

## CHAPTER ONE



# The Geo-body in Transition

### Spatial Turn in Southeast Asia

The emergence of territorial states in Southeast Asia was a grandiose process of social change, marking a total transformation from the “pre-modern” to the “modern”. To understand the nature of the transformation, it is crucial to focus on four processes involved in the spatial turn under Western colonialism.

The first is the emergence of an ideology in the West that provided a rationale for the possession of colonial space. A new and exclusive relationship between a state and a colony required an ideological basis, conceptually turning tropical territories into “no man’s land” (*terra nullius*). Then through judicial declarations of land nationalization, *terra nullius* became an imaginary national space that had no civilized society, and vast tracts of uncultivated “waste” land fell under colonial governance.

The second process required for the colonial state to realize its national space was actual policy-making with regard to the redistribution of land and the marshaling of labor for cultivation of cash crops and exploitation of natural resources. Land laws, labor ordinances, and immigration acts created a social field where the usufruct of land was distributed to peasants and entrepreneurs. Plural societies, where multiple ethnic groups were mobilized for plantation and mining sectors are typical byproducts of colonial engineering. The nationalization of space and the mobilization of labor operated in tandem to make *terra nullius* a capitalist production site and a mercantile exchange sphere.

Thirdly, the nationalization and legal redistribution of land were followed by the actual implementation of policies, and the last phase was the reaction of local society to the colonial apparatus that evolved in connection with the construction of national space.

The relationship between state and society at work in a newly created space is geographically as well as historically specific, and subject to local variation based on timing and location. The next two chapters attempt to empirically interrogate the above-mentioned four processes, using a maritime borderland zone of colonial Southeast Asia as a case study.

Colonizers who expanded their dominance over the Malay world beginning in the eighteenth century attempted to transform the region's vast riverine-maritime complex into discrete state possessions that were to a large extent arbitrary creations.<sup>1</sup> The land, whether primary jungle or swidden in fallow, was declared to be state property and made subject to redistribution, even though people had cultivated it or collected forest produce from it for generations. Colonial administrators saw no concept of private ownership in the East, identifying only rights of usufruct over communal land. Furthermore, they regarded their predecessors — the local rulers — as barbaric Asiatic despots and, on this self-righteous basis, claimed the sole right to possession and allocation of land. Stamford Raffles, a founding father of Singapore, for instance, considered sultans and local chiefs petty tyrants, who siphoned off the fruits of their people's industry through a tributary system (Raffles 1830: 151–2).

The production of colonial space was also legitimized by social evolutionary thinking, then a dominant ideology of the European bourgeoisie. Karl Marx thought the lack of land ownership and existence of despotic monarchies to be common characteristics of Asia. Many other Western social thinkers saw Eastern absolutism as comparable to Western feudalism, a stage prior to where they placed themselves in a linear developmental process. These ideologies provided colonizers with a justification, as both leaders on the evolutionary ladder and social reformers for transferring power from local rulers to colonial governments. When local rulers were removed by the newly established administrations or placed under the rubric of indirect colonial rule,

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<sup>1</sup> From the “age of discovery”, the claim to take possession of native land has been ritualistic. European landfall in the Caribbean in 1492, for instance, was accompanied by a series of “ceremonies and juridical formalities to take possession of the island, making the declarations that were required, and which at more length are contained in the testimonials made there in writing” (Greenblatt 1991: 55). For Columbus, taking possession seems to have been principally the performance of a set of linguistic acts: declaring, witnessing, and recording.



Fig. 2 Malay Maritime World

ownership of and control over territorial space was also transformed. The colonial government became the supreme landlord with the prerogative to allocate land and to tax both the people who labored and the goods produced within its bounded territory.

The colonizing of space proceeded concurrently with the process of mobilizing labor and reconfiguring pre-existing relations between man and nature. Flora in the colony was vastly altered for commercial agriculture, labor was assembled through in-migration, and land was allocated for cultivation. This reconfiguration of colonial space led to the emergence of an ethnically segmented peasant society: both foreign and domestic indentured laborers planted commercial crops in the plains; natives in the interior engaged in shifting cultivation and collection of jungle produce; and mobile sea-faring peasants found an economic and habitational niche on the coast. Ownership and allocation of land,

labor mobilization, and ethnic segmentation were all part of the colonial space-making process.

### **The First White Rajah, James Brooke**

James Brooke, the first so-called white rajah, was an ambitious young man who, influenced by the political philosophy of Stamford Raffles, believed in British territorial expansionism in Southeast Asia. He first visited Sarawak in 1839, when a struggle between local Islamized chiefs and the decaying Brunei Sultanate was intensifying. In exchange for Brooke's help in the pacification of Sarawak, the sultan granted him territory corresponding roughly to present-day Kuching and its environs. In 1841, Brooke was appointed the first rajah of this westernmost region of Brunei's political domain. Initially the Sarawak kingdom was not recognized as an independent state by the international community, and its political legitimacy was based only on the symbolic recognition of the Brunei sultan. The kingdom was therefore another local kingdom, and it lacked the borders and the politico-economic machinery features of a modern nation-state. The kingdom of Sarawak retained characteristics of pre-colonial polities, but under Brooke rule it embraced a century-long historical process that transformed it into a nation-state, laying the basis for British colonized rule (1946–63) and a place in independent Malaysia.

The situation of Sarawak was far from unique. Many Western colonial governments were not in fact extrinsic to local society. Colonial administration retained pre-existing political systems. In Southeast Asia, not a small number of colonial governments resembled traditional kingdoms, dynasties, and religious communities both structurally and operationally. The port state of Melaka as governed by the Portuguese, and later by the Dutch East India Company, operated according to the principles of statehood in Southeast Asia. According to Ricklefs, the kings of Batavia regarded the Dutch East India Company as just another kingdom (Ricklefs 1974: 27).

