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## 4 Borneo, the river effect, and the spirit world millionaires

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Indianization, beginning in the first century of the common era and escalating over the next centuries, is described as the process by which southeast Asian chieftain cultures adopted some form of Hindu or Buddhist world views in order to gain a foothold in the increasingly vibrant and messy maritime world. The resultant palace-based kingdoms operated as theocentric, distributional nodes. Inevitably, the story revolves around irrigation, paddies, palaces, temples, ports and shipping, and just as importantly, the India-China trade that energized the system. Less fleshed out is the history that looks in the other direction, namely into the forest highlands. And yet, so many of the commodities that were transported across the ocean came from the forests: rubies, diamonds, gold, camphor, cinnamon, Dragon's Blood, edible bird's nest and so forth. These commodities were not there "just for the taking," but were in territory that often belonged to animist forest cultures.

One can imagine Indianization as an inverted sieve sucking in commodities from its upstream periphery to place them in the civilizational vortex of luxury trade. As James Scott has pointed out, little is known about the nature of these upstream exchanges in comparison with the volumes we know about southeast Asian oceanic trade, so one moves into the upstream world with caution; but to ignore the difference between sites of trade and sites of extraction is to ignore one of the fundamentals of the success of the Indianized palace cultures of southeast Asia. On its surface, the trade was asymmetrical, gold was exchanged for beads, and thus, ultimately what is at play is the "cunning" of exploitation, a cunning that escalated by the 12th century with the introduction of coinage. But the upstream cultures were more than just passive suppliers; they also profited from these exchanges, mainly in the hope of enhancing ceremonial status and fulfilling ritual obligations. In their own way, they too "drove" the economy. In this chapter, I look at Borneo as a test case for this discussion, since such exchanges occurred in a particularly concentrated form and survived, though weakened, into the 19th century. The Borneo story shows how powerful the animist world was a necessary and equal partner in extraction enterprises. Borneo is, in fact, so important to the story of southeast Asian trade that without it,

Indianization would have taken on a significantly less dramatic profile. And yet it falls completely out of the literature on Indianization because the nature of the exchange that took place on the island does not rise to the level of a document-based, civilizational narrative.

### **Borneo's export portfolio**

The scholarly literature on southeast Asian trade describes most of the things coming out of Borneo as “forest products.” But this modern-era concept can deflect the conversation in the wrong direction. Borneo was not the exporter of forest products. It was the exporter of wealth. Trade accounts compiled in 1829 tell us that in one year, the Borneo to Singapore trade had a value of a quarter-million Spanish dollars. And that was only the first stop of many before the goods reached their final destination, producing what one speculator estimated as a profit of a hundredfold.<sup>1</sup> Even in 1911, the Chinese would buy a pound and half of crystalized camphor from Borneo for fifty dollars—equivalent to about two ounces of gold.<sup>2</sup> One can only imagine its “palace-value cost” in China at that time.<sup>3</sup> “[The] Chinaman does a thriving trade in the wild produce of the country, and makes huge profits out of the Dayaks and other natives on this river.”<sup>4</sup> As to bezoar stones, the gall bladder of a long-tailed monkey (*Semnopithecus pruinosus*)—a late 19th-century ethnographer noted:

A curious industry is the collection of galiga, or bezoar stones, which are also mostly secured by the Orang Poonan [Borneo's forest tribes]. These galiga are highly prized for medicinal purposes, and are sold at fabulous prices to the Boegis [Celebe traders from Sulawesi who settled in Koetei], who resell them to the Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

A chronicle of the Banjar kingdoms of south Borneo dating from about 1663 notes that a representative from Banjar was sent to China, “taking with him ten diamonds, forty pearls, forty emeralds, forty red corals, forty rubies, forty opals, forty loads of beeswax, forty bags of damar, and thousand coils of rattan, a hundred gallons of honey, and ten orangutans.”<sup>6</sup>

Statements like this before the 16th century are extremely rare, meaning that working our way backward in time is to work into the realm of conjecture, but there can be no doubt that Borneo was a powerful “pull” on southeast Asian trade from the early centuries of the first millennium BCE. Gold, dried bark, diamonds and the other goods that came out of Borneo were established parts of Indian spiritual needs and based on lore that seems to have almost been written by—or at least written to the benefit of long-distance, luxury product merchants. Already ancient Vedic priests required incense and gold, even though gold, for example, did not come from India, but from the fabled *Suvarṇabhūmi*, the name of a land mentioned in ancient Indic sources.<sup>7</sup> *Suvarṇabhūmi* means “Golden Land” and is described as

“an island in the ocean, the furthest extremity towards the east of the inhabited world, lying under the rising sun itself.”<sup>8</sup>

