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Dayaks in a Ledger: A Bornean Labor History and an Oil Town's Indigenous Workers

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Abstract

This article delineates a hitherto eclipsed labor history of the Northwest Borneo oilfields. In 2018, Brunei Shell Petroleum (BSP) in an unprecedented move, released to Brunei's national archive two labor registers of the British Malayan Petroleum Company (BMPC-renamed BSP in 1958), with entries dating between the 1940s and 1950s. These registers provided a rare glimpse of the workers who were recruited to the Brunei oilfields as labor, a category distinct from staff. As BMPC labor they worked to rehabilitate the company town and the oilfields that were destroyed during the Second World War by the Japanese army and allied bombing in the British protectorate of Brunei. Like colonial records that amassed information for the control and rule of colonized subjects, each entry in BMPC's ledger meticulously noted the date of engagement, place of employment, wages, work history, as well as some biographical information about its workers. Inadvertently, these entries also revealed modes of worker resistance and assertions of agency, thus providing a glimpse of the hidden transcripts of a labor history shaped by the policies of BMPC in this colonial outpost. My article draws on these two BMPC labor registers to trace a micro-spatial history of "Dayak" labor in the emergent Borneo oilfields. Often obscured in historical records, the registers made visible the ways in which Indigenous workers negotiated and resisted the company's control of its labor force. I explore Dayak labor recruitment within the context of the 1880s-1941 when state borders irrevocably shifted and regional economies were increasingly drawn into a global market. In doing so, I chart migrant labor routes across varied regional economies in Northwest Borneo, BMPC's management of a multiethnic labor force, and company workers' agency.

Keywords: Indigenous labor history; Brunei; Borneo oilfields; Dayak labor; oil migration; British Malayan Petroleum Company; micro-spatial histories; resistance and agency

Introduction

In May 2018, I traveled to Seria, an oil town in Brunei's Belait district on the northwest coast of Borneo. I was hoping to access resources on the recruitment and work experiences of Indian men who during the 1940s–1960s had come to work as office staff of the "British Malayan Petroleum Company (BMPC)," a Royal

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Dutch/Shell group company. The company archivist informed me that no documents were available on BMPC's Indian staff but then directed me to Brunei's national archive in Bandar Seri Begawan where, I was informed, two of the company's labor registers had been sent for archiving.

At Arkib Brunei, I was handed BMPC Labor Department records: *Book 2: Labour Register from Badge No. 607 to No. 1212* and *Book 18: Labour Register from Badge No. 11025 to No. 11422*.¹ Opening these ledgers, I found myself looking at the faces of the men who were engaged by BMPC in the mid to late 1940s to work as laborers, machinists, electricians, drillers, truck drivers, cooks, and other unskilled and skilled jobs. Holding their number against their chests, workers had posed for a photograph that was pasted onto their employment record. Page after page, I encountered the faces of a multiethnic labor force. I had expected to find several Indian names recorded in the ledger based on anecdotal accounts of the visible dominance of Indian labor in the Seria oilfield. Instead, as I turned the pages, I was captivated by the "Dayak" faces that looked back at me over and over again. While the Indians I interviewed had spoken of Dayaks—a non-Malay Indigenous people of Borneo—who worked as laborers and acknowledged them as good workers, they did not appear to have perceived Dayaks to be a critically important contingent of BMPC's workforce.² Sifting through the records of *Book 2* and *Book 18*, I surmised that Indians in BMPC had probably perceived Dayak labor as an unstable pool of workers and therefore overlooked their contributions to the rebuilding of the Seria oilfield.

Brunei, a British protectorate between 1906–1984, is sandwiched between North Borneo (now Sabah) and Sarawak. North Borneo was administered by the North Borneo Chartered Company from 1881 and became a British protectorate in 1888. Sarawak, which had been the Brooke Rajahs' fiefdom between 1841–1946, became the Crown Colony of Sarawak administered by Britain in 1946. Labuan, an island off the northwest coast of Borneo, was ceded by Brunei to Britain in 1846 and became a Crown Colony in 1848. After the Second World War, except for the interim period September 1945–July 1946, when first the British Borneo Civil Affairs Unit (BBCAU) and then the British Military Administration (BMA) were in charge of these states, North Borneo and Labuan were administered as the "Crown Colony of North Borneo" and remained under British control until 1963, when they were incorporated, along with Sarawak, into the federated states of Malaysia. During the war these territories—including the rest of Borneo that was under the jurisdiction of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesian Kalimantan)—were occupied by the Japanese between December 1941 and September 1945.³

In the wake of the landing of Australian troops in Northwest Borneo, the retreating Japanese army set fire to the oil wells and destroyed installations in Labuan, Seria, and Miri, the neighboring oil town in Sarawak. Allied bombings in Borneo had also caused extensive damage to infrastructure across the region. Food shortages and other privations of war during the Japanese occupation along with labor shortages and the task of reinstating civilian administration compounded the efforts to rehabilitate British Borneo. The labor records of BMPC must therefore be located not only in the history of the oil industry in Brunei but also in the historical context of the Second World War and its aftermath. *Books 2* and *18* speak to the efforts by BMPC and the neighboring and closely-linked Miri-based "Sarawak Oilfields



Figure 1. Map of Northwest Borneo

Limited (SOL),” also a Royal Dutch/Shell Company, to restore the functioning of the Miri and Seria oilfields, the Lutong refinery in Miri, as well as the rebuilding of the oil towns.⁴ These registers must also be juxtaposed with the urgent needs of the Brunei government’s public works operations. BMPC’s ability to recruit labor and quickly rebuild its oilfields was facilitated by the unequivocal support of resident British administrators and the Colonial Office. This prioritization of BMPC’s needs over those of Brunei public works points to the pivotal role of oil in Brunei’s recovery from the war and the immense leverage BMPC held in dictating the British administration’s policies and goals in Brunei.

My article examines labor recruitment practices and the employment and agency of Dayaks during this period of recovery when BMPC embarked on rebuilding and developing the Seria oilfield as well as the infrastructure to facilitate oil exploration and maintain a stable workforce. To do so, I first trace the histories of labor recruitment in Northwest Borneo between the 1880s–1941, when the flows of labor were embedded in the colonial interdependencies of a regional world system. Such an approach simultaneously recognizes the circuitous, flexible, and overlapping histories of heterogeneous populations and preserves the singularity of parochial or provincial narratives. Borneo’s porous borders blur notions of indigeneity, residency, and foreignness while British Borneo’s asymmetrical colonial polities and overlapping economies facilitate fluid routes of travel and commodity exchange. Mitsiou and Preiser-Kapeller’s “analytical framework across scale” is useful here in capturing “the complexity of labour mobility across scales and beyond rigid categorizations.”⁵ After charting Northwest Borneo’s labor histories, I then position Dayaks as Indigenous people who worked in plantations and emergent oilfields but also traveled their own courses. Dayak mobility crossed space and time and, in this article, the figure of the Dayak serves to link the uneven histories of colonial and Malay states; diverse peoples with trans-local affiliations; the pre- and post-Second World War economies; and regional market exchanges tied to larger commercial and social

zones. A focus on Dayak labor in the oilfields, to borrow from Mitsiou and Preisher-Kapeller, allows for a mapping of “both the entanglements emerging from micro-histories of individuals and to accumulate these individual trajectories into complex networks across spatial and temporal scales.”⁶ I contextualize the presence of Dayaks in a growing regional, multiethnic labor force and in a reorienting of traffic to the oilfields of Miri and Seria during the interwar period, before turning to an analysis of BMPC’s labor registers, *Books 2 and 18*. I position these books as valuable sources of a microspatial history that render visible the individual and collective agency of Dayak workers in taking on and performing labor on their own terms. While anthropological resources provide ethnographies of various Dayak societies in Borneo during this period, often with an implicit gaze that renders Dayaks in archaic time or marked by their indigeneity, Arenz et al. point out that this scholarship was “predominantly focused on social structures, kinship and descent . . . well into the 1970s.”⁷ Furthermore, British colonial records and correspondence consistently represented Dayaks as congregate numbers, thus rendering Dayak’s lived experiences of work invisible. In detailing the itineraries of work and charting individual workers’ employment histories, BMPC’s labor registers therefore disrupt the ubiquitous anonymity of Indigenous workers and, indeed, of other workers of its multiethnic workforce documented in British Bornean records. They also serve as a retrospective lens into a hitherto obscured Indigenous work history in the oilfields and its intersections with local and immigrant labor histories. The traces of continuities between the interwar and post-Second World War, despite the Japanese interregnum, of SOL’s Miri and BMPC’s Seria oilfields are reflected in the employment histories recorded. “New” recruits listed in the labor registers often had prior histories of work in the Miri and Seria oilfields.