The same is true of Sarawak. From the viewpoint of Islamized sultans, local Malay chiefs, Muslim traders (*nakoda*), Dayak leaders (*orang kaya*), and leaders of Chinese communities (*kongsi*), the first rajah of Sarawak was another newly emergent local lord.<sup>2</sup> The essential

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<sup>2</sup> In this book Dayak means a member of a group of indigenous peoples inhabiting parts of Borneo, including the Iban, the Orang Ulu, and the Land Dayak.

power of his kingdom came from the charismatic nature of the rajah himself. When on expedition, James Brooke was portrayed as a brave war leader fighting rebellious pagan tribes such as the Iban and the Kayan. When in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak kingdom, the rajah's daily routine was to come to the royal palace under the shade of a yellow umbrella, a symbol of the cosmological power and dignity of Malay rulers.<sup>3</sup>

Like other kingships in Southeast Asia, the Sarawak succession followed a patrilineal line, passing from James to his nephew Charles Brooke, and thence to Charles' son Vyner. Under James, the Sarawak government consisted of a small number of British and native officers. In 1841, it was run by four white officers and two Malay officers; the numbers slowly grew to 30 British and 15 Malay officers by 1884, but even at the turn of the twentieth century, white officers numbered less than 50 (Naimah 1999). As in a traditional Southeast Asian state, the officers — both British and Malay — formed an unstable entourage surrounding the rajah. Each of his subordinates maintained a relationship with the rajah based on the exchange of salary and loyalty, and the state's governmental organization was an extension of such dyadic relations. But Rajah Brooke was also white, British, and Christian. The neighboring colonial powers did not regard him in the same light as other local chiefs at the margin of their territory, but had certain expectations of governance in line with European models.

### **Rajah Charles Brooke as a Supreme Landlord of the Tropics**

The near absence of registration or administrative instructions on land before 1871 has been well documented (Porter 1967: 17–31). Under James Brooke, Sarawak was still in political turmoil, at war with the Iban and other natives in the interior, and the first rajah was in no position to implement land reform and agro-economic policies. The situation changed after the coronation of Charles Brooke, whose reign would mark the economic transformation of Sarawak through the expansion of regional trade with Singapore and the early development of export-oriented commodity production.

According to Porter, “Charles Brooke was bold and more practical than his uncle and the effect of his confident approach to his duties

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<sup>3</sup> For the detailed analysis of political history of Sarawak under James Brooke as a “man of prowess”, see Walker 2002.

began to be seen almost immediately after he assumed responsibility for administrative government” (Porter 1967: 32). Charles Brooke implemented nation-building by improving land administration and mobilizing labor, both crucial to promoting commodity production. Charles immediately proposed a comprehensive land regulation that was passed unanimously by the Supreme Council and announced in the *Sarawak Gazette* on January 21, 1871. The first and basic land law of Sarawak made all “unoccupied and waste” land the property of the Sarawak government, available for commercial production, and liable for reversion to the state if left uncultivated:

1. All unoccupied and waste lands the property of Government, required for agricultural purposes, beyond the township and with the exception of such tracts as may be reserved or disposed of by Public Sale, shall be granted to applicant at the words mission pleasure of the Government in Fee simple for \$1 per acre or on lease of 900 years on payment of 50 cents per acre, with an annual quit rent of 10 cents per acre ...
2. Persons taking land on lease of 900 years to have the option after the expiration of 3 years, of purchasing the land in Fee simple on payment of the additional sum of \$ 1 per acre ...
3. All lands granted whether upon lease or in Fee simple, are liable to revert to the State, in the event of one-fourth not being cleared and brought under cultivation or otherwise made use of for pasturage, or building purposes within 10 years of the period of possession ...
4. All mortgages, upon land to render them legal, must be duly registered ...
5. Squatters will have no actual right to the land, but in the event of the Government taking over such lands the temporary possessors will receive compensations for their plants, arbitrarily fixed by two or more persons, nominated by Government: all buildings run up on such lands are to be limited in value to \$25, and to be liable to be called upon for the payment of rent and taxes.  
[Items 6-13 omitted.]

(*SG*, January 24, 1871: 39)

The government’s aim in claiming possession of land was to establish its sole right to distribute it to cultivators of commercial crops. To support this goal, a series of detailed agrarian policies were drawn up

to encourage the cultivation of gambier and pepper, which commanded a good price in the international market at the time. Gambier, used for dyeing, was usually planted together with pepper for economic and ecological reasons.<sup>4</sup> But their cultivation did not yield long-term plantation sites. Gambier processing required large amounts of firewood, while pepper quickly exhausted the soil. In the search for firewood and fresh soil, planters moved inland to clear virgin or secondary forest in fallow.

In 1872, a government proclamation assured Chinese planters that “they shall have land free of all payments and to any extent, if they engage to bring it under cultivation however gradually”; that “no tax shall be levied on exports of gambier or pepper for the first six years”; and that “the Government will engage to allow gambier and pepper gardeners to have salt and tobacco free of duty on the spot for the term of six years”. Anticipating the socio-economic form the gambier-pepper plantations would take, the regulation granted “the leading Chinaman of each river ... power from Government to exercise authority over coolies”. The government also promised to enforce social control, maintaining that “coolies who stipulate to serve masters for certain periods will be obliged by the law to do so or incur punishment” and pledging “to assist to recover runaway coolies and in all other ways to assist the planters in accordance with the rules of justice” (*SG*, June 17, 1872: 47).

In 1876, the government announced 99-year land grants of “1,000 fathoms square”<sup>5</sup> at nominal rents, on the condition that “a proper course of farming and bona fide system of gambier and pepper cultivation be carried out”. Freedom from export duty was extended another four years — or ten years in the case of “persons coming to Sarawak and there opening gardens with their own capital (that is without advances from Govt.)” — and taxes thereafter were promised to be light. Signaling the relative scarcity of labor, the government also undertook to provide “free passages from Singapore to Kuching for all Towkays and coolies intending bona fide to cultivate gambier and

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<sup>4</sup> The reasons for the co-cultivation of these plants are: (1) gambier produced refuse that manured pepper vines; (2) the sale of fast-growing gambier provided an income before the pepper matured for harvest; and (3) gambier plants required little attention compared to labor-intensive pepper production, thus their demands were complementary rather than competitive.

<sup>5</sup> 1 fathom = 6 feet.

pepper in Sarawak”<sup>6</sup> (Porter 1967: 38–9). In the same year, the rajah allowed sago cultivators to obtain title to their land, as well as those who produced rice, coconuts, or other “native culture”, provided the land was at least 1/2 to 1 mile from the townships.

The decade of the 1870s was thus a formative period in the development of Sarawak’s agricultural landscape. Charles Brooke and his government took active measures to promote cash crop production through the transformation of virgin and secondary forest and the immigration of agricultural laborers. Unlike large-scale plantation industries developed by European planters in British and Dutch colonies, the expansion of cash crop agriculture in Sarawak was left largely in the hands of Chinese entrepreneurs.

