

# Indigenisation and Collaboration

## Mapping the Spatial and Architectural Contribution of Indigenous Actors to an English Rajah's Rule in Mid-19th-Century Borneo

**John Ting**

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Mapping the Spatial and Architectural Contribution of Indigenous Actors to an English Rajah's Rule in Mid-19th-Century Borneo

John Ting, University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia

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By the mid-19th century, British Straits Settlements' city planning in Southeast Asia enforced racial segregation between colonisers and the colonised. European quarters were separated from non-European ones, and further divided by race and class. After the 1857 Indian rebellion, differences hardened, and colonial architecture mirrored elite European forms to assert authority, deny Indigenous agency, and reinforce social stratification. This system extended to architectural historiography, distinguishing between vernacular and colonial-modern styles, cementing race-based spatial and architectural classifications. These exclusionary grand narratives, termed "continental thinking" by Edouard Glissant, justified European racial superiority and control, obscuring the contributions of indigenous and migrant actors in architecture and space.<sup>1</sup>

1.

Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race and Morality in Colonial Asia," *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*, ed., Micaela di Leonardo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

2.

For example, see Ahmad Najib Ariffin and Mohammad Zulhemlee bin An, *Re-discovering Malaysian Vernacular Architecture: Form, Tradition and Sustainability* (Kuala Lumpur: OCOMOS Malaysia, 2021).

3.

Michael Wiedorn, "On the Unfolding of Édouard Glissant's Archipelagic Thought," *Karib – Nordic Journal for Caribbean Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 7; Cheryl Julia Lee, "Archipelagic Thinking in Merlinda Bobis's Fish-Hair Woman Corpus," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 59, no. 4 (2023): 15.

and Indian people continue to shape national identity, sidelining non-Muslim Indigenous voices. Malaysian architectural historiography remains colonial, focusing on the Malay timber house and Chinese shophouse, while neglecting the vernacular architecture of Indigenous groups, especially in Borneo, whose distinct practices are often underrepresented.<sup>2</sup>

The reality of colonial (and postcolonial) situations, however, is that there is not one singular root that is suggested by hegemonic historiographical approaches. If one adopts a conceptual framework like Glissant's "archipelagic thinking," many threads can be revealed to counter the singular narratives of territorialised and hierarchical legacies from the colonial period (like essentialised continental approaches) by demonstrating the interconnected multiplicities and localised decisions from that period contributed to the production of space.<sup>3</sup> In terms of architectural historiography, this approach aims to give Sarawak Indigenous groups a voice to acknowledge and demonstrate Indigenous contributions in the production of architecture. I am not from a Sarawak Indigenous group, and cannot speak for them historically, but when period European sources are brought

together with modern history, political science, geography and anthropology research, Indigenous voices and contributions to the production of space and architecture can be revealed.

In the case of European engagement with what is now Sarawak in the mid-19th century, archipelagic thought shows that hybrid processes were deliberately and actively engaged with architecture and settlement patterns. This paper demonstrates that Europeans were indigenising themselves to rule in Sarawak, in contradistinction to the harder boundaries that were being enforced between coloniser and colonised. James Brooke became Rajah of Sarawak through a blend of gunboat diplomacy and knowledge of Malay cultural practices. As the British refused to colonise Sarawak, Brooke indigenised himself to rule as a Malay regent. His governance system was highly indigenised and ambivalent towards British colonialism, particularly in commerce and agriculture. Collaborating with Sarawak River Malay and Bidayuh groups, Brooke gained control of river basins from Brunei and defeated common enemies through punitive expeditions. Success in these conflicts relied on Indigenous knowledge rather than colonial military infrastructure. The

Brooke government followed Malay practices, using networks of forts at strategic points along rivers to control and manage both collaborators and enemies. A fort was established along a river to control trade and communication, and access to the sea. Forts were also established on adjacent rivers to cut off alternative means of accessing maritime routes across watersheds between two rivers. Located at river confluences like Iban longhouses, these forts allowed for surveillance and retreat. The forts attracted Malay settlers and expanded Brooke's sphere of influence, which focused more on people than territory. Built using vernacular prefabrication methods combined with Indigenous construction techniques, labour, and materials, these forts symbolised the integration of local and European practices under Brooke's rule.