In this article, I choose to examine closely the entries in *Book 18* rather than *Book 2*, since *Book 18* bridged the period from 1949 to 1953, when the Brunei government declared rehabilitation to be at an end.⁸ Entries in *Book 2* were for laborers recruited in 1945 whereas *Book 18*’s entries dated from 1949 when the workers were recruited and their employment histories recorded. In December 1945, BMPC reported to the Colonial Office:

We have been able to carry out considerable amount of rehabilitation work on the Seria Field and at the Refinery and Sea loading lines at Lutong in the adjoining state of Sarawak. Subject to the arrival of key material, which is expected shortly, we anticipate that we shall be able to commence production from the Seria Field, and ship crude from Lutong, at an initial rate of some 40,000 tons a month in January 1946.⁹

Cleary and Wong point out, “by 1948 120 productive wells had been opened and actual output . . . [was] well above pre-war levels.”¹⁰ By the end of 1949, BMPC had also begun to place its workforce in new housing. This record of BMPC’s labor force reflects the urgencies of rebuilding the oil town and serves as a roadmap of the company’s long-term development goals. The period between 1945–1953 was a critical phase in Brunei’s history as the country’s oil industry came to dominate the

priorities of the state as well as lay the foundations for an industrial district in Brunei that defined the state's modernity.¹¹

Analyzing the entries in *Book 18*, I piece together the employment histories of Dayak labor and the "stories" that emerge from its pages. I do not seek to isolate Dayak labor histories here but instead place them alongside the employment histories of immigrant and local laborers recorded in *Book 18*. BMPC's registers were not organized according to specific years but by the badge numbers of their workers. *Book 18*, for instance, recorded laborers whose badge numbers ranged between numbers 11025 to 11422. This strategic cataloging enabled BMPC to create a dossier on each worker and revealed the several ways in which a worker was tracked—among other things, by dates of engagement to promotions and to discharge or retirement dates. These modes of tracking were significant for the company's surveillance was panoptic in intent. In the meticulously documented logs of workers, BMPC officials charted the itineraries of company work and, inadvertently, revealed the ways in which Dayaks and other workers performed their work and the exigencies they confronted in their lives. While British colonial records pointed to the recruitment of a diverse labor force in the Borneo oilfields, the lived experiences of these workers remained undocumented. Here, for the first time, I encountered in the registers the men who had been recruited to work as *laborers* in the Borneo oilfields. In sifting through *Book 18*, I argue that a composite picture of subaltern modes of resistance and compliance emerges that reflected Indigenous autonomy and agency in the negotiation of company policy. Moreover, the role of Indigenous workers was affirmed in the transformation of sites within the jungles of Borneo into a model oil town and lucrative oilfield, epitomizing the energies of industry and modernity.

James Warren's conceptualization of a Sulu zone in Southeast Asia is useful in rethinking Borneo's borders and placing it in a regional as well as world economy.¹² Borneo was firmly within the ambit of this cross-cultural and interdependent region centered around the Sulu Sultanate and, at the same time, historically had been part of trade routes that extended to the Indian ocean world system. Northwest Borneo's labor history is implicitly embedded in these flows of people and commodities, and I assert that *Book 18*, through its chronicle of workers' employment histories, evoked the global currents of this traffic of labor and capital. Furthermore, drawing on the notion of *microstoria* from Italian historians who have "on the one hand pointed to the importance of the intensive study of primary sources and the attention to apparently meaningless 'traces' within them, and on the other hand stressed the existence of multiple temporalities across various geographical and social configurations," I then pose *Book 18* as a historical document in which seemingly innocuous "traces" of workers' lives allowed for "micro-global" connections and the assertions of new visibilities for unseen work and peoples.¹³ As Vito and Gerritsen explain, "because the micro-spatial approach views 'the global' as a mindset that does not necessarily imply the study of world-scale phenomena, the chronological period can be extended back to periods when the interlocking of regional systems did not extend to the globe as a whole."¹⁴ Microspatial histories therefore preclude the marginalization of local, parochial, and regional histories.

Head-hunting: Labor Recruitment in Northwest Borneo 1880s–1941

The rehabilitation of the oilfields and oil towns and the expansion of oil production in Brunei was dependent on a readily available and stable workforce. Postwar Brunei faced especially acute shortages of labor. The Japanese invasion and occupation of Borneo had led to the flight of many Bruneians from towns into the interior of the country while many expatriates had left the country. Although local Malays and Chinese residents were recruited by BMPC, a significant number of workers were recruited from outside Brunei. A 1951 Colonial Office memo noted that “a rather large population increase occurred between 1947 and 1949,” most of it through the employment of “immigrant” labor by BMPC.¹⁵ Classified as “immigrants,” these workers were primarily recruited from Sarawak, Malaya, and, to a lesser degree, from Hong Kong, the Dutch Indies, and India. The categorization of Dayaks as immigrants is noteworthy since the Indigenous People grouped under the category *Dayak* have historically lived in a vast region across Borneo that had been part of the Sultanate of Brunei. As Ranjit Singh points out, the movement of peoples around this region was “fluid and transient . . . as political boundaries in the modern sense were still undefined.”¹⁶ The Sultanate of Brunei, in particular, suffered a substantial loss of territory with James Brooke’s acquisition of Sarawak in 1841, his nephew and successor Charles Brooke’s annexation of Limbang in 1890, and Britain’s grant of a charter to the North Borneo Company in 1888—effectively establishing the British colony of North Borneo in a region where competing rival powers jostled for control over three principal territorial zones. The new borders diminished the Brunei Sultanate’s dominion and regional authority and effectively redefined many Bornean Indigenous peoples in Sarawak and North Borneo as aliens in the newly-established British protectorate of Brunei. Besides, Sarawak under the Brooke Rajahs specifically regulated the movement of Dayaks across its borders. However, historical movements of Indigenous peoples across this region continued well into the twentieth century, but after the Second World War the hardening of state boundaries enforced a more systematic tracking and surveillance of these crossings.

In this section I provide an overview of the historical processes and overlapping contexts of Dayak, local, and immigrant labor recruitment to draw attention to the significance of regional labor routes and its intersections with an increasingly global market. In particular, I focus on the 1880s to the pre-Second World War interregnum when the Miri and Seria oilfields emerged as principal destinations for labor. This period was marked by the new kinds of shifting borders that Indigenous peoples and migrants crossed and, to borrow from Warren, reflected “a global inter-regional process of integration and change with unexpected local implications and insecurities.”¹⁷ Embedded in these landscapes, Dayaks traversed and forged overlapping and divergent routes alongside those of an increasingly multiethnic labor force in Borneo. Positioning Dayaks thus makes visible, as Warren suggests, “the little people”—fishers, ‘raiders’, divers, traders, highlanders, forest dwellers, pioneers and slaves” who are “part of a series of regional-economic zones” and “entangled in globalizing events beyond their own local geographic border and worlds.”¹⁸ The term *Dayak* is generally described as denoting a non-Muslim group of Indigenous peoples

of Borneo and is distinguished from other non-Muslim Indigenous peoples such as the Kanowits, Kenyahs, Melanus, Muruts, and Bisaya. However, *Dayak* is a generic categorization of a heterogeneous group of Indigenous peoples whose dialects may be mutually unintelligible.¹⁹ Besides, historically, geography rather than ethnicity determined a group's identity in Borneo. James Brooke is credited with naming the "Sea Dayaks" (because of their association with sea piracy)—who are now known as *Ibans*—as well as the "hill tribes" who came to be known as the "Land Dayaks" in Sarawak—now called the Bidayuh people.²⁰ The Land Dayaks were seen as a "comparatively peaceful and sedentary group" in contrast to the Sea Dayaks who were depicted as raiding and head-hunting peoples.²¹ Sea Dayaks historically have been migratory peoples who covered vast distances swiftly.²² Although the contemporary nomenclature for Sea Dayak is Iban, in this article I elected to use the term *Dayak* since BMPC's labor registers categorized these workers as such. The designation *Iban* did not appear in either of these records.²³ Hence, whereas "Dayak" might very well conjure racist imagery of a head-hunting jungle people, I have employed the term here as an expedient means of signifying the resonances of a colonial vocabulary in company documents of the period as well as to avoid readers' confusion. Interestingly, Pringle notes that the renaming of Sea Dayaks as Ibans was contested by Ibans themselves who did not accept this designation until after the Second World War.²⁴

Beginning in the 1880s to the turn of the twentieth century, Dayaks in Sarawak were already being used as wage labor in the tobacco estates and surveys for oil exploration in Miri. As a people who practiced swidden *padi* cultivation, Dayaks were accustomed to clearing sections of hills and planting their crops. Thus, on the plantations and in the emergent oilfields, Dayak labor was seen as eminently suitable to felling trees and clearing the land. Their continual movement to farm in new unfelled forest regions accounted for the frequent migrations they undertook. However, this also made Dayaks a transient labor force in estates, the timber industry, and later in the incipient oilfields since they left their longhouses to work between planting and harvest seasons. Many other Dayaks continued trading jungle produce and venturing north to North Borneo for work. Historically, Dayak trade in jungle produce "was an integral part of their dual household economy," and thus Dayak mobility was tied not only to itinerant swidden practices but also to participation in distant market-oriented occupations that augmented their subsistence farming.²⁵