### **Lundu District’s Encounter with Brooke Colonization**

Lundu District, 1,870 square kilometers situated in the western corner of the First Division,<sup>7</sup> is an area with a long history of Brooke colonization. Lundu, one of the oldest administrative districts under Brooke administration, occupied a portion along an extremely porous international boundary with Netherlands East India. The borderland area was divided by the low mountain ridge running from Cape Dato on the coast to Mt. Raya in the interior. On the Sarawak side, rivers such as the Lundu, Tuba, and Serikin ran into the South China Sea. On the Dutch side, the Sambas, Landak, and Sparan rivers ran down to the plain. Marked only by this watershed, the boundary between the Brooke territory of Sarawak and Dutch Sambas originated in and coincided with the frontier that separated the Brunei and Sambas sultanates.

The district became part of Sarawak in 1841 when it was granted to James Brooke by the sultan of Brunei. For the Brookes, this district was a relatively unproblematic colonial territory compared to the Second Division (the Batang Lupar, Saribas and Kelakah districts), where they faced ongoing Iban resistance. It was Lundu where the first fort was established in the early 1870s, functioning as a training station for young British officers in their first years of duty, from whence they transferred to outstations further afield.

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<sup>6</sup> “Towkay” (*taukay*) is a common word of Hokkien origin, meaning the head of a firm or shop.

<sup>7</sup> The First Division comprised of current divisions of Kuching, Samarahan, and Sri Annam.



Fig. 3 Sarawak (Malaysia) and West Kalimantan (Indonesia)

Long before the Brookes came to power, the Lundu region had been under the jurisdiction of the chief of the Lundu Dayaks. The chief collected levies on commodities such as beeswax and edible bird's nest, and imposed fines if fruit trees were destroyed on the premise that they were planted by the chief's ancestors (*SG*, May 1, 1882: 31). One of the earliest accounts of Lundu is found in a travel journal written by Spenser St. John, who left a vivid description of a longhouse there in the 1860s:

No village in Sarawak is blessed with greater prosperity than this. The old Orang Kaya, being of a most determined character, has reversed



**Fig. 4** Lundu District and Sematan Sub-District

the usual order of things; and the Malays, instead of being the governors, are the governed. Having for years been little exposed to exaction, they are flourishing and exhibit an air of great contentment (St. John 1862: 8).

During the reign of the second rajah, however, Dayak rule was completely abolished. On March 23, 1882, Brooke government officials arrived with a proclamation from Charles Brooke that deprived the Lundu Dayak chief of all jurisdiction over his subjects (*SG*, May 1, 1882: 31). Unlike other outstations relatively free from the rajah's interference due to lack of communications, the First Division and its officers were henceforth under close supervision:

There was a European Resident and his two European assistants, who were responsible for the administration of the First Division which surrounded Kuching. Resident of the First Division was the highest post in the Sarawak Civil Service. Under Charles Brooke this was a post of great trust and confidence. The Resident in Kuching was usually called upon to give advice on matters affecting other Divisions or the country as a whole. Often he was placed in charge of the government when the rajah was absent. However, the Resident of the First Division was usually unable to administer Kuching or the First Division without the rajah's continuous interference (Ward 1966: 94).

The government's economic policy and its effect at the local level were therefore most apparent in the First Division, and Lundu was one of the first places where new agro-economic policies were implemented. The district functioned as an experimental area for the new cash crops of pepper, gambier, coffee, and coconut. As a result, Lundu District was quickly transformed from a local consumption agro-economy to one based on export-oriented cash crop production.

The development of export agriculture in Lundu was also encouraged by the rapid growth of the Singapore commodity market during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Two years before the coronation of Charles Brooke in Sarawak, the 1869 opening of the Suez Canal significantly boosted worldwide trade. Within five years, the value of Singapore's trade increased by 154 per cent<sup>8</sup> (Moore and Moore 1969: 371). Singapore was the regional center for interoceanic trading vessels — Bugis *pinisi*, Chinese *junks*, and European steamships — that cruised the South China Sea during the northeast and southwest monsoon. Cape Dato, at the western tip of Lundu District, was located in the heart of the trading network that linked Singapore, the west coast of Dutch Borneo, Sarawak, and Brunei.

Charles Brooke's government targeted Singapore Chinese merchants (*taukay*) for migration and investment in the district. According to the *Sarawak Gazette* of June 17, 1872:

The last Royalist [steamship] brought us a number of Chinese Taukays from Singapore and Rhio with the professed purpose of looking for land suitable for gambier and pepper planting. They returned to Singapore by the same steamer, and before leaving

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<sup>8</sup> From \$58,250,915 in 1868 to \$89,632,235 in 1873.

expressed themselves much satisfied with what they saw. Free passages were granted them by Royalist, and Heartsease conveyed them to Lundu and back. It is their intention to form a company in Singapore in which Sarawak merchants would join (*SG*, June 17, 1872: 46).

During the reign of James Brooke, a large number of Chinese had come to Sarawak's First Division, finding work in the Bau goldfields and in Kuching to the southwest, or settling in farming communities in and around Kuching, Bau, and Lundu (Porter 1967: 28). They are assumed to have fled Dutch Borneo where Chinese gold miners were at war with the Dutch throughout the 1840s and 1850s (Chew 1990: 21–2). In Lundu District, St. John had noted “about 200 Chinese working on gardens extending over about a hundred acres of ground, and neatly planted with various kinds of vegetables, among which beans and sweet potatoes appeared most numerous”. According to him, Chinese agricultural products were not exported, but mainly sold within regional markets for local consumption by “the sago growers and workers of the rivers to the north” (St. John 1862: 8).

The district was an open gate to immigration into Sarawak from across the border and the region, supplying the important labor reserves for the expansion of Lundu's plantation economy. Within a decade of Charles' accession, numerous Chinese estates had been established. One district officer reported that “the scheme for planting gambier and pepper now in process of trial with the Chinese will, if fairly successful, provide a good starting point, from which to initiate a wider plan of introducing the cultivation of the same and the other products among the Malays and Dayaks” (*SG*, December 8, 1877: 85).

Throughout the 1880s, Lundu residents and new settlers were quite responsive to the new production system, but success brought its own problems. A district report of 1887 stated that “land disputes and collisions between Chinese gardeners and Dayaks are somewhat constant and from the number of pepper gardens opened all around Lundu such disputes will increase” (*SG*, July 1, 1887: 121). New land regulations also caused a great deal of confusion in Lundu, where residents had previously managed their swidden fields according to customary law.

