

Who gives a **DAM!**

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RIT

IE BAKUN ODYSSEY

James Ritchie



PERDANA
LEADERSHIP
FOUNDATION
YANG BAKU
KEPIMPINAN
PERDANA

To Tun Dr Mahathir,

Who gives a
DAM!??

We Malaysians
No!

Jan 9/9/05

THE BAKUN ODYSSEY

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1011083



Who gives a DAM!

THE BAKUN ODYSSEY

By
James Ritchie



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Preface

As far back as in 1936, English professor Julian Huxley, writing about Colonial attitudes in his book 'Africa View', among other things, said: "There is a type of (person) who allows sympathy for backward tribes and his enthusiasm for their institutions to run away with him and to blind him to the real interests of the people he serves. It is the old story of choking the cat with cream, in the long run his lack of foresight (resulting in) much mischief."

A year later in 1937 an anonymous reviewer of Huxley's' book in the Sarawak Gazette believed that Huxley's' comments related directly to a common attitude of mind in Sarawak which did not allow that (native) peoples had the right to share in the benefits of civilisation and which preferred to treat them as eternal children.

"At the present moment, Sarawak stands at the crossroads. For better or worse, conditions have changed and are rapidly changing and the 'zoo' idea is now an anachronism which can no longer be tolerated if the natives are to get the square deal to which they are entitled. Sarawak has ceased to be an oasis of (tranquillity) in an age of bustling materialism; no longer

can it be regarded as a kind of sanctuary where natives can live a life of idyllic simplicity untroubled by echoes from the outside world.

“It is our duty to face this fact, and to endeavour to fit the natives for the struggle that lies before them - the struggle to adapt themselves to the new world which is being opened up to them,” he wrote.

These comments were made almost 70 years ago. Despite this, there are still people who hold to the “human zoo” idea without realising the implications which are implicit in their attitude. Nothing has been able to convince the lobbyists, consisting of groups operating from western countries and local NGOs, that the need to bring about development in the remote interior outweighs the need to prevent any form of development - whether it is logging or the establishment of a dam. These critics remain adamant that the lifestyle of the natives should be “preserved” and the environment should not be disturbed.

Even though longhouses remain a trademark in Sarawak, the days of the romantic longhouse setting is long gone. Belaga, in particular in which Bakun is situated, has changed and so has its landscape. If not for the old folk and the very young children, the longhouses in the very remote areas of Belaga would have all but vanished. The fact is that the changing economy has driven many of the menfolk to leave their longhouse to seek work at the numerous logging camps around the vicinity or away in towns. Some families reside more or less permanently in Belaga, Kapit, Kuching or elsewhere even though they have family rooms in their longhouse.

During school term, the children are also away boarding at schools or with nearby relatives. This makes the longhouses feel even more empty. Those who can afford often return during the holidays to help brighten up their homes once more. Generally, the older folk have little or no education.

The people have low levels of education and they are mainly engaged in shifting cultivation or as timber camp workers. People cultivate their own rice. Almost all the meat and fish they consume come from the jungle and rivers. Vegetables were either grown or collected from the jungle.

The younger generation, on the other hand, are leaving the longhouses for the towns and cities of Malaysia as well as in other countries. Today,

a significant number of native Dayaks are holding responsible positions in the government's administrative machinery and in business and a lot more have made good in the professional fields such as medicine, engineering, architecture, social sciences, and law.

Thus, to say that the natives of Sarawak are contented with life in the jungle is to seriously underestimate their drive, ability and determination to become part of a progressive society and contribute to the development of the nation. One only has to look around the urban centres of the state to see that, like the other races, the Dayaks are also keen to enjoy the fruits of modernisation.

Capt. Dudley Morgan

Foreword



The Right Honourable the Chief Minister of Sarawak
Pehin Sri Dr. Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud
S.B.S., D.P., P.S.M., S.P.M.J., S.S.D.K., D.G.S.M., S.S.A.P., S.S.S.A.,
S.P.M.T., S.P.D.K., P.D.K., KT. W.E. (THAILAND), KEPN (INDONESIA),
S.P.M.B. (BRUNEI), K.O.U. (KOREA), AO (AUSTRALIA), P.C.D.