The arrival of imperial powers in Northwest Borneo in the nineteenth century marked a realignment of Sarawak, North Borneo, and Brunei's economies. Mark Cleary, for instance, argues that "the economies of Borneo had to shift from what Wallerstein (1989) termed an 'external economy' . . . to a 'peripheral economy', whose production patterns were increasingly structured by the demands of the world commodity market."²⁶ By the beginning of the twentieth century the historical reliance on "jungle" products traded by Indigenous and local peoples in the region began to be bolstered by capital-intensive commodity production as seen in the rubber, pepper, and tobacco estates, and coal mining. The discovery of oil in Sarawak's Miri in 1910 and Brunei's Seria in 1929 furthered the realignment of state priorities and, as Cleary observes, brought Northwest Borneo firmly into the ambit of the world economy.²⁷ This reorientation of Northwest Borneo to commercial production meant

that new concentrations of labor were required in specific sites in these states. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century plantations and mining companies in Borneo, particularly the Borneo Company that came to dominate Sarawak's commercial interests, therefore augmented local and Indigenous workers with immigrant workers. For instance, Sarawak's need for labor led to the importation of Chinese and Tamil workers from Singapore.²⁸ By the 1920s, SOL's demand for workers could not be met by Singapore and the company turned to Hong Kong to bring in Chinese workers. Amarjit Kaur observes that "the large number of Chinese in Miri resulted in the town becoming virtually a 'Chinese' town."²⁹ Indians were also recruited from Singapore for Sarawak's oilfields. SOL's labor recruitment is significant in the history of the Seria Oilfields since the two subsidiaries of Royal Dutch/Shell shared resources and infrastructure, especially in the pre-second World War period. Labor from Sarawak was seconded by BMPC after the discovery of the first oilfield in Seria in 1929, and this movement of workers was reflected in the labor registers of BMPC.³⁰ Kaur points out that Malay and Dayak workers were also employed in the Miri oilfields where they "were mainly involved in collecting and delivering timber for various construction projects associated with drilling."³¹

In the years leading up to the First World War, local and migrant labor within Northwest Borneo was concentrated in the rubber, sago, and tobacco plantations, the timber industry, and the oilfields. These commercial plantations were important to oil histories in the region since many agricultural workers were lured or recruited to work in the oilfields. Furthermore, seasonal labor was recruited on an ad hoc basis between planting and harvest seasons. During Charles Brookes tenure as Rajah of Sarawak (1868–1917), the internal migration of Sea-Dayaks and Chinese settlers was selectively encouraged and authorized in underpopulated regions in an effort to colonize the land, enhance revenue collection, and strengthen the Rajah's control over areas ceded by Brunei: Baram in 1882 (today a federal constituency in Sarawak's Miri Division), and Limbang in 1884 (which split Brunei's Temburong district from the rest of Brunei creating two noncontiguous regions). Robert Pringle points out that in the late nineteenth century, jungle produce continued to be an important source of revenue: "The Ibans [Sea-Dyaks] were therefore officially encouraged to travel through the new districts in search of wild rubber, rattans, camphor, damar and other products."³²

During this period, a foreign workforce comprised mainly of Chinese immigrant and contract laborers and, to a lesser extent, Indian contract laborers was brought to work on the plantations in Northwest Borneo. For instance, in North Borneo, Chinese contract workers and a few Javanese, recruited in 1882 from Singapore—thus sidestepping the ban on their emigration from the Dutch East Indies—were brought in to work the rubber and tobacco plantations.³³ This form of contract labor in Borneo was part of a global trafficking of indentured workers to colonial outposts around the world. Brunei, however, did not have a robust plantation industry and the Chinese presence here was mostly in small businesses. Rubber production in Brunei, except for four "viable" British-owned plantations, was found mostly in small holdings where wages were low and output limited.³⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, Indian contract labor was abolished to be replaced by a *kangani* recruitment system whereby labor brokers brought in workers from India. Kaur notes that

the kangani system was different from the contract or indenture system: "Rubber planters started utilizing their own 'trusted' workers as labour brokers to recruit Indian labour, thus introducing a chain-migration outcome based on specific recruitment areas in southern India. This was primarily a personal or informal recruitment system and it became the preferred recruitment method after 1910."³⁵ Along with Chinese contract workers, Malays were also employed in significant numbers on tobacco estates and paid wages while the Indigenous workers who cleared sites for planting were paid "on a casual, piecework basis."³⁶

The early history of the development of the oilfields of Miri and Seria was intrinsically linked to the migrant paths of workers of Northwest Bornean plantations and public works projects as well as the internal migrations of Malay and Indigenous peoples. The discovery of the Miri and thereafter the Seria fields redirected flows of labor to these developing oil towns. By the 1920s, Kaur documents that "Sarawak Oilfields became the largest employer of Chinese labour."³⁷ Higher remuneration offered by SOL and BMPC lured workers away from plantations. Furthermore, when rubber prices crashed in 1921 and estate profits slumped, many newly-unemployed workers turned to the oilfields. This migrant history diverged from those of European and North American oilmen whose technical expertise, for instance, in oil exploration or drilling, brought them to colonial outposts around the world. Although many were drillers and mechanics, they were not categorized as *Labor*, a distinctly racialized designation reserved for local, indigenous, and Asian workers, whether they be drillers or mechanics.

The labor history of this early period of oil exploration and production was reflected in *Book 18* where notations on some logs indicated that some of BMPC's workers listed in its pages were formerly contract laborers. Until the early 1930s, many of the Chinese workers hired to work in the Miri oilfield were assumed to be contract workers. These workers' movement was restricted by the Sarawak government and the oil companies relied on "sympathetic Malays and Dayaks to round up absconding labourers."³⁸ Indeed, prior to the twentieth century, Sarawak not only regulated departures by sea but also put in place "coercive measures to prevent laborers from absconding via the land border to [Dutch Borneo which] included the requirement of a pass from the government officials in Chinese-employment areas. These passes had to be shown to Dayak chiefs through whose villages the Chinese passed." Those who failed to do so were apprehended and punished.³⁹ Along with Chinese and Indian workers who were contract laborers during this period, some Malays were also hired under contracts.⁴⁰ For the most part, local Malays and Indigenous peoples hired to work in the oilfields appeared to be "free" labor but were not considered an especially stable or skilled workforce. Racist stereotypes that shaped an ethnically-segmented labor force played a role in the ways in which job assignments were determined. In Sarawak, the perception of Dayak and Malay loyalty to the Brooke regimes served to posit value in their presence in the workforce as a counterpoint to potentially subversive Chinese laborers. Dayaks, were seen as being particularly suited to being watchmen because of their assumed fealty to the Brooke Rajahs and their native "fierceness" and skills in tracking.

In 1938, the kangani system was formally abolished in Malaya. Thereafter all labor entering northwest Borneo after this period was purportedly "free."⁴¹ A snowballing method of recruitment of labor from India, where Indians in Sarawak and Brunei

brought their relatives and acquaintances to train and work in the oilfields helped forge an informal migrant oil route from India to Northwest Borneo. This flow of labor was shaped by kinship ties and familial obligations and occurred in an ad hoc manner, dependent on a person's local networks of influence in Sarawak and Brunei. A more formal path of recruitment occurred when kanganis were replaced by laborers who entered into contracts with the oil companies or the government's public works Department. They recruited a pool of workers and supplied labor to the oilfields or public works projects. Solely responsible for the labor they brought in, they were also responsible for the travel, housing, and other needs of their workers. These private contractors, especially after the Second World War, became indispensable in meeting the companies' needs for unskilled and skilled workers. Labor that was recruited by contractors was "off" the books since they were not the company's employees. Anecdotal accounts and oral histories that I have collected indicate the employment of hundreds of workers by contractors. However, who they were and how many there were is difficult to estimate since labor contractors' records are not accessible or are unavailable. Thus, *Book 2* and *Book 18* did not take into account the actual number of workers in the oilfields. SOL and BMPC also had arranged for representatives of Burmah Shell in Madras (now Chennai), India to recruit workers. Indians who were selected and sent by Burmah Shell, were employees of the companies and therefore "in" the books.