Over time, of course, the geography of the Indian Ocean became more concrete, but it was not until the rise of the great Hindu kingdoms in India and the Buddhist kingdom at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka that east Indian Ocean trade began to seriously escalate. This, together with the end of the Roman Empire, produced a type of “turn” to the east. West-facing ports were supplanted in primacy by east-facing ones. Furthermore, the various kingdoms in India, feeding on the newfound trade opportunities, began to organize themselves by building and endowing large-scaled temples to which an increasing number of devotees were expected to shower wealth. This devotional economy and its trickle-down effect significantly increased the demand for luxury items.<sup>9</sup> From that perspective, one can argue that the mythologically- and spiritually-induced “pull” toward Borneo and similarly far-off places created in its wake a civilizational gap that had to be filled and thickened for it to be a more effective producer of wealth. By the 9th century, the luxury trade was in full swing. When the artists designed the reliefs on the walls of Borobudur that represented the life of Buddha, they added an image showing the forest tribes of Borneo, who can be identified by their tell-tale blowpipes. The men are portrayed clustered on the forest floor shooting darts at the long-tailed monkeys in the trees. On their own, the Borneo forest people do not kill monkeys. Is it possible that they are collecting bezoar stones to trade with?

One of Borneo’s first exports in ancient times was probably camphor, which had a wide range of medicinal, spiritual, and especially aphrodisiacal properties. Irrelevant today as a global commodity, we can forget that even in the centuries BCE it was valued as a gift worthy of sovereigns and more expensive even than gold; it figures, for example, among the items sent by the emperor of China to Alexander. The treasure house at Ctesiphon included one hundred sacks of camphor, a royal fortune!<sup>10</sup> There is no way to know where that camphor came from, but the name that the Indian merchants had for Borneo was Karpuradvipa (Camphor Island).<sup>11</sup> As for diamonds, they were extracted from the riverbeds in the southwest part of the island. It is, of course, not known when diamonds were first discovered on Borneo, but the name that the Javanese gave the island was Puradvipa or Diamond Island. Then there was gold, which was associated with immortality in the Vedas.<sup>12</sup> Gold was not a commodity one finds in India itself. In fact, the Roman author Pliny complained that India was draining Rome of all its gold which it used to pay for Indian luxury goods.<sup>13</sup> With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, south Asians were desperate to find other sources.<sup>14</sup> George Coedes even speculated that Indian exploration of southeast Asia might well in fact have been stimulated by the search for gold when western sources dried up.<sup>15</sup> Another valuable, but rarely mentioned commodity was cinnabar ore, out of which mercury is made. It came from mines in Bau, just west of Kuching in northwest Borneo.<sup>16</sup> It was used for

medicine, gold-smithing and lacquer. Once again, there is no way of knowing when cinnabar was first mined, but when Magellan's boats arrived in Brunei in 1521, they reported that the chiefs ingested mercury, a treatment particularly common to the Chinese world since ancient times. It was certainly exported to India, which had no local sources.<sup>17</sup>

Gold, diamonds, camphor and cinnabar were only a small part of Borneo's portfolio of offerings. There were tortoise shells (used by the Chinese as oracle bones); hornbill ivory (which the Chinese valued above true ivory, or even jade, to make belt buckles for high officials); rhinoceros horn (used to treat fever, rheumatism, gout and other disorders); crane crest (used to make dagger crane crest scabbards and rings); beeswax (which has numerous uses, including medicinal, but also for cloth-dyeing in Java); lakawood (a scented heartwood and root wood of a thick liana, *Dalbergia parviflora*); and Dragon's Blood, a resin produced from the rattan palms of the genus *Daemonorops* gathered by breaking off the layer of red resin encasing the unripe fruit of the rattan. Rolled into balls, it was used for Hindu ceremonies in India; in China, especially during the Ming Dynasty, as a red varnish for wooden furniture; and almost everywhere as a cure-all. The rubber of the gutta-percha tree was an important medicinal commodity exported to China.<sup>18</sup> Last but not least, there were the edible bird nests, something that the Chinese emperor and his elites had a particular fondness for.<sup>19</sup> These nests are still today the world's most expensive food.<sup>20</sup> English naturalist H. Wilfrid Walker described his arduous voyage into the highlands to witness the death-defying harvesting of the nests from the roof of a cave.<sup>21</sup> Standing knee deep in guano at the bottom of the cave, he mused to himself that if only he had the courage to dangle on the flimsy ropes to get a nest or two, he "might have come away a wealthy man."<sup>22</sup>

Despite its undeniable status as wealth producer, the island does not figure with any prominence in the scholarly literature on Indianization. It is not mentioned in the foundational book *The Making of South East Asia*,<sup>23</sup> by George Coedès, nor is it mentioned in *The Indian Ocean in World History*.<sup>24</sup>

There are several reasons for this absence. Camphor, diamonds and gold were all lightweight and easily transferable. A few bags of gems and some gold nuggets along with sacks of dried bark and perhaps a sampling of exotic bird feathers to top things off could make a fortune and easily fit in the long, tube-shaped holds of a typical outrigger boat, for example.<sup>25</sup> There were also many players operating at different scales and with different types of masters with dozens of possible transit ports, not to mention the innumerable bays and deltas with their own micro-economies. By the time the goods reached India and China, they had changed hands numerous times. The most important reason for the absence of Borneo from our discussions is that the goods moving about in southeast Asian maritime flows make their appearance in the historical records only at the end of their movement across space and time, in other words when they become jewelry, gifts, incense and payments as registered in official proclamations or inscriptions.