Since the early days Sarawak has never fully exploited its potential even though the country had the richest resources. The white Rajahs were happy to keep the State and its natives under wraps and unexposed. It was felt that if the natives in the interior were introduced to modernisation, they would eventually lose their cultural identity.

The Rajahs allowed and even encouraged the natives to indulge in subsistence agriculture and their practice of shifting cultivation for a very long time. It was not long before the country found itself lagging behind in the socioeconomic field.

During the post 1970 period, the government embarked on improving the existing infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. Generally, efforts

were taken to improve the standard of living and quality of life. There was a boom in commodity prices. At that time there was little downstream processing or manufacturing of Sarawak's agricultural products and minerals. It was the countries that bought these products that gained by processing the commodities and minerals into finished products.

To be on par with the other States in peninsular Malaysia, Sarawak had to adopt a "catch-up" policy by reorganising its economic structure. It started with the successful adoption of an outward-looking industrial policy and knowledge-based development strategies. With the formation of the Ministry of Industrial Development, the Sarawak economy experienced more rapid growth. Despite being hit by the world economic slowdown of the mid 1980s the State continued to grow at a rate 4.3 percent. Into the 1990s, the economy picked up and has since remained at a high 8 percent.

We have reorganised the State's economic structure and placed greater emphasis on the manufacturing sector and opening up vast opportunities. This is because the State lags far behind and needs to catch up with the other Malaysian states. In order to do this, the government has had to speed up its development projects each year in order that the two regions (East and West Malaysia) would have parallel growth.

The State's biggest breakthrough was the impressive record of attracting billions of ringgit in foreign investments between 1981 and 1995 allowing Sarawak to have the highest growth rate in the whole of Malaysia. We continue to grow. To entice the investors to come to Sarawak, the government had sent many business missions abroad and introduced favourable industrial policies and incentives for the trans-national companies.

Billions more have been and will be invested in other industries including the mega electronics at the State's "Silicon Valley" at Sama Jaya in Kuching, high-tech oil and gas industries at the world's biggest LNG plant in Bintulu and the construction industry particularly in the restructuring of the urban landscape. Investments will also be made in industries that will emerge as a result of Bakun dam's construction such as pulp and paper and aluminium plants, and a diversifying timber industry which will now focus on downstream products.

All of this has been possible because of the open political and economic system and stable social and political climate in the State.

The best part of our industrialisation is that it has opened the doors to a new economy to enable the native people to be at par with the other urban folk. It has created new avenues for the rural poor.

Bakun is the first of the few other major hydroelectric projects which are expected to bring in handsome rewards which will assist the government in the efforts to restructure Sarawak into a modern country by the year 2020.

Sarawak has therefore to attract energy-intensive industries to make up for its limited industrialisation which requires a big local market to support.

With the creation of the Bakun, a lot of money will be concentrated in Belaga, one of the remotest and most “backward” regions in the country. The problem is ensuring that everybody—from the big to the small businessman—gets a fair share of the Bakun cake.

My hope is that by writing this book, James will be able to give a portrayal of how serious we are about developing the state.

It is for our future generations.



Pehin Sri Dr. Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud
Chief Minister of Sarawak

Message from Chairman of Tamar Media



James Ritchie is no stranger to the Bakun Saga having closely followed the events as a reporter since the early 1980s. After his excellent book on Bruno Manser, I thought it would be fitting to publish another on an equally important issue.

This reminds me of a remark made by our Chief Minister when he was a young Cabinet Minister in 1963. He said: “Taha, you don’t know how big the potential of hydropower is!”