The Miri and Seria Oilfields

For the interwar period, accounts of Dayak employment in the Miri oilfields in Sarawak's Baram district are sketchy, particularly before 1919. Most official and colonial sources did not document the lives of SOL's oil workers and Dayak workers simply constituted numbers in labor force tallies in annual reports and in the *Sarawak Government Gazette* (hereafter cited as SGG.) In 1910, Miri was a coastal village in the Baram region of Northwest Sarawak comprising about "twenty scattered houses and two Chinese shops," and was of no particular significance prior to the discovery and extraction of oil.⁴² Dayak presence here prior to the discovery of oil was not documented but undoubtedly Dayaks came through the region as they followed and charted trade routes and migrated for work in North Borneo's tobacco estates. Cochrane in 1924 reported that in 1910, prior to importing twenty-five Chinese workers from Singapore, only "80 able-bodied men and youths" could be mustered by the Field Manager in Miri. By the end of 1912, Cochrane stated that Miri's nascent oilfield had "a native labour force of 424 Malays and Chinese" and two years later there were "969 natives and Chinese."⁴³ The challenges of documenting Dayak presence in the Miri oilfields is reflected here with the term *native* first referring to Malays and Chinese and then, when used in 1914, clearly excluding Chinese from this nomenclature. The ambiguous use of "native" also blurs or makes invisible the presence of Dayaks in the labor force in the early years of the oil industry in Miri.⁴⁴ In 1915, the SGG noted that revenues in the Baram region had increased in part due to "an influx of labor owing to the operations of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co., Ltd.," indicating the rapidly dominating presence of the oil company and the growing population of Miri.⁴⁵ Apart from workers employed directly by the company, "a large number of Malays and Chinese [were] kept upon contract works."⁴⁶ A 1917 entry in

the SGG records 827 workers on the company's payroll in December but acknowledged that "some 63 Chinese builders and carpenters, and 60 riveters on tank construction are employed by contracts, and do not appear on our books. Employment is also provided for a large number of natives, who collect and deliver timber for various constructive purposes."⁴⁷

The demand for labor and the growing dominance of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company (the pre-cursor to SOL) clearly rerouted the paths of workers in the region. The loss reported by the Sarawak government of state revenue in 1913 from "jungle produce," a trade dominated by Dayaks, was blamed on "the majority of the natives [being] engaged in working for the Oil Company instead of working jungle produce."⁴⁸ Population movements also indicated the movement of Dayaks to the coastal town of Miri and then later to the Belait district in Brunei. One of the first accounting of Dayak labor in the Miri oilfields is found in the SGG of March 1913, which noted that the company employed 140 Dayak "coolies." Whether the term "coolie" referred to contract labor is unclear, although it is juxtaposed with the 196 Chinese coolies employed by the company, with both categories distinguished from the sixty-five "contractors[sic] employees."⁴⁹ In 1919, the company employed forty-five Dayaks and a year later 216 Dayaks. Significantly, artisans, "coolie," and contract labor were now distinguished from the Dayak,

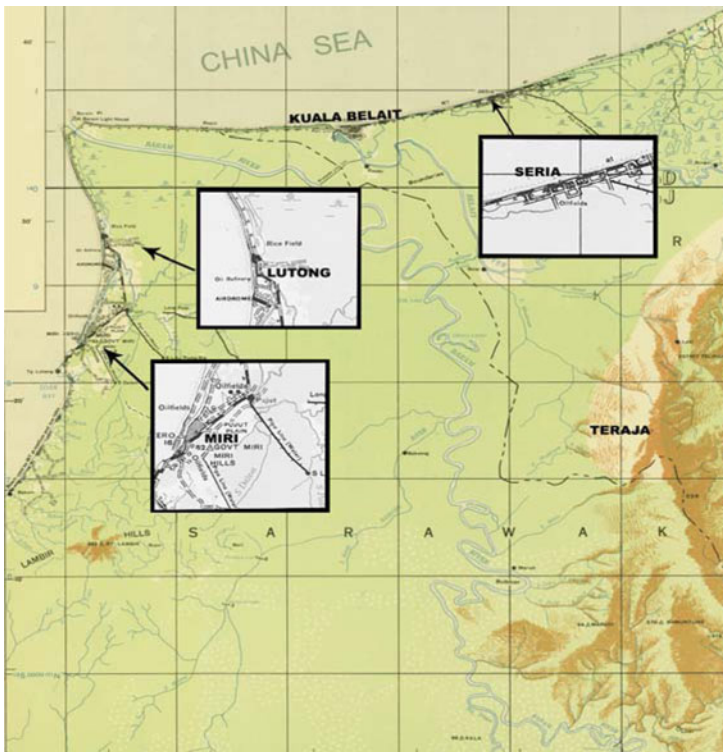


Figure 2. Sarawak and Brunei Oilfields

Javanese, and Indian labor employed by the company. Including Chinese and Malay labor, these groups were accounted for in the enumeration of “native labour increases.”⁵⁰ Javanese and Indian labor would have been considered as immigrant labor but the company appears to have glossed over these distinctions to categorize them collectively as “native” laborers. Evidently, during this period, classifications for peoples of color—despite differences in citizenship, ethnicity, indigeneity, and place of origin—and the designation *native* blurred when it was expedient to do so. In the 1921 annual report for Miri a distinction between Chinese “coolies” and Chinese “contract” coolies was made, making the use and meaning of the term *coolie* ambiguous. Dayaks were no longer listed as “coolies” although now Malay “coolies” were recorded as being employed by the company. In 1922, of the 3,860 member labor force noted in the SGG, 590 Dayaks were included in the 754 workers employed by contract laborers affirming that Dayaks were recruited to the Miri oilfields by contract laborers.⁵¹ That the presence of Dayak workers in the Miri oilfields was substantial in the 1920s is evinced by the company’s building of “one long” house for Dayaks.⁵² By the end of 1923, as Cochrane notes, SOL had “3,252 coolies” in its workforce, most likely here a reference to its Chinese workers.⁵³ Local Malays appeared to have been hired as artisans.

The discovery of oil in April 1929 across the Sarawak border in Brunei’s northeast Belait district expanded the arena of the oil industry in Northwest Borneo. At this time, Seria did not exist. The township that sprang up out of the swamp in the 1930s began as a drilling camp eleven kilometers east of the village of Kuala Belait on the Brunei-Sarawak border.⁵⁴ G.C. Harper explains, “In the early 1920’s, Shell’s exploration staff in Miri began working further afield, not only in Sarawak but also in Brunei where Anglo-Saxon [Petroleum] had acquired concession rights in 1913. This explains why SOL staff were involved in the discovery of the Seria field.”⁵⁵ A subsidiary of Royal Dutch/Shell, BMPC could draw on the resources and personnel of SOL. The Lutong refinery in Miri, for instance, serviced the Miri as well as Seria oilfields. Moreover, in the interwar period, BMPC’s offices were located in Miri. In the early years of prospecting and drilling for oil, there was no road from Miri to Kuala Belait and labor and material came by small steamships from Miri. Additionally, as Harper notes, all administrators were in Miri with the “Miri department heads [being] responsible for their individual departments in the Seria field.”⁵⁶ Oil was exported from Seria for the first time in 1932 and by 1940, the Seria oilfield was producing 17,500 barrels of oil a day, making it “the largest single oil producer in the British Empire.”⁵⁷ Ironically, the rising production of oil in Seria occurred contemporaneously with a decline in Miri’s oil output.

During the interwar period, oil exploration and production in the Belait region saw the development of an oil town in Seria. Kuala Belait served as a midway station between Seria and Miri through which transited material for Seria’s oil infrastructure as well as BMPC staff and labor. The developing oil town depended on a workforce primarily sourced from Sarawak and Brunei and, to a lesser degree, Singapore, Hong Kong, and India. The British colonial office monitored the affairs of SOL through the Protector of Labor for Sarawak, who also served as Controller of Labor for Brunei. Brunei’s dominant population has been Malay and today the Brunei Constitution recognizes seven Indigenous groups as being native to Brunei: Kedayan, Barunay, Bisaya,

Murut, Tutong, Belait, and Dusun. Collectively, these groups are considered “native” ethnic groups. Although some Dayaks lived dispersed along the Belait and Temburong rivers, their numbers were inconsiderable in relation to “native Bruneians” and they often remained invisible in public records. The 1911 census, for instance, listed no Dayaks as living in Brunei. The Belait district’s low population prior to the development of the Seria oilfield was related to the topography of this region. A crocodile-infested swampland along the shoreline and dense rainforest around, one of the only viable means of transport from Seria was along the shore. It was not until 1938 that a road was completed between Seria and Kuala Belait. The difficult and dangerous terrain also meant that labor-intensive expeditions were urgently required to facilitate land surveys, exploration, and drilling and the building of the infrastructure of a township. The transfer of workers from the Miri and Lutong operations to Seria in the 1930s resulted in a rapid increase of a “foreign” workforce of Chinese and some Indians. Additionally, Dayaks from Sarawak were recruited, primarily for clearing passages through the forest and for other unskilled jobs. Horton states that in 1933, Malays and Dayaks accounted for thirty-four percent of BMPC’s labor force and in 1938 37 percent.⁵⁸ The prioritization of housing for skilled and unskilled workers reflected the dependence on labor in developing the oilfields. The housing of Dayaks, as it did in Miri, indicated the substantial reliance on unskilled Dayak labor in the early years of the oil industry in Seria. Whether most Dayaks were recruited by a contractor or whether most were migrant labor following opportunities to make some money between planting and harvesting seasons was unclear. A memorandum to the Colonial Office from W.G.S. Dobbie, General Officer Commanding Malaya Command, provided a snapshot of the demanding work in the Miri and Seria oilfields: “the hours of work for all ranks are extremely long, 6:30 a.m. to 11 a.m., 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. No holiday on Saturdays, no public holidays, and duty on Sunday out of three. The drilling staff works continuously in 8-hour shifts.”⁵⁹