The officer stationed at Lundu was thus kept busy explaining the land regulations to the local people. He reported that, “I sent all these men into Court and explained to them Land Regulations and the system of permits to open and to extend gardens and gave orders that

no clearing was to be made without application to the Government authorities at the Fort” (*SG*, July 1, 1887: 121). Despite these efforts, land continued to be cleared without reference to the government, which prompted Rajah Brooke to issue the following order in 1889:

Whereas it has come to my knowledge that land lying at the foot of Lundu mountain is being appropriated by Malays under pretense that it has been given or sold to them by Dayaks. I hereby make known to all denominations of people living in Lundu that any-one clearing land lying between Lundu River and Gading Mountain and planting on it without permission from the Government does so at his own risk; and in the event of such land being required by the Government will receive no compensation (*SG*, January 1, 1889: 7).

In June 1893, opening gardens without application to the district office became an offense subject to a fine. Three months later, the Police Court recorded two cases of breach: in one, a Chinese planter was fined \$5; in the other, a Dayak was ordered to pay court costs for felling jungle without a permit (*SG*, September 1, 1893: 146).

The purpose of land regulation was twofold: to grant land to planters and to reclaim land in the event it was left uncleared and uncultivated. Officers stationed at Lundu Fort were responsible for granting land and for transferring previously granted but unused land to other planters. The *Sarawak Gazette* of the 1890s provides a glimpse into the continuing confusion and daily routine of an officer in Lundu:

A good deal of my time has been taken up with surveying gardens in the vicinity. Principally marking out land for which permits have been granted. Sibuyaw Dayaks living at Lundu have been given land between Simuning and S’Kati, the land has been laid out in a way that will give them plenty of space for extending, and the allotments, numbering fifteen, join each other. The Dayaks have been given to understand that they will receive no other land if they fail to give this every attention or allow it to become a field of “lalang” [weeds]. The soil is exceedingly good, and the land, covered with young jungle, of their own choice (*SG*, October 2, 1893: 163).

Between Sompā and Rambungan a good deal of land of out here has been given to Malays for coconut planting but none has yet got beyond planting a small patch with watermelons. All permits however are given on the understanding that if no real work is done in six months, the land may be granted to others (*SG*, October 1, 1898: 195).

A good many permits have been issued to Malays for coconut planting, but none appears to have done anything yet. As this land has been especially reserved to Malays for two years, and none have yet done anything, I shall now grant permits to Chinese to plant if any should wish to do so (SG, December 1, 1898: 224).

As a result of the land and labor regulations, new cash crop fields mushroomed. An officer who inspected various upriver and coastal areas of Lundu reported that seventy gardens containing some 60,000 pepper vines had been opened in 1889.

**Table 1** The Average Number of Pepper Vines/Garden

<i>Area</i>	<i>No. of Gardens</i>	<i>No. of Vines</i>	<i>Vines/Garden</i>
Jangkar	11	9,000	818
Siberis	2	1,000	500
Serayan	6	5,000	833
S'Larat	11	5,500	500

Source: SG, September 2, 1889.

Between 1893 and 1895, as many as 293 land permits were issued in the district (SG, Dec. 2, 1895: 220). The majority of applicants were Chinese, along with a small number of Dayaks from groups such as the Sibuyow, Jagoi, Selako, and Larah. The Malays in the district, however, were virtually unrepresented in mainstream agricultural development until the mid-1890s, when Malay settlers began to be involved in copra (dried coconut) production. This led to dramatic growth in the Malay population in Lundu and the Sematan coast leading to Cape Dato.

## **The Development of Plantation Economy**

Lundu's plantation economy was based on ethnically differentiated modes of crop production. The differences stemmed mainly from the way labor was mobilized for the operation of agricultural estates. Chinese plantations were owned by merchants from Singapore, Pontianak and Kuching who employed coolies from Dutch Borneo. Dayak cultivation was family managed, with labor rarely involving more than a single longhouse or group of kinsmen. Malay plantations were opened by Malay merchants from Sambas and other coastal areas in Dutch Borneo. The Malay peasants from Sambas region worked under the leadership of Malay and Bugis ship captains (*nakoda*)-turned-merchants. Except

for a small number of Dayak and Malay laborers employed at Chinese-owned fields (*SG*, November 1, 1893: 173, Lockard and Graham 1992: 28), Lundu’s plantation industry was based on this ethnically segmented labor organization.

### **Chinese *Taukay*-owned Pepper and Gambier Plantations**

According to the census of 1889, the Chinese population in Lundu was 947, with a male/female ratio of 5:1 (765 males and 182 females). Most were indentured laborers from Dutch West Borneo working on pepper and gambier plantations. Chinese planters, taking advantage of the special incentives offered by the Sarawak government, cultivated cash crops “by living on the premises or putting coolies in charge” (*SG*, August 1, 1899: 261).

**Table 2** The Population of Lundu District (1889/1898)

<i>Ethnic Group</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total 1898</i>	<i>Total 1889</i>	<i>+/-</i>
Chinese	629	168	798	947	-150
Malays	737	659	1,396	1,023	373
Sibuyau	429	436	865	844	21
Silakow	366	333	699	804	-105
Larah	135	120	255	333	-78
Various	61	66	127	149	-22

Source: *SG*, August 1, 1898: 166.

The terms “plantation”, “garden”, and “estate” were used interchangeably in Lundu District reports to describe Chinese-owned cultivated fields. The size of the fields and the number of laborers employed varied significantly. Pepper gardens recorded in 1893 ranged from 3 to 8 hectares.

**Table 3** The Size of Pepper Gardens

<i>Planter</i>	<i>Cultivated Land</i>	
Wa Ha, Liam Kim	160 fathoms sq.	(8.29 ha)
Seng Ha, Ah Low	100	(3.24 ha)
Ngo Wa, Ah Low	130	(5.48 ha)
Kim Eng, Hop Pan	150	(7.29 ha)
Liang Heng, Ah Jew	100	(3.24 ha)

Source: *SG*, October 2, 1893: 163.

Gardens with more than 1,000 vines would have required a labor force well beyond that of a household, especially during harvest season. The *Sarawak Gazette* reported that in Sematan Sub-District, there were 37 gardens with more than 100 vines. "The number of vines on the said plantations amount to 50,250, and the aggregate number of labourers employed on the same appear to be 81 males" (*SG*, July 1, 1893: 114). One Pontianak Chinese had employed 28 coolies to clear 600 acres for a coffee plantation that was one of the largest in the district (*SG*, April 1, 1895: 66–7).