Indeed, as development continues to take place, it is important that we record the events for posterity. In this respect, James’ chronicle is relevant now. And will continue to be in time to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dato' Taha Ariffin'. The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

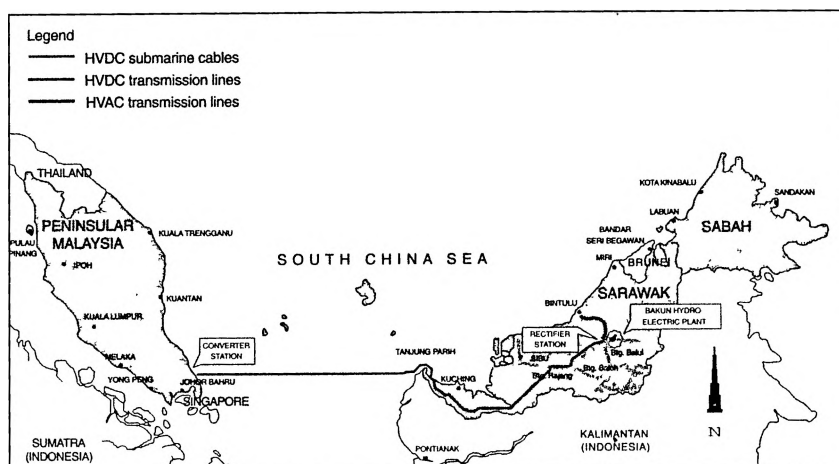
Dato' Taha Ariffin

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Introduction



Source: 'Bakun Hydroelectric Project - Green Energy For The Future', EPU, 1996

Sarawak has an amazing network of rivers and tributaries - watering a region of 124,449 sq. km (48,612sq miles). The 590km Batang Rajang (also called Rejang river) which from the Indonesian border, meanders through the Belaga district before pouring out to the South China Sea in Central Sarawak.

Nearly 600km away from the capital of Kuching, far away in the remote heart of Sarawak is the district of Belaga. Covering a massive 7,400 square miles (19,000sq km), Belaga is one of the largest districts in the state.

Above Belaga bazaar is the Balui river.

It is also known as the Batang Balui. One of its sources is a peak called Batu Puteh on the western slopes of the Hose Mountains.

Naturalist Odoardo Beccari, who first visited these mountains in the mid 19th Century said the name, which means "White Mountain", had given rise to the mistaken belief that it was capped with snow and might therefore have been the source of the Rejang.

However, the main source of the Rejang proper lies many miles away way

in the Iran and Niewenhuis ranges, a mountain chain stretching between 1,000 to 3,000 meters in height at the border between Sarawak and Kalimantan Indonesia. These mountains are also the source of two large rivers in Kalimantan - the Mahakam and the Kayan - which flow North-Eastwards into the Sulawesi Sea and the Straits of Makassar in Kalimantan.

Another important tributary of the Rejang is the Batang Baleh which joins the main stream a few miles up river from the township of Kapit and is navigable by small boats for up to a distance of 90km. Its source, also in the Iran/Niewenhuis Mountains, lies close to that of the source of the Balui.

As it begins its journey through from the highlands, the Rejang starts off as a furious torrent cutting deep gorges in its upper regions before slowing down to a lazy stroll through long, almost ruler straight stretches of middle reaches. Further down, it absent-mindedly seems to lose its way in a maze of complex waterways forming the Rejang delta. Finally after meandering dreamily through swampy mangroves it makes a sudden dash into the South China Sea. The Igan, Lassa, Paloh and Belawai are all navigable rivers and form part of the Rejang delta system.

The untamed river dominates the lives of the upriver people above the Belaga bazaar. It is the main means of communication and the transport of goods and people. It takes them to their farms, cut through painstakingly from the forest and with its tributaries bears them deep into the forest on daily hunting expeditions. In its kinder moods it carries them on simple shopping expeditions down river to the little township of Belaga for essential supplies.

It is also a source of food, supplementing the diet with fish, shrimps, terrapins and other fresh water animals.

In the middle of almost every year comes the dry season, called Kemarau, when the river is at least thirty feet below the river bank. Carrying provisions to and from the little bobbing boats is an exhausting business. It is a long way up the wooden steps to the riverbank and the old bazaar which first started as a Malay village in the 1890's. Much hardship is endured when the town and surrounding area are cut off from the rest of Sarawak where stretches of the river becomes very shallow.



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DAM!
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Janies Ritchie, 55, has been a journalist for 34 years. Since settling in Kuching in 1981, he has written more than 20 books on Sarawak issues. Most of his books touch on local politics and the environment. At present he is a freelance writer.