On the eve of the Japanese invasion of Borneo, Seria had become the economic center of Brunei and the Seria town had grown rapidly and substantially. The urban infrastructure for the township, including building roads, providing medical services, the fire station, and telephone exchange was done by BMPC since “the Government found it cheaper and quicker to sub-contract jobs . . . to BMPC.”⁶⁰ As the Japanese invasion of Borneo became imminent in December 1941, SOL and BMPC put into effect oilfield denial schemes to ensure their oil facilities could not be used by the Japanese. Oil wells were disabled and the infrastructure for oil production destroyed in Miri, Lutong, and Seria. European staff and their families were evacuated. Some Chinese fled into the interior. Those workers who remained were put to work in the recovery of the oilfields and its administrative offices. Residents of Kuala Belait and in the region were compelled to work in the oilfields. While many Indigenous peoples moved into the interior some were also deployed to rehabilitate the oil towns. During the occupation, the Japanese were able to restore oil production very quickly and by the time of the Allied invasion had produced about 11.5 million barrels of oil.⁶¹

Table 1. Racial Distribution of BMPC's Labor Force

| RACE | 1946 | 1947 | 1948 | 1949 |
|-------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Malays/Borneans ⁶³ | 1,020 | 1,492 | 2,232 | 1,955 |
| Chinese | 518 | 683 | 1131 | 1350 |
| Indians | 179 | 202 | 218 | 329 |
| Javanese | 44 | 66 | 73 | 76 |
| Eurasians | 10 | 13 | 22 | 15 |
| Dayaks | | | | 889 |
| TOTAL | 1,771 | 2,456 | 3,676 | 4,614 |

BMPC's Labor Registers

The labor registers of BMPC documented the work histories of labor recruited after the liberation of Borneo. They reflected the varied arenas of the rehabilitation operations and the places where labor-intensive recovery measures were required. This was also a period when concerted efforts to recruit labor and staff led to a significant rise in Brunei's population. The *Annual Report* for 1946 noted that 119 Europeans, 4,952 Malays, 5,098 Chinese, 77 Indians, and 74 people of "Other Races" entered Brunei. Aliens, "those who were neither subjects of the Brunei Sultan or British subjects," were required to produce a passport or other travel document to enter Brunei. However, according to the *Annual Report*, "little restriction is placed on the free movement of aliens of Malaysian race" and there was no regulation of the "volume of immigration."⁶² A significant number of these immigrants came to work for BMPC, and a fewer number found work in the government's public works programs. For the period between 1946–1949, the Colonial Office's annual reports' figures for 1946–1949 (Table 1) logging the racial distribution of BMPC's labor did not account for the workers brought in by contractors nor the volume of casual labor. During this period, verbal agreements to work for a month were also permitted. The BMPC labor registers that I examined also did not provide data that corresponded to these official numbers. For instance, the *Annual Report* for 1949 recorded an increase of 111 Indians hired. In *Book 18*, only fourteen Indians were listed as being engaged in 1949. One explanation for this discrepancy may lie in the number of books that might have been allocated to different labor supervisors. *Book 18*, for instance, recorded workers who were engaged during 1945–1951. A study of all the books between *Book 1* and *Book 18*—a gap of 11,024 entries—most likely would provide a more accurate representation of BMPC's labor force during this period.

Despite the gaps in the company records, the available BMPC's labor registers are indispensable in providing a microhistory of BMPC's labor force. The workers listed here fell under the designation *labor*—skilled and unskilled—and were distinctive from BMPC's staff who constituted a separate workforce: senior Asiatic staff or SAS (later regional staff or RS) and senior staff (during this period reserved for Europeans or whites from Australia, Canada, or the United States). Thus, Europeans were conspicuous in their absence from BMPC's labor registers.

Table 2. Template for entries in BMPC's Labor Register Book

| BADGE NUMBER | NAME | NATIONALITY | STATUS | RATE | DEPARTMENT | |
|-------------------------|------|-------------|--------|-----------|------------|-------|
| DATE ENGAGED | AGE | INCREASES | | TRANSFERS | | FINES |
| FAMILY | DATE | AMOUNT | DATE | DEPT | | |
| WHERE LIVING | | § | CTS | | | |
| PREVIOUS STATUS | | | | | | |
| PREVIOUS WAGES | | | | | | |
| RENEWAL No. | | | | | | |
| DATE DISCHARGED | | | | | | |
| REASON FOR DISCHARGE | | | | | | |
| DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH | | | | | | |
| LEAVE | | | | | | |

Interestingly, the recruitment of labor came under the scrutiny of the Colonial Office, whereas the recruitment of staff appears to have been of little concern to it. BMPC's labor registers therefore provided critical documentation of company labor policies and its consonance with British colonial policies. Furthermore, on the one hand, these books presented a composite picture of BMPC's multiethnic labor force and the technologies of labor management employed by the company. On the other hand, "reading between the lines," these books presented glimpses of workers' lives and their personalities. Each worker was assigned a badge number and in *Book 18*, had a page dedicated to chronicling his/her work history (see [Table 2](#) below). The earlier ledger, *Book 2*, had three entries per page but the template was the same as that of *Book 18*. In these ledgers the labor supervisor regularly updated the worker's performance and wages until a worker's service with the company was terminated or when the badge number of the worker changed, or if she/he was promoted to the regional staff. A photograph of the worker was pasted at the bottom of many of the entries—although more so in *Book 18* than in *Book 2*.

Book 2: Some Glimpses of Laborers Recruited in 1945

Book 2 consisted of entries for 605 "badge numbers" of laborers recruited in 1945 whereas *Book 18* listed workers recruited in 1949 and had 397 badge numbers listed, although a few entries were missing. The fewer number of workers listed in *Book 18* reflected the stabilization of BMPC's labor force, the completion of a phase of rehabilitation, as well as possibly the changing priorities in BMPC's labor recruitment. In 1945, the need for labor was framed by the devastation of the oil towns and the urgency of oil-well recovery operations. Whereas it was evident that Dayaks were

employed to clear the land, the *Annual Report* for 1946 does not identify Dayak workers but implicitly appears to have included their numbers in the category “Malays/Borneans.” *Book 2* listed a variety of jobs that were assigned in 1945 to Dayaks, Malays, Chinese, Javanese, Indians, and Eurasians. Dayaks were most often laborers or watchmen assigned to various sites in the oilfields and town. Labor force employees worked a range of jobs including telephone operator, cook, wireman, mosquito catcher, syce, fireman, driller, and rigger. A few of the worksites, such as the Kuala Belait-to-Baram pipeline (destroyed by the retreating Japanese), did not appear in *Book 18*, presumably since the pipeline became operational by 1947. Some of the entries provided a glimpse of the continuities between the Miri operations and the exploration for oil in Brunei, labor exchanges, as well as oilfield labor used during the Japanese interregnum. Several workers in *Book 2* were listed as having previously worked for the company in the 1920s. For instance, one Indian worked for the company between 1928–1941; a Malay was listed as having been employed as a mandore between 1927–1941; and a Chinese laborer was engaged as an engineman in 1917. It is unclear as to what most of these men did during the Japanese occupation of Borneo. One Malay laborer was listed as having been employed previously by the Japanese as an apprentice welder for two-and-a-half years, hence it was plausible that others continued working in the Seria and Miri oilfields under the Japanese. Another Malay employed in the sanitation department as a “larvae catcher” in 1945 had joined the company in 1934, and worked as an apprentice wireman and, in the postwar period worked his way up as laboratory assistant in 1954 and was later promoted to the regional staff. The prior employment of a Chinese “cook-boy” was entered as being with BBKAU Labuan, the British Borneo Civil Affairs Unit.