The larger plantations under the management of wealthy *taukay* merchants with multiple holdings were often described as "firms" or "kongsi",<sup>9</sup> independent units patterned after clan-based organizations in China (*SG*, April 1, 1895: 66). The *Sarawak Gazette* in 1892 recorded the sale by public auction of the property owned by the Ban Hin Long firm, comprising seven pepper gardens with more than 5,500 vines, two shop houses in Lundu bazaar, and one dwelling house in Kuching (*SG*, August 1, 1892: 143). Large plantations had on-site clerks for daily operations and obtained special permission from the government to allocate *arrack* (hard liquor made from rice) and opium to their indentured laborers. They were equipped with accommodation facilities for coolies, as indicated by the inspection report of a colonial officer who "visited Bong Keh Sam's coffee plantation at S'nibong and found that a substantial building with bilian [ironwood] shingles was in the course of construction for the accommodation of his coolies, half of the building finished was occupied by the coolies. The coolies numbering twenty-eight I found to be in good health. Six of their number who had been giving trouble received punishment" (*SG*, April 1, 1895: 67).

It is difficult to reconstruct how these plantations operated due to the scarcity of reliable archival materials but the following extract from a report by the Resident of Lundu District indicates how labor was mobilized. Bound to plantation owners by advance payment, Chinese coolies were forced to sell the pepper seeds they cultivated to the estate owners who had advanced them money at a price far below their fair market value.

A bad system of opening gardens is in vogue, a system which is bad all round, doing good to neither Towkay nor coolie and eventually ending in the loss of the garden opened up.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of *kongsi* organization in Sarawak, see Daniel Chew (1990).

The system is based on what is the invariable custom in the East, i.e., the advance of wages and other sums of money before any work has been done to warrant such payment. In this way any broken down coolies can relieve his immediate wants by clearing a few fathoms of jungle, putting in young pepper vines, and then borrowing money on the security of his garden, with a promise to sell all his crop to the mortgagee at a price considerably below market value, the mortgage in the mean-time supplying him with food till vines bear. By this time he is hopelessly in debt on account of his original advance, now swelled by the value of the provisions he has meanwhile been supplied with by the Towkay (*SG*, June 1, 1889: 77).

Pepper cultivation was a speculative enterprise, subject to sudden ups-and-downs in market price. Planters in Lundu District tried to insulate themselves by keeping dried seeds in stock when the price was low. Well-connected merchants, however, had a great advantage over the growers:

As I find the pepper planters here have been getting very low prices for their pepper, in some cases less than half the price current in Singapore, I now put a notice in bazaar every fortnight showing the prices current in Singapore in the hope that it will enable them to get better prices from their Taukays (*SG*, August 1, 1899: 261).

The government's priority lay in securing revenue from taxes levied on export commodities. It therefore focused on ensuring the smooth operation of Chinese plantations. This is best seen in the distribution of agricultural produce in local markets, an issue of major concern to Chinese plantation owners. A number of coolies secretly sold crops to Chinese merchants outside Lundu bazaar rather than to their own employers:

Apparently in the Lundu district one or more Towkays has overreached himself and the harm of this not only affects himself but also the district, by unsettling a part of its population and laying them open to great temptation to dishonesty in the way of fraudulently selling crop to those who are not entitled to it, from which it is but a step to robbery and other crime (*SG*, June 1, 1889: 78).

District officers tried to contain the illicit marketing of commodities by restricting distribution channels to local networks based on patron-client (*taukay*-plantation worker) relations. In spite of their efforts, the illicit sale of crops by coolies and their arrests regularly featured in Lundu officials' monthly reports:

... two cases in which Chinese have been arrested for bringing pepper for illicit sale from Simpadi, Lee Kai Juh in the employ of Messers, Tap Soon Seng of Kuching, and Sio Chang and Ah Siam in the employ of Messers, Ghee Soon & Co. In the former case the purchaser has been brought to light but he is at present in Kuching (*SG*, September 1, 1893: 146).

... two Chinese had been arrested during my absence, found bringing pepper to Lundu from Simpadi for illicit sale (*SG*, October 2, 1893: 163).

Sales of agricultural produce outside the patron-client relationship continued to be subject to prosecution by the government, and Chinese laborers were deprived of maneuverability in profit making.

### **The Encroachment of Dayak Swidden Fields**

Dayaks, especially Selakos who had newly migrated from Dutch West Borneo, repeatedly complained about the Lundu chief's claim on land and forest produce (*SG*, May 1, 1882: 31). The abolition of the sovereign powers of the Lundu Dayak chief by Charles Brooke in 1882 was initially welcomed by local residents but after the Brooke government was in control, a fundamental transformation in the Dayak way of life began to take place.

Unlike Chinese and Malays who migrated to Lundu in response to economic opportunities under the Brooke government, most of the Dayaks living there had been engaged in swidden rice agriculture there for a long period of time. The land regulations of the Brooke government deprived them of customary rights to the secondary forest, curbing their ability to use land for swidden cultivation outside their existing domain (Hong 1987: 40). The new government's claim on the land formerly under customary tenure caused great confusion in Lundu. The government felt confident that the regulation would be beneficial, reporting in 1893:

The Sibuyau Dayaks do not seem to appreciate the land regulations, having always looked upon land in this neighborhood as their own property. The permit system I feel sure will encourage the natives in bringing the soil under regular culture for they now seem to understand that reckless felling of jungle is prohibited (*SG*, September 1, 1893: 146).

However, just two years later, the *Sarawak Gazette* printed this document:

Some Sibuyau Dayaks are claiming that they had been unjustly fined by the Court for breaches of land regulations, in felling forest for planting without taking our permit (*SG*, December 2, 1895: 220).

The revised land regulations announced in 1893 gave further recognition to commercial “squatters”, who “could be dealt with leniently” or permitted “to take out title” on the land they occupied. The commercial squatters were, in effect, given legal title to land cleared and then “abandoned” by others. Considering that Dayak swidden cultivators left their fields in long fallow, the regulation gave planters secondary forest that had been cleared by Dayaks. In this sense, the order was the government’s deliberate attempt to curtail Dayak shifting cultivation and customary tenure.

Dayaks in Lundu were brought into cash crop production relatively early in the colonial era, in what was probably an inevitable response to land encroachment by the Brooke regime. Though their adjustment initially was involuntary, some Dayaks in Lundu became quite active in the development of the export-oriented plantation economy. Their gardens flourished, according to many colonial officers who inspected them:

I was struck with the appearance of the pepper cultivated by Silakau Dayaks though not on a large scale, what there was equaled Chinese (*SG*, February 1, 1893: 26).

