For two centuries, travellers were amazed at the massive buildings found along the rivers that flow from the mountainous interior of Borneo. They concentrated hundreds of people under one roof, in the middle of empty rainforests. There was no practical necessity for this arrangement, and it remains a mystery. Peter Metcalf provides an answer by showing the historical context, using both oral histories and colonial records. The key factor was a premodern trading system that funnelled rare and exotic jungle products to China via the ancient coastal city of Brunei. Meanwhile, the elite manufactured goods traded upriver shaped the political and religious institutions of longhouse society. However, the apparent permanence of longhouses was an illusion. In historical terms, longhouse communities were both mobile and labile, and the patterns of ethnicity they created more closely resemble the contemporary world than any stereotype of “tribal” societies.

Peter Metcalf is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Virginia. His research in Borneo spans thirty years, and he is the author of many books and articles.
The Life of the Longhouse

An Archaeology of Ethnicity

Peter Metcalf

University of Virginia
There where your Indies have sprinkled their tribes
like ocean rains . . .

Allen Curnow,
*Landfall in Unknown Seas*
Contents

List of Figures  xi

The Problem: Ethnicity and Community  1
Why Longhouses?,  1 The Larger Question,  2 Rehabilitating Ethnology,  4 The Process of De-Essentializing,  6 De-Essentializing Ethnicity,  8 The Reality of Communities in Borneo,  9 Ethnicity Is an Object of Research, Not a Preliminary to Research,  10 Ethnicity and Community,  11 “Ethnographic Riches” versus “Need to Know”,  11 Histories, Narratives, and Archives,  13 The Archaeology of Ethnicity,  14 The Political Systems of Highland Borneo,  15 Shan Is to Kachin as Malay Is to Orang Ulu,  16 One Society Integrating Many Cultures,  18 The Hinterland of Brunei Is Not a Culture Area,  19 Can Central Borneo Be Seen as One Society?,  20 Leaders and Aristocrats,  21 On the Irrelevance of Kinship,  23 Tanks and Longhouses,  23 Room Affiliation: Birth and Adoption,  24 Room Affiliation: Marriage and Remarriage,  25 Segmentation of Rooms,  26 “Houses” and “Rooms”,  27 Order of Presentation,  28

PART I. LONGHOUSES

One: Longhouses  31
Houses of Unusual Length,  32 First Sight of the Longhouse,  33 Construction of the Longhouse,  35 Spaces of the Longhouse,  38 Moving About the Longhouse,  47 The Longhouse as Fortress,  51 The Longhouse as Metropolis,  61 To Lack Longhouses Is to Live in the Forest,  65

Two: Longhouse Communities  66
Aban Jau’s Community,  66 Place and Ethnicity,  67 Narrating Community,  69 Reference to Location,  70 Longhouse Communities and Speech Communities,  71 What Did They Speak at Long Batan?,  73 Community Language, and Ethnicity: Mapping the Sebop Diaspora,  74 Imposed Ethnicities,  76 Swidden Agriculture Does Not Explain Migration,  78
Contents

Three: The Coming of the Brooke Raj 80

James Brooke Goes Adventuring, 80 Punitive Raids as an Instrument of Government, 82 The Conundrum of Iban Expansion, 83 The Second Great Kayan Raid, 84

PART II. LONGHOUSES AND LEADERS

Four: Aban Jau’s Career 89

Origins in the Usun Apau, 90 Encounters with the Berawan, 90 Meeting the Kayan Threat, 93 Aban Jau’s Diplomacy, 94 Aban Jau Makes Himself a Rajah, 96 Aban Jau Raids the Coast, 98 Outmanoeuvred by the Rajah’s Men, 102 The Last Years, 106 The Longhouse as Tomb, 106

Five: Aban Jau’s Successors 108


PART III. LONGHOUSE AND TRADE

Six: The Sultan’s Fence 123

Gilding the Lily: Murder at a Funeral, 124 Outside the Sultan’s Fence, 126 Inside the Sultan’s Fence, 131 The Open Backdoor, 134 The Persistence of Trade, 136

Seven: Premodern Upriver Trade 138

Port Cities of Southeast Asia, 139 A Portrait of Brunei, 141 The Exports of Brunei: Herbert’s List, 143 The Exports of Brunei: Other Precious Commodities, 147 The Exports of Brunei: Bulk Commodities, 149 The Lack of Infrastructure, 151 The Alternative: Trading Expeditions, 152 Brunei’s Trading Communities, 157 The Burong Pingai at Long Kelejeo, 162 Elite Commodities Going Upriver: Brassware and Ceramics, 163 The Importance of Glass Beads, 166 Cloth and Iron, 170 Every Longhouse Its Own Brunei, 172 Chiefly Patronage of Trade, 173 Trade in Isolated Communities, 175 Jungle Produce in the Colonial Era, 177
# PART IV. LONGHOUSE POPULATIONS

## Eight: The Linguistic Data

181

Utility of the Linguistic Data, 182  First Component: The Lower Baram Subgroup, 184  Second Component: The Lun Bawang Subgroup, 186  Third Component: The Kenyah Subgroup, 191

## Nine: Disease, Slavery, Assimilation, Annihilation

193


# PART V. LONGHOUSES AND RITUAL

## Ten: The Ritual Consensus

213


## Eleven: The Ritual Operator

223


## Twelve: The Impresarios of the Ancestors

243

The Nulang Arc, 243  The Communal Response to a Death, 244  Debating Ritual Formats, 247  Legitimation, 250  Subversion, 253  Charismatic Confusion, 254  The Gift in Borneo, 255

# PART VI. LONGHOUSES AND THE STATE

## Thirteen: Longhouses during the Raj

261


Contents


Fourteen: Longhouses after the Raj 284

The Vacuum of Japanese Rule, 285  British Colonial Progressivism, 287  The Postwar Persistence of Longhouses, 289  Some Statistics from the 1970s, 291  When the Baram Flowed Backward, 295  The People Upriver Become the Upriver People, 296  From Colonialism to Neocolonialism, 298  The Destruction of the Rainforest, 301  The Longhouses Empty Out, 304  The Future of Longhouses, 309

Conclusion: The General in the Particular 311

Constructing Cultural Difference, 312  Numberless Tribes, 313  Disposing of the Facts, 314  History and Process, 315  From Farmhouse to Longhouse, 316  The Leader as CEO, 317  Reciprocity and Charisma, 318  Defence Becomes Primary, 320  Modernity Delayed, 321

Appendix 323

Bibliography 327
Index of Ethnonyms 341
Index of Authors and Subjects 343
Figures

Brunei and its hinterland 17
Room containing no first-degree relatives 27
Veranda of a Berawan longhouse 37
Veranda of a Sebop longhouse 39
Tama Jok with spear, shield, and sword 54
Kayan longhouse protected by a stockade 55
Sebop men singing at a longhouse festival 63
Long Batan people were neither Sebop nor Berawan 67
Rivers flowing out of the Usun Apau 75
Watershed of the Kemena 92
Charles Hose with war party 103
Aban Avit’s longhouse 113
View of Brunei 141
Brunei in the Asian world economy 142
Site for making prayers 231
Ritual operator 233
Berawan mausoleum 256
Upriver Agent Tama Avit 265
Numbers of rooms in Kayan and non-Kayan communities 292