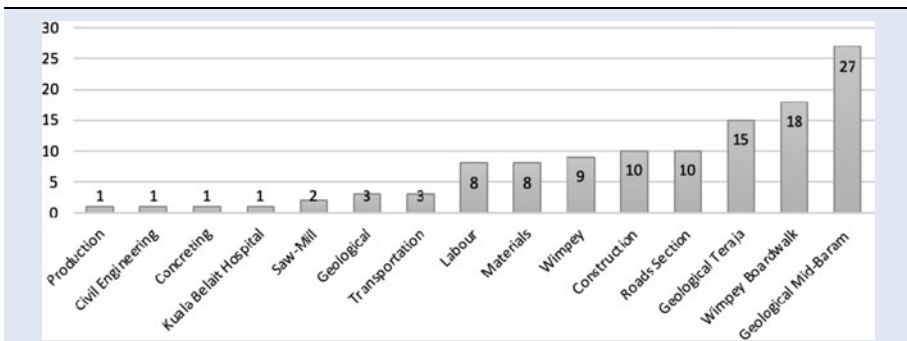
The chronicling of each worker’s employment in *Book 2* revealed the long years of employment and the promotions of some to RS. Remarkably, an eighteen-year-old Chinese laborer employed in the “Labourer Ration Store” in 1945, despite having his ration allowance (RA) and good conduct (GC) bonus cut for two months for “unauthorized interference with office property during leisure hours,” was promoted to SAS in May 1949, an unprecedentedly rapid advance. His file showed that he was sent to be trained in the machine shop for three years as a draughtsman. Some men were discharged for taking leave without permission and a Malay worker was discharged on medical grounds after contracting tuberculosis. Similarly, an Indian derrickman was discharged with “one month’s wages in lieu of notice” for being “medically unfit.” A Dayak was dismissed for “sleeping on the job” while a Malay was dismissed for “disobedience and suspected misuse” of company petrol. After a period of working in the Belait area, some workers were transferred to SOL’s Miri oilfield or the Lutong refinery, pointing to BMPC and SOL’s mutual interests and the sharing of expertise and resources. From the entry for one Chinese laborer who joined the company in 1945 and left a year later to take up a contract job, it was evident that labor contractors were hiring from the region either for BMPC contract work or the government’s public works. Intriguingly, a Javanese laborer who was hired by the company in November 1945 was repatriated to Java two months later, for unknown reasons. Other entries also noted where a discharged worker was headed. For instance, a Dayak “left to Labuan en-route to Sibul” in Sarawak while

an Indian left “without knowledge of the Company for Miri.” Another Chinese worker who left the company had the monthly twenty dollars of his wages allotted to his wife in Miri terminated. There were no reasons given for this financial arrangement or whether this was a common practice. An entry for a Malay wireman who “absconded from [Kuala Belait] Hospital” also raised interesting questions. A Malay wireman was listed as having died in hospital but no reasons for his death was provided. However, a Dayak who died in service was listed as having “died due to natural causes.” Offenses that led to cuts in their RA and GC bonuses included “stopping for work before time,” “incurring an accident whilst driving a truck,” losing one’s “number disc,” and “using Company’s truck [for] illegal business.” A Malay syce in the garage and transport department had several infractions revealing a spirited irreverence about company rules. His RA and GC bonuses were cut several times including for losing his number disc, “driving along the backroad . . . at a speed of 79 kilometers/hr” and for “forcing his way into Kranie’s seats at cinema.” BMPC’s Marina Theatre at the time showed Malay, Chinese, and Indian films and was segregated according to worker grades. The term *Kranie* referred to clerks and the seats therefore presumably pertained to the space reserved for regional staff.

Book 18: Dayak Lives and Transcripts of Work in the Oilfields

The Colonial Office’s *Report on Brunei for the Year 1949* enumerates, for the first time, the Dayaks employed in BMPC’s labor force (Figure 5). While it noted that Dayaks in Brunei “are found in settlements along the upper reaches of the Temburang, Pandaruan and Belait Rivers,” the report also recorded the immigration of 1,267 Dayaks to Brunei and the departures of 1,144 Dayaks. Unlike *Book 2*, *Book 18* documented workers’ places of birth, which allowed for a reasoned conjecture of the immigrant status of BMPC’s workers. Of the 385 entries examined in *Book 18*, 117 are those of Dayaks. None of these Dayaks’ places of birth were recorded as being Brunei, although forty-seven Dayaks had their places of birth unmarked. The *Colonial Report’s* figures for Dayak arrivals and departures to Brunei therefore pointed to Dayak mobility across borders, and BMPC’s recording of their birth places suggested their routes to the Belait district. Of the 117 Dayaks listed, seventy-seven

Table 3. Distribution of Dayak Labor



were from Sarawak. Of these, fifty-eight Dayaks, the largest group, were from Sibü, Sarawak's Third Division 407 km Southeast of Seria; fourteen were from Simanggang (now Sri Aman) in the Second District, 495 km Southeast of Seria, and historically densest population of Dayaks in Sarawak; and three were from Sarawak's capital city Kuching in the First Division and 865 km to Seria. Forty-two Dayaks had no place listed for their birth place. Some of them could have been local Brunei Dayaks, but considering the immigration figures for 1949, it was most likely that these Dayaks too came from Sarawak, a few possibly even from North Borneo. The classification *Dayak* glossed over the heterogeneity of Dayak communities, hence it was impossible to determine the ethnic affiliations of these workers, identities that could have been linked to specific places. However, the *Sarawak Annual Report of the Department of Labour for the Year 1958* noted that "the migration of labour is mainly confined to Ibans" and that "the oil industry in Seria and Miri continued [emphasis added] to employ Iban labour from the Second and Third Divisions."⁶⁴ Albeit this report was for 1958, it identified the most popular postwar Dayak migrant corridors being from divisions one and two.

Dayaks engaged by BMPC during this period were mostly unskilled laborers. Ninety-two Dayaks listed in *Book 18* were hired as Grade-1 laborers who made \$1.50 per diem. [Table 3](#) below charts the departments to which the 117 Dayaks were assigned. Most Dayaks were concentrated in the geological department, either in the mid-Baram or the Teraja region, indicating that they were probably tasked with forest-clearing for roads and pathways or hired to facilitate geological survey operations. The departments that required workers for labor-intensive jobs appeared to have hired in clusters. For instance, twenty Dayaks were hired on February 26, 1949, by the geological department's mid-Baram division. This group was "paid off by the Seismic party 1" on April 27, 1949, when presumably the field mission's objective was completed. These men were then discharged from the company on May 3, 1949. Interestingly, for all these Dayak workers hired in the geological department, their places of birth were unmarked in their company records. However, many of these Dayaks previously worked in SOL's Miri oilfield as evidenced by their Miri employment badge numbers entered in BMPC's *Book 18*. These numbers ran sequentially, for instance, from Miri Numbers 10822–10823 and 10825–10835. Thus, it was reasonable to assume that these Dayaks had traveled together across the border to Seria. It also indicated that BMPC might have transferred them from Miri to meet their work exigencies.

Dayak workers employed by BMPC ranged in age from a fifteen-year-old from Sibü employed as a Grade-1 laborer and assigned to Wimpey at \$1.50 pd. to a forty-seven-year-old Dayak employed as a line assistant in the Dayak Company Line for \$36 per month. There were two sixteen and two seventeen-year-old Dayaks as well as three eighteen- and three nineteen- year-old Dayaks employed as stackers in the materials department. Seventy-three Dayak workers were in their twenties, thirty-one were in their thirties, and seven Dayaks were in their forties. Age was not a criterion for any of the jobs or the wages they received. A forty-year-old Dayak from Kuching was paid \$1.50 pd. as a trainee ganger in the production department; a twenty-two-year-old Dayak was paid \$1.70 pd. as a constable in the labor department; and a sixteen-year-old Dayak—who obviously had worked in the Miri

oilfield previously as his Miri number was logged—was paid \$1.00 pd. as a Grade-0 *opas* (peon) in the geological department. (The *Annual Report of Brunei for 1949* did not acknowledge a Grade-0 level when it identified twelve employee grade levels in the oil company and wages ranging from \$1.50—\$5.10 a day).⁶⁵ *Book 18* recorded daily wages ranging from \$1.00 pd. for the 16-year-old *opas* to \$2.55 for a Grade-3 laborer in construction. Monthly wages were assigned to line or training assistants and ranged from \$39 to \$54 for a Grade-2 cook. A couple of Dayak cooks were paid a weekly wage of \$17.40. Of the 117 Dayaks in *Book 18*, eighty-five were listed as being single and thirty-two married, some with children. Except for three Dayak workers, the rest were living in Dayak company accommodations.

BMPC Dayak workers occasionally were moved to different sites within the Belait district. Two Dayak constables hired in March 1949 were transferred to Kuala Belait in May of the same year only to be brought back to Seria in December. Others were regraded and moved to a different site as in the case of a Dayak line assistant who was promoted as a Grade-2 cook and sent to field engineering, the “Eastern District.” BMPC recorded the prior occupations of its employees and noted the earlier badge numbers of Dayaks employed previously in the Miri oilfield or those who had been in the service of BMPC. None of the Dayaks had worked with labor contractors. Some Dayaks had “Ex-Sibu” noted on their files. Whether this referred to a particular site of work in Sibu and if so, which one, was indeterminate. The peripatetic patterns of Dayak employment reflected the imperatives of Dayak work as well as the company’s forbearance of their comings and goings, since many were rehired by BMPC. Labor turnover was high during this period and Dayaks who came to Brunei did so for short periods of time to supplement their income. Indeed, the *Annual Report of Brunei for 1949* bemoaned:

the mental make-up of the local races who have not yet lost, as so many Europeans seem to have done, the ability to enjoy leisure. Money is still secondary consideration to them and work for cash wages only when they require money for some particular purpose. When they have saved what they think they need, for a buffalo or a wife or what may be, they are quite likely to pack up and go off to their kampongs without telling anyone and often without collecting wages they have worked for.⁶⁶

Dayak survival clearly did not depend on their work in the oilfields and this is reflected in their employment records.