... the pepper planted by these Selakau Dyaks seemed to be doing exceedingly well, and they deserve great credit for the way some of them keep up their gardens (*SG*, January 2, 1894: 10).

The average size of Dayak plantations was much smaller than that of the Chinese. The average number of pepper vines per garden owned by Dayaks ranged from 350 to 450, which could have been managed by a family unit, as compared to the Chinese average of 980–1,400 vines per estate.

There were exceptions, however, and in 1895 the *Sarawak Gazette* mentioned one Selako planter who owned more than 3,000 pepper vines in Sematan (January 2, 1895: 11). To maintain 3,000 pepper vines required intensive labor, especially in weeding and harvesting, and was well beyond the capacity of an individual domestic group. There

**Table 4** The Number of Pepper Vines and Gardens (Chinese and Dayak Gardens)

<i>Area</i>	<i>No. of Gardens</i>	<i>No. of Vines</i>	<i>Vines/Garden</i>
<i>Simatan</i> [Sematan]			
Chinese	29	28,500	983
Dyaks	10	4,500	450
<i>Lundu</i>			
Chinese	91	127,700	1,403
Natives	8	2,800	350

Source: *SG*, April 1, 1895: 66–7.

is, unfortunately, no historical documentation on the Dayak mode of large-scale commercial cultivation at the turn of the century.

### ***Nakoda* Entrepreneurs and Malay Coconut Plantations**

Malay commercial activities on the coast of Lundu District were part of a larger trading network that encompassed the east coast of Riau, Singapore, the Natunas, Sarawak, along with ports such as Sambas, Menpawah, and Pontianak in West Dutch Borneo. The coastal area between Lundu and Cape Dato was directly linked to commercial hubs in Java and Singapore by the trading networks of Sambas Malay and Bugis *nakoda* merchants. According to a British observer:

There was a string of Malay trading settlements, along the coast of Borneo on the South China Sea side, from Tg. [Cape] Dato at the northern side. The archipelago-wide trade was in the hands of local Malays and Bugis who sailed in prahu of 800 to 1,200 pikul burden, carrying from 40 to 60 men each.<sup>10</sup> These boats made two voyages a year. Each consignment, according to the individual size of the vessel, was worth for 2,000 to 8,000 Spanish dollars annually (Moor 1837: 13).

Even after James Brooke came to power, Malay trading activities survived for a time, linking Pontianak and Brunei via Cape Dato, with Sematan and Lundu port functioning as important strategic points connecting West Dutch Borneo and Sarawak. From the mid-nineteenth

<sup>10</sup> 1 pikul = 60.48 kg.

century, *nakoda* trading activity expanded as *nakoda* merchants engaged in the timber business in the Lundu coastal district in response to rising demand for timber in Singapore, and employed Sambas Malays as coolies and carpenters. In the early 1890s, the *Sarawak Gazette* recorded substantial contact between *nakoda* and Lundu officials in connection with the timber trade and ship-building: the *nakoda* asked for monopolies on certain types of timber (especially *tengar* bark and *piñaga* wood) and jungle produce; the Brooke government ordered them to pay export duty on each shipment to Singapore and Java, and Sambas Malays to pay tax on each *sampan* (boat) they built (*SG*, February 1, 1893: 26; September 1, 1893: 146; December 1, 1894: 208; April 2, 1894: 56; August 1, 1895: 144; December 2, 1895: 220). Logging activities by *nakoda* on the coast between Lundu and Cape Dato, as well as on major riverine areas such as Kuala Lundu, Kuala Sematan, and Kuala Samunsam, facilitated the later development of coconut plantations in the area (see Fig. 9).

The *nakoda* merchants thrived on their maritime as well as riverine trading, but the establishment of the Brooke regime and the influx of Chinese *taukay* traders caused their commercial activities to decline. As Sanib Said pointed out, the Sarawak government took decisive measures to deprive Malays of economic power:

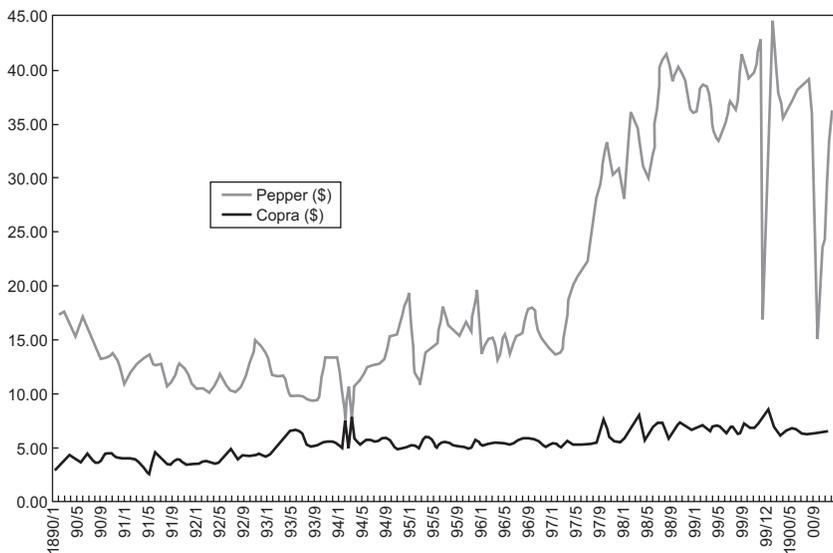
One of the important steps taken was to close the source of production as well as the market to Malay traders. This involved breaking the mutual dependence between Dayaks and the Malay traders. This was achieved by a resettlement policy implemented by the formation of a fort system in every major river settlement.... Hence movement of population could easily be observed and controlled. The fort, always manned by one or two European officers and a Kuching Malay Native Officer, then acted as the strategic and administrative center of the river system.

In turn, the Malay traders were encouraged to take up subsistence farming round the fort. The result was that the Malay community living in that river system would be under constant observation from the Government, and they had no alternative but to concentrate on mere passive and sedentary occupations (Sanib 1985: 21–2).

