kuching and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia's capital).

There they become de-tribalized urban poor. Where the easiest way out is to marry into a well-off family, which is often Moslem. The price for doing so is that they must convert to Islam.

It is against the law for a non-Moslem to marry a Moslem in Malaysia. The non-Moslem (man or woman) must convert to Islam or else the marriage will not be legally recognized. Marriages between non-Moslems are recognized as well - but unless a Christian finds another Christian to

marry, he or she either stays single or becomes Moslem.

Thus the interior of Sarawak is progressively being de-populated. In many longhouses, only old folks are left. Chief Angol is 83. As you can see, he is a devout Christian:

who is also devoted to Iban culture, traditions, dances, ceremonies, and way of life. But that way of life is dying. It's sunset in Borneo.

It's still a marvelous place to see. The extraordinary caves of Gulung Mulu are among the world's largest and most impressive:

If you're really adventurous and in good shape, you can climb the biggest mountain in Southeast Asia, Mount Kinabalu in Sabah at 13,435 feet. I wish I had some pictures of it to show you, but I climbed it back in 1976 and the pics are in some box back home. Google images of it and up will come plenty.

The Iban and other Dayak tribal people are extraordinarily friendly. They'll welcome you with open arms - you have no worries about keeping your head! Headhunting is no more.

Yet I worry about them. We can only hope that American Christians in need of a mission will come to help them.

And what of that shrunken remnant, that independent holdout of the Sultanate of Brunei? It's current Sultan, the son of Omar III and the 29th in an unbroken line starting from Awang Alak Betatar (r. 1363-1402), Hassanal Bolkiah is the richest man in the world.

As the personal owner of all of Brunei's oil reserves of some two billion barrels, plus tens of billions of dollars acquired from previous production over many decades, his wealth far outstrips that of Bill Gates, Carlos Slim, or Warren Buffet.

His home, the Istana Nurul Iman Palace, is the largest home in the world, the largest in human history, with 1,788 rooms, 257 bathrooms, 18 elevators, a banquet hall for 4,000 guests, a garage for hundreds of cars including 500 Rolls-Royces, all in all over *two million square feet under roof*. Here's a shot of it from the air as you're flying into Bandar Brunei, now renamed Bandar Seri Bagawan:

He is married to his first cousin, Pengiran Anak Damit. His father and her mother were brother and sister. (His second wife is a former Malaysian television news announcer; his former second wife was a Malaysian Airlines stewardess.) Marrying first cousins is a Brunei royal tradition. That's why the Brunei royal family is nuts.

Their son, Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah, whose picture you see on almost every page of

Brunei newspapers, is a retard. His favorite activity is shooting pool - endlessly.

But the Brunei Royals' most renowned looney is Prince Jofri, the Sultan's brother. After blowing through four billion of the Sultan's money on an ultimate playboy lifestyle, his brother exiled him to London - only to find out that Jofri had stolen another 16 billion.

One of Jofri's more notable expenditures was a 180-foot yacht with two helicopter landing pads and gold-plated toilets. It was named - prominently on either side and the stern - *Tits*. The yacht had two speedboats, appropriately named *Nipple I* and *Nipple II*. You've got to love a Moslem like that.

Jofri was building a palace for himself when his brother cut off his allowance. So the place was turned into a hotel called the Empire. To say it is over the marble top is a pathetically weak understatement. The atrium is 260 feet high. Here is a glimpse:

All this marble and ridiculous luxury and you can't buy a beer. The place has no bar. Alcohol is un-Islamic in Brunei.

The Sultan just turned 61 (Jackson and I were there on his birthday). He's still sane, the oil and natural gas business is run by Brits and American engineers, he's worshipped by Bruneians as a demi-god to whom he provides totally free perks like world-class education and medical care. Brunei will stay together until he turns it over to his goofball son. That will be around when Brunei

runs out of oil. It should be ten or even twenty years off.

In the meantime, it's peaceful here in Borneo and the sunsets are mind-boggling. It's sad to think of the fate of the Christian Dayaks and the incredible destruction of their jungle home by logging. The entire rainforest of northern Sarawak, for example, has been cut down, the Malaysian government selling the timber to Japanese lumber companies. Driving through the rape of a whole environment is a depressing experience.

Thus seeing a Borneo sunset is bitter-sweet. There's a beauty to them that seems almost unearthly, with a glowing, incandescent turquoise, scarlet, orange, indigo, cobalt, gold, the entire sky alive with an intensity of color. I tried to capture it digitally, but it turned out a pale and wholly inadequate reflection of reality:

Perhaps that's appropriate, in keeping with the reality of Christians in Borneo. At least the

Chinese and their pork and beer, will keep the Malay Moslems at bay and give the Dayaks a chance. Let's hope.