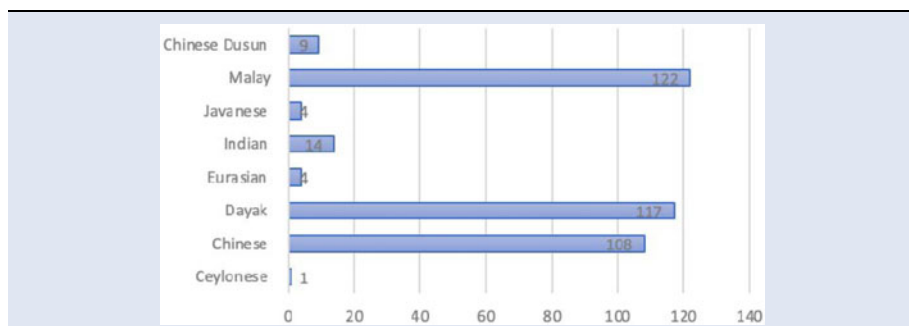
Most of the Dayaks listed in *Book 18* left the company’s service apparently “of their own accord” after a few months or a year of service. BMPC required its employees to provide notice of their departure but whether most Dayaks did so is unclear. However, *Book 18* detailed a Dayak who refused “to go back to work out his month’s notice” and another who within two months of being hired “refused to return to work and wishes to return home as soon as possible.” “Continual absence without permission” was grounds for discharge but whether those who were charged, although it was duly noted in their logs, were fired or simply left could not be determined. Other reasons for Dayak workers being discharged pertained to their conduct. Two laborers in Wimpey were hired and fired the same day since they both “refused to work.”

“Overstaying leave” was also grounds for discharge. A Dayak constable was “instantly dismissed for failure to check buildings under his care.” Another was dismissed because his work was deemed unsatisfactory. *Book 18* also documented an unusual case of a Dayak laborer in the roads section, a month-and-a-half after he was hired, being deported to Sarawak by the Brunei government for unknown reasons. *Book 18* also revealed a pattern of Dayaks leaving their employment as a group. For instance, at least seven Dayaks in the geological department left “of their own accord” on June 26, 1949; similarly, a month later nine Dayaks working in the Wimpey section left “of their own accord.” Some Dayaks who had been let go by Seismic Party 1 appeared to have been rehired shortly thereafter, possibly for another job assigned to the Seismic Party.

Dayaks employed by BMPC were free laborers and their records indicated their sense of independence and free will. Most left when they wanted to, often apparently with no sense of obligation to the oil company. The company was cognizant of its dependence on Dayak labor and the need for a stable labor force. The *Annual Report* states, “there was some trouble with the Sibiu Dayaks as a result of which sixty-four Dayaks returned home.”⁶⁷ *Book 18* accounted for the departure of several groups of Sibiu Dayaks, possibly of some of those mentioned in the *Annual Report*. Dayak agency and resistance to the company’s control was thus documented in these entries and raised the question, embedded in the notations, whether Dayaks “leaving of their own accord” were other stories of Dayak agency. In the account of the Sibiu Dayaks, the *Annual Report* hinted at the company refusing to concede to some demands made by the Dayaks and that the Dayaks chose to walk away, rather than meet the company on its terms: “The matter was fully investigated and steps taken to improve liaison so as to prevent misunderstandings. Arrangements were also made for the Dayaks to build their own long houses, at the company’s expense.”⁶⁸

In 1949, BMPC provided its employees with “a cost of living allowance of 20 percent of wages for single men and 50 percent for married men was paid and an increased regular attendance and good conduct bonus of \$5 a month plus two days basic pay.”⁶⁹ The marital status of workers, and the number and ages of children, was meticulously documented in the labor register books. One entry even noted a worker “accompanying his insane wife home.” In the section under “Fines,” employee

Table 4. BMPC’s Labor Force



infractions that were reprimanded by cuts in their RA and/or the GC bonuses were detailed. Remarkably, except for a Dayak in construction who had his bonus cut by fifty cents for “failing to draw rations on Sunday and wasting time on Monday,” no other infractions by Dayaks were documented in *Book 18*. As reported in the 1949 *Annual Report*, “Daily hours of work for men were 7 3/4 hours and work was originally for six days of the week with the aim of a five and a half day week, which was later to be achieved.”⁷⁰

By the end of 1949, BMPC had revived its oil wells and expanded production. Basic infrastructure projects were completed and extensive oil-town development projects were initiated. The building of housing for its employees was accelerated and projects to provide welfare amenities for BMPC labor and staff progressed steadily. Dayak labor was vital to these infrastructure projects since they provided the unskilled labor required in construction, road building, and the geological surveys for oil exploration. *Book 18* conclusively made visible this crucial role of Dayaks in the oil industry in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Book 18: Some Transcripts of Work and Other Lives

Whereas Dayaks were a visible presence in BMPCs labor force, *Book 18* also provided a glimpse of the work, lives, and personalities of other workers in Seria. Apart from the 117 Dayaks logged in *Book 18*, 267 workers of 7 distinct ethnic groups were listed (Table 4). There were 122 Malays, the largest group of workers, 108 Chinese, 14 Indians, 9 Chinese Dusun, 4 Javanese, 4 Eurasians, and 1 Ceylonese. These workers recorded their places of birth as being variously in Brunei, Sarawak, North Borneo, Singapore, Malaya, Labuan, China, Java, India, and Ceylon. *Book 18* listed only one female, a forty-year-old Chinese *amah* [maid/nanny] who worked for only ten days—leaving of her “own accord”—at the Kuala Belait hospital for forty-one dollars per month (Grade-2). She was born in China, lived in the Kuala Belait *kampung* (village, most probably in the Chinese section), and had previously been a “planter.” However, another number was noted next to her badge number, indicating that she had at some point worked for the company previously. She was listed as being “single.” Several workers’ prior occupations were recorded as “planter” and it was uncertain whether it represented work in an estate or in smallholding farms. Evidence of the ethnic segmentation of BMPC’s labor force was seen in the distinction made between skilled and unskilled labor. Dayaks dominated the workforce in the geological department—only one Chinese was listed in geological. Skilled jobs were dominated by Chinese and Indian laborers. Of the fourteen Indians listed in *Book 18*, only one was a Grade-1 laborer. The others were Grade 3–Grade 6 and included enginemen, riggers, floormen, a carpenter, a crane driver, and two office assistants. One of these men was previously listed as being a planter while nine Indians had been contract laborers. Curiously, only Indians had their religious identities entered under their “nationality,” a category for all purposes that denoted race/ethnicity. Thus, “Indian Mohammedan,” “Indian Christian,” and “Indian Hindu” were distinct identities. The low number of Indians listed in *Book 18* and the evidence from the *Annual Report* that “South Indians constitute many of the drilling gangs and do most of the stevedoring both at Kuala Belait and for the company at Labuan,”

indicated that most Indians working in the oilfields during this period were hired by labor contractors.⁷¹ Twelve of these Indians lived in “company accommodation” of which Book 18 identified two distinct sites—Dayak and Malay. All other groups, if not living locally, were presented as living in “company accommodation.”

The youngest employee in the labor records was a fourteen-year-old Malay Grade—0 *opas*, who was born in Brunei. Most of the Malays were from Brunei, with twenty-one Malays reporting Sarawak as their place of birth. Some Malays were listed as being “ex-Singapore” or “ex-Sibu.” The departments that Malay workers worked for included materials, Kuala Belait engineering, transportation/water transportation, materials, geological, heavy equipment, communication, garage, Wimpey, saw-mill, and labor. They were enginemen, carpenters, sailors, fitters, laborers, constables, greasers, stackers, loaders, syces, firemen, and crane and bull-dozer drivers. Three of the Malays were previously labor contractors, some had been “planters” and one was a tapper. The records for Malays revealed a range of reasons for their discharge from the company with many displaying a feisty disregard for authority, resistance to perceived unfairness, and a defiant and purportedly *laissez-faire* attitude to work. Many left of their “own accord,” but some were dismissed for being “continually absent without permission,” or when their work was deemed unsatisfactory, or when their services were no longer required. In one instance, a Malay engineman was dismissed for being “caught sleeping on duty [on] several occasions” and another Malay laborer at Wimpey refused to work, for reasons unknown, and was dismissed. Supervisors maintained keen oversight of workers in their charge. One Malay was warned for “being found sitting in a new bungalow while on duty” and many Malay workers had the G.C bonus and/or even wages cut for infractions that ranged from: a \$2.50 GC bonus cut for “being found sitting during working hours,” “cut in full bonus for careless driving,” two months bonus cut for “damage to P&H class shovel . . . due to carelessness,” and one month bonus cut for refusing “to work overtime on an urgent job.” A sailor’s GC bonus was cut for “leaving his vessel in a filthy condition” and a constable had \$3 cut from his GC bonus for “leaving his [post] of duty without permission” while another Malay had his GC bonus cut “for disobeying orders.”