Losing their commercial supremacy to Chinese capital, *nakoda* traders finally turned to agricultural production to survive under the Brooke regime. Unlike Chinese and Dayak peasants, Malays in the district did not participate in inland pepper cultivation, continuing instead to plant coconuts and some bananas on the coast. In January

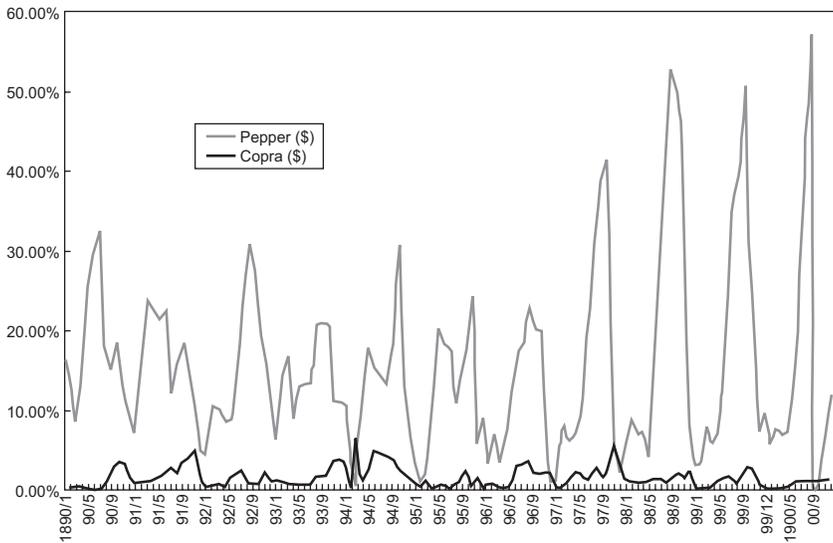
1894, the amount of pepper produced for export in Sematan reached 1,122 pikuls (67,881 kg), but not a single pepper garden was registered under a Malay name (*SG*, March 1, 1894: 41).

Since the cultivated interior of Lundu and Sematan had already been exploited by Chinese and Dayak pepper planters, it was difficult for *nakoda* traders to enter these industries, when they turned to agricultural production. Moreover, pepper prices on the international market had often collapsed, making the crop unattractive, but Sambas *nakoda* (Malay and possibly Bugis merchants), long engaged in coconut planting in coastal districts of Dutch West Borneo, had the necessary expertise to open coconut plantations. Copra was a low profile export that hadn't undergone any dramatic price increases on the international market. Figure 5 shows the price fluctuation of pepper and copra exports in Kuching Foreign Trade Returns from January 1890 to December 1900. The percentage of pepper and copra exports during the same period is shown in Figure 6; the sharp ups-and-downs of pepper exports reflect price fluctuations. Compared to pepper, copra was insignificant in Sarawak's international trade returns, but it provided a stable income for coastal populations. The formation of a



**Fig. 5** Price Fluctuation of Pepper and Copra Export in Kuching Foreign Trade Returns from January 1890 to October 1900

Source: *SG* Kuching Foreign Trade Returns, 1890–1900.



**Fig. 6** Percentage of Pepper and Copra Export in Kuching Foreign Trade Returns from January 1890 to October 1900

Source: *SG Kuching Foreign Trade Returns, 1890–1900*.

coconut plantation belt on the frontier coast near Cape Dato encouraged Malay migration from Sambas and its vicinity in the 1890s.

Opening a new coconut plantation along the previously uninhabited coast required substantial inputs of labor. Besides clearing virgin forest, weeding and copra production — to harvest, husk, and dry seed — were all labor-intensive. *Nakoda* plantation owners brought Malays across the Sarawak/Dutch Borneo border to serve as estate caretakers and laborers, providing their necessities during the settling-in period. These workers were accompanied by a wider community that included children and grandchildren, traditional medicine men (*bomoh*), midwives (*bidan*), and carpenters (*tukang*).

The majority of the *nakoda* held the title *haji*, and many were literate.<sup>11</sup> The ability to read and write *jawi* (an adapted Arabic alphabet

<sup>11</sup> Lundu District office recorded following names of *nakoda* traders who registered coconut estates: Tuanku Jin, Haji Taha, Haji Matarip, Haji Usin, Haji Sleman, Nakoda Hitam, Haji Matsalleh, and Taip. Except for Tuanku Jin of Sungei Cina (origin unknown) and Haji Sleman (a Sarawak man married to a Natuna woman), all were either from the Dutch West Borneo coast or the Natuna Islands.



**Illus. 2** The remains of a coconut plantation on the Sematan coast

for writing the Malay language) was important in applying to open coconut gardens under the land regulations (registration forms were available in Jawi, English and Chinese). Individually, *nakoda* routinely developed more than one plantation, moving between Sambas and Sarawak to bring additional labor. The resulting increase in the Malay population of Lundu District coincided with a decrease in the male Chinese population, who had been employed on experimental tobacco estates in the late 1880s (see Table 2). The government said the increase in the Malay population was due “partly to immigration from Sambas and partly to natural increase as families of five and six children are very common among the Malays here”, and found it “very satisfactory” (*SG*, August 1, 1898: 166).

Plantations and *kampung* (villages) occupied the same land, a characteristic of the Malay mode of cash crop production. Plantations of greatly varying sizes aggregated at river mouths such as Bakuching, Belingsah, Bedaun, Sungei Limo, Kuala Samunsan, Telok Serabang, and Telok Melano. Colonial officers reported in 1898 that “the whole coast from S. Blinsah to Telok Milano [Melano] has now been practically taken up for cocoanut planting” (*SG*, July 1, 1898: 142) (see Fig. 9). The plantations filled the coastal area to about 300 meters from the ocean front:

[Between Kuala Sematan and Kuala Blungai] there are altogether 17 plantations aggregating a little over 1¼ mile in length and averaging about 400 yards deep (*SG*, August 1, 1899: 261).

Between S. Puguh and Simatan [Sematan] there are about half a dozen cocoanut plantations made by Malays. These clearings extend for 1¼ mile along the beach with a depth of 300 or 400 yards, they are fully planted up and the cocoanuts are doing very well (*SG*, January 3, 1899: 11).

Village organization in the plantation belt gradually shifted from loosely structured aggregates of several coconut plantations to administratively independent communities with village heads. By 1899, six *kampung* were established with officially appointed *tua kampung* (village heads) and a *penghulu* (district head): Belinsah, Bedaun, Sungei Cina, Simunsam, Serabang, and Telok Melano (see Fig. 9). By the end of the nineteenth century, *nakoda* from Dutch Borneo were incorporated into Sarawak's government-backed plantation economy. Malays had maintained their community-based labor organization under the leadership of the *nakoda*, and migrated to new plantations, which became their home villages.