Since scholars rely heavily on this type of documentation, their perspective can only be on the end-game. The name of camphor reflects the problem. The word derives from the Italian *camfora*, which was a medieval Italian word from the Arabic *kapur*, which was in turn from *kapur barus*, which means “the chalk of Barus,” Barus being the port located near the modern city of Sibolga on the western coast of Sumatra. Though the entire world thought that camphor came from Barus, it was only the staging point for camphor, much of which came from Borneo.<sup>26</sup>

Borneo should, of course, not be considered in isolation. Trade between India and the Indonesian kingdoms was well-established by the 3rd century CE.<sup>27</sup> The same for Funan on the Mekong Delta, which served as an intermediary between India and China. But in all of these discussions, scholarship on southeast Asian trade tends to bring us to the shores of Borneo, but not further inland.<sup>28</sup> To get past the problem, we have to differentiate geographies of trade from geographies of extraction. This means that I have no choice but to turn to the reports written by English, American, or European ethnographers, naturalists, geologists and government officials who came to Borneo beginning in the early 19th century for shorter or longer stays depending on their purpose. Apart from the flora and fauna, they wrote on marriage customs, tattooing, head hunting, war craft and religion, and had viewpoints typical for that period. It was a land, as one commentator wrote in 1821, “infested by numerous races of barbarians or savages, differing from each other in language and ever in a state of hostility.”<sup>29</sup> William Walker, who travelled in southeast Asia collecting bird and insect specimens, had a more positive impression of Borneo’s cultures, but the title of his book was the rather intimidating: *Wanderings Among South Sea Savages* (1909). Some of the perspectives sound more innocuous. The self-proclaimed anthropologist Owen Rutter, for example, wrote in 1929 that in Borneo, “the pagan village is a self-contained, self-sufficing community, independent, if need be, of the outer world.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the naturalist Carl Bock argues in his book *The Head Hunters of Borneo* that “they live in utter wildness, . . . almost entirely isolated from all communication with the rest of the world.”<sup>31</sup> These Romantic Era interpretations place the emphasis on tribal isolation. Such views aside, there is enough in the various reports in combination with more recent ethnographic studies—particularly those of James Scott and Michael Dove—to begin to stitch together a general picture of what Borneo trade might have looked like before the 18th century and by extrapolation, even during the period of Indianization.

## River worlds

The ancient cultures of Borneo were numerous and their ethnographic backgrounds complex, but on the question of trade, the situation becomes somewhat simpler, as there were basically three different zones of interaction.

The river mouth, the upstream areas and the forests. Today, the remnants of the latter two, the upriver and forest communities, are often lumped together under the rubric Dayak. Though Dayak is a Borneo word for one of the tribes, it probably means something akin to "man." Calling everyone Dayak was a convenience for the English, who also differentiated between Sea Dayak and Land Dayak. This is problematic since Borneo communities did not differentiate themselves in this way. Yes, those who lived along the sea were different in many respects from those who lived in the uplands, but the name of a particular community was derived from the sacred river along which it lived. So deep is the river embedded in consciousness, that in almost all the ancient languages of Borneo the word for water is the same as the word for river; "when water is brought up into the house it is still the river when they drink, they drink the river; when they boil their rice they boil in the river when they name their children they pour the river over them."<sup>32</sup> Even the names of most villages were river-based. Long-glat meant "at the mouth of the river Glat." Orang Sungei meant "River People." Furthermore, the world was organized as an up-and-down to these rivers. Ngadju meant "Upstream." Uma-Tempai meant "House at the Tepai" (a tributary of the Mahakam). Further upstream, one found more mobile, forest-based societies, known generally today as the Penan. Though they did not make boats, they too were usually known by the river around which they migrated. The Penan called the traders who ventured into their territory "from the river-mouth."<sup>33</sup>

The ancient Borneo river cultures did not see themselves as living on an island in a vast sea. The sea—even for the so-called Sea Dayak—was nothing but yet another widening of the river mouth of which the particular river on which they lived was a tributary.<sup>34</sup> The global imaginary—if one could phrase it thus—would be drawn in the form of an ever-widening river with the Malay, the Chinese and the others living at the widest part. The world was not a globe, but an increasingly wider plane sloping downhill. Toward the upper reaches there would be the sacred landscapes of mountains, hills and areas where the spirits live.

There are . . . many sacred hills, rivers, and lakes wherein dwell certain powerful demons who govern the spirits. In this nether world, some say that there are trees and plants and animals . . .; this point, however, seemed open to considerable doubt in the minds of some whom I questioned, while others had so definite an idea of it that they drew maps to show the positions of the different regions. They seemed to regard it as a large river, along whose tributaries dwelt the various classes of departed spirits.<sup>35</sup>

Borneo cultures were animist, meaning that humans exist in a complex relationship to a world that includes sacred landscapes and the spirits of ancestors. Shamans served as the key mediators between the human and spiritual world. Birds were consulted before any kind of activity. Gold, for