In this coastal area of western Borneo, the emergence of nation-bound economic spaces signaled the decline of Malay maritime supremacy. European colonialism generated new center-periphery dynamics, and the area was transformed from the hub of pre-colonial *nakoda* commercial networks to the margin of a modern national territory. Malay commercial networks were segmented and compartmentalized by a new colonial boundary of Sarawak and Dutch West Borneo. The economic policies of the Brooke government broke down Malay commercial dominance by supporting Chinese commercial activities as well as the production of agricultural commodities. The Malays suffered a sharp economic downturn as the *nakoda* class gradually lost its preeminence in trade and moved into the sedentary agriculture in the frontier region of Sarawak.

### **Spatial Assemblage and Labor Mobilization**

Victor King has stated that “the Brooke Raj did not have the personnel, finances, skills, nor the desire to carry through substantial social, economic and political transformations in Sarawak” (King 1990: 113). Charles Brooke himself was aware that his government's efforts at

economic development were far from satisfactory. He admitted as much after four decades in power:

I do not flatter myself when I say that I have tried my best to advance agriculture, but I have most signally failed, and am, in consequence, much disappointed. Nevertheless, I still entertain hopes that the time for its development is not far distant, and I am prepared to take any pains, to receive any amount of advice and to undergo any trouble if only I can see my way to successfully spread gardens and plantations in the place of our vast jungles (Bampfylde and Baring-Gould 1909: 302).

Commodities produced on plantations in places such as Java and British Malaya brought profit to colonial governments and foreign entrepreneurs. Compared to what British and Dutch colonizers achieved elsewhere, the degree of socio-economic transformation in Sarawak was rather disappointing for Brooke and his officers, and leads to the observation that Sarawak slumbered peacefully under the eccentric despotism of white rajahs, who were dedicated to the preservation of virgin forest.

This statement certainly is not an accurate description of the frontier district of Lundu at the turn of the twentieth century, because the shift to an export-oriented economy brought fundamental change to the social demography and political economy of local communities. The advent of Chinese indentured laborers, the encroachment of Dayak swidden agriculture, and the formation of coastal Malay plantation-cum-villages were the results of social engineering deliberately carried out by the Sarawak government. Between the 1870s and the 1890s, the period in which Charles Brooke's agro-economic policies took effect in local areas such as Lundu, the Sarawak economy's basic structure

**Table 5** The Breakdown of Export Items in 1886 as a Percentage of Total Export Value

<i>Items</i>	<i>Share (%)</i>
Forest products	8.0
Minerals	9.7
Cultivated products and manufactured goods	52.9
Maritime products	0.6
Imports re-exported	8.8

Source: *SG*, May 12, 1887: 78–9.

changed. In 1871, export items listed in the government's annual report were limited to *gutta percha*, Indian rubber, beeswax, *trepang* (holothurian), sago, gold, rice, camphor, and bezoar stone, most of which are jungle produce rather than cultivars, but by 1886 jungle produce accounted for only 8 per cent of the total value of exports (*SG*, May 12, 1887: 78–9).

The frontier region of Lundu gradually transformed its natural resource-dependent economy based on the sale of jungle produce to an export-oriented cash crop economy during Charles Brooke's reign, coinciding with the growth of the Singapore commodity market and the acceleration of world trade. In this most sparsely populated agricultural frontier, featuring tracts of inaccessible primary jungle, the expansion of the cash crop economy would not have been possible without state intervention. Chinese, Dayaks, and Malays responded in their own ways to both the new agro-economic policies and the demand of the world commodity market.

## **The Geo-body in Transition**

This chapter has shown how the Brooke government treated the hinterland of the Sarawak kingdom, previously occupied by a small number of Dayak swidden cultivators, as *terra nullius*, unoccupied land, and made it state property, thereby transforming its economy. The territory was subsequently commodified through the introduction of pepper, gambier, and coconut cultivation, which relied on the labor of Chinese coolies and Malay immigrants brought from Dutch Borneo. The importation and mobilization of migrant workers led to the formation of an ethnically segmented agricultural society in the borderland, while territorial enclosure turned mobile people into sedentary agricultural laborers.

The emergence of this state-bound, agricultural space caused a significant decline in the fortunes of one ethnic group in particular. Malays enjoyed maritime supremacy when western Borneo was the hub of pre-colonial commercial networks. The expansion of trading networks by the *nakoda* merchant class had in fact been a major element in the Malay maritime world of Southeast Asia. In that world, western Borneo was a crossroads for peoples and commodities, linking Sarawak, the western part of Dutch Borneo, Brunei, the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, the Great Natuna Islands, Singapore, Sumatra, the Riau Archipelago, and Java.

European colonialism generated a new center-periphery dynamic. The Malay commercial network was segmented by the colonial boundaries of Sarawak and Dutch West Borneo. The economic policies of the Brooke government demolished Malay commercial dominance by supporting new Chinese mercantilism and the production of agricultural commodities. As a result, Malays suffered economic dislocation, in which the maritime *nakoda* class gradually lost its preeminence in trade.

With government incentives, Chinese capital was invested for the development of plantations based on contracts between coolies and *taukay* entrepreneurs. The government controlled the movement of agricultural produce from coolies to *taukay* in order to secure tax revenues. For Dayaks, a series of land regulations brought fundamental transformation to agriculture in the region as the government's encroachment of secondary forest previously managed under customary law restricted swidden agriculture and associated migratory patterns. Their mode of production became more sedentary, and traditional hill rice cultivation gradually achieved a symbiosis with export-oriented commodity production. The development of Malay coconut plantations was closely related to traditional *nakoda* activities in the region, which were in decline. Malay and Bugis adventurers from Sambas, Dutch Borneo, then tried their luck on the frontier of Sarawak, adopting a mode of production based on patron-client relations between *nakoda* traders and mobile peasants. The establishment of Malay plantations led to the emergence of numerous peasant communities along the frontier coast.

These three distinctive modes of production, as well as the spatial assemblage of Chinese, Dayaks, and Malays, consolidated an ethnically segmented peasant society in the Lundu hinterland. Although they differed in organization, size, and the commodity cultivated, each ethnic group experienced a single absolute forcibly imposed by the colonial authority — the nationalization of frontier land previously occupied by the Lundu Dayak chief and his kinsmen.

The creation of national space through labor mobilization led to the formation of a new plural society. In the next chapter, I will discuss the apparatus necessary for this achievement, paying special attention to state attempts to confine cross-border flows of people, goods, capital, ideas, and practices.