The company’s panoptic surveillance of its workers was also evident in the infractions for which Chinese workers had their GC bonuses cut: a fitter had \$3 cut because he was “found at the coffee stall during working hours,” a constable had several infractions—\$4 pay and GC bonus cut for “leaving his beat without permission for 4 hours,” “lateness to report to duty,” and “failure to turn up for the parade.” A Grade-4 office assistant had his GC bonus cut for “leaving his ration card in the office and wasting time on Monday,” although he was promoted to SAS later that year. A carpenter, first “for arguing with his foreman after having been given instructions to carry out his duties,” and five months later for “disobeying and arguing with his No.1,” had his GC bonuses cut before being dismissed for his work “being unsatisfactory.” More serious infractions resulted in instant dismissal as in the case of a painter who hit his “No.1.” One Chinese worker “refused to work as leave not granted” and was dismissed for his apparent intransigence. A Chinese bricklayer refused to “work on steel shattering” and was dismissed. The *Annual Report* reported an increase in wages at the beginning of the 1949. Two of the entries in *Book 18*

appeared to refer to this pay revision when a plumber and a fitter were repatriated to Singapore for “refusing to accept the new grading and rate.” Clearly, workers were cognizant of their right to a fair wage and safe working conditions. Workplace accidents were not mentioned although some entries noted “medical” causes for discharge from service. One entry noted that a Chinese fitter was “burnt to death during the break-out of fire in his quarters,” but did not mention whether this happened in company accommodation. A Chinese Dusun “absconded from hospital,” indicating that the company had sent him there for treatment. Discord within BMPCs multiethnic labor force appeared not to have been of much concern although an Indian floorman had his GC bonus cut “for causing a fight.”

Chinese Dusun are a North Bornean Indigenous People of mixed Dusun and Chinese heritage. *The Annual Report on North Borneo for the Year 1947* described them as “the most important of the local tribes” who were “an intelligent and prosperous people.”⁷² Although only nine Chinese Dusun were listed in *Book 18*, their work allocation reflected distinctions made between the labor of different Indigenous groups. None of the Chinese Dusun worked in clearing forests or construction work. Though three were Grade-1 laborers, they were assigned to the materials or communications departments. An office assistant on trial in “Field Training” was paid \$2.30 pd. and two were Grade-4 store assistants in materials. Three of the four Javanese listed in *Book 18* were paid monthly wages. *Book 18* also had entries for four Eurasians recruited in 1949, two from Singapore, one of whom was promoted to SAS in June 1949.

Conclusion

BMPC’s labor registers provided a rare glimpse of the oil company’s recruitment of laborers, the management of a multiethnic labor force, and the operational needs of BMPC in the immediate postwar period. They contribute to a Northwest Bornean labor history that points to the convergences of the economies of Malaya and Borneo plantations, smallholding farms, and the oil industry. More importantly, where labor often has been simply composite “numbers,” these books drew portraits of workers that revealed workers’ agency as well as their distinctive personalities. In this article, I have asserted that Dayak labor was often invisible since it was habitually dismissed as casual labor or as a particularly unstable labor force. However, I argue that a study of the recently archived BMPC labor registers, especially *Book 18*, pre-empt or resists such erasures. An official record of Dayak labor history in the oilfields, *Book 18* revealed the enormously demanding and strenuous jobs that Dayaks undertook in making BMPC’s geological work *possible*. Surveying and exploring for oil could not have been undertaken without Dayak labor and Dayak knowledge of the terrain. The significance of Dayak labor in the oilfields of Seria therefore cannot be overstated. By contextualizing the history of labor recruitment in Northwest Borneo, I have charted the passages of traveling labor. Herein, Dayak social and economic practices—particularly swidden farming and mobility—were juxtaposed with the oil industry’s labor-intensive postwar urgencies. While meeting some of the core needs of BMPC, I maintain that Dayaks took employment on their own terms, taking and leaving the company’s service according to their own priorities.

Dayak labor's intersections with the varied ethnic histories of work in Bornean sites therefore make visible the confluences of multiple streams of migrant pathways in inter-regional economies. Microspatial studies of local actors such as Dayaks in these regional sites of global commerce point to the conflux of indigenous riverine and "jungle" economies and the currents brought by increasingly rapacious and encroaching global players. In bringing Dayak labor histories in conversation with Northwest Borneo's labor history and juxtaposing them with "traces" of the lives and work of a multiethnic labor force on the Borneo frontier, I have sketched an oil company's labor recruitment practices and an Indigenous people tactically engaging them.

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Notes

1. I have chosen to conceal the identities of the workers listed in BMPC's labor registers, hence I do not refer to their names nor reproduce their pictures in this article. While workers listed are identified by their name and personal details, in the chronicling of their employment histories, it is their badge numbers rather than their names that allow for the company's tracking over time of their employment histories.
2. Also spelled as "Dyak" in colonial records.
3. See Tarling, Nicholas, *A Sudden Rampage: The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia, 1941-1945* (Honolulu, 2001).
4. Anthony Vincent Michael Horton, "The Development of Brunei During the British Residential Era 1906-1959: A Sultanate Regenerated" (PhD diss., University of Hull, 1985). Prior to the Second World War, Miri served as BMPC's headquarters and, as Horton points out, "there was a constant traffic between the Miri and Seria wings of the oilfields. As a result, the Belait district tended to have more in common and closer links with Baram district across the border in Sarawak than with the capital of the Sultanate. The whole oilfield, indeed, was treated as a unit by defence and law and order planners as well as by the Shell group," 310-11. By 1941, the Miri oilfield had begun to decline in importance and, after the War, BMPC's headquarters was moved to Seria.
5. Ekaterini Mitsiou and Johannes Preiser-Kapellar, "Moving Hands," in Christian G. DeVito and Anne Gerritsen eds., *Micro-Spatial Histories of Global Labour* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018), 37-38.
6. *Ibid.*, 55.
7. Catherin Arenz, Haug, Seitz, and Venz. *Continuity Under Change in Dayak Societies* (Wiesbaden, Germany, 2017), 13. For a discussion of scholarship on Bornean indigenous peoples, see Victor King, Zawawi Ibrahim, and Noor Hasharina Hassan, *Borneo Studies in History, Society and Culture* (Singapore, 2017).
8. See Horton A.V.M., "The Development of Brunei," 30.
9. CO 968/101/6.
10. Mark Cleary and Shuang Yann Wong, *Oil, Economic Development and Diversification in Brunei Darussalam* (New York, 1994), 38.
11. For an extensive discussion of the narrative on Brunei's modernity see Sridevi Menon, "Narrating Brunei: Travelling histories of Brunei Indians" *Modern Asian Studies* 50 (March 2016), 718-764.
12. James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone: The World Capitalist Economy and the Historical Imagination* (Amsterdam: 1988).
13. DeVito and Gerritsen, eds., *Micro-Spatial Histories*, 5-10.
14. *Ibid.*, 11.
15. CO 852/1126/2. Minutes between Cooper and Whitley, 16/4/1951.

16. D.S. Ranjit Singh, *The Making of Sabah 1865–1941: The Dynamics of Indigenous Society* (Kuala Lumpur, 2000), 6.
17. Warren, *Sulu Zone*, 14.
18. *Ibid.*, 64.
19. Writing in the *Sarawak Gazette*, Rev. William Howell identified several “divisions” of the Sea Dayaks: “Batang Rejang, Katibas, Kaowit, Krian, Saribas, Sebuyau, Balau, Batang Ai, Undups, Skrang, Lemanak, Kumpang, Engkari, Kubau, Engkerbang, etc.” *The Sea Dyaks and Other Races of Sarawak: Contributions to The Sarawak Gazette between 1888 and 1930* (Kuala Lumpur, 1992), 5.
20. Winzeler points out that in Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia “the various Dayak and other Bornean native groups are much better known in traditional ethnological terms than as ethnic communities.” Robert L. Winzeler, eds., *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land, and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo* (New Haven, CT, 1997), 14.
21. Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels*, 11. Pringle speculates that the Land Dayaks’ disinclination to move may be explained by their location in the relatively fertile First Division of Sarawak.
22. For an extended discussion on Dayak groups, see Victor King, *The Peoples of Borneo* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1993).
23. Winzeler notes, “In Kalimantan, the Dutch originally applied the term ‘Dayak’ to the tribal peoples of the interior in general. However, in Sarawak, its use was for a long period limited to . . . the Land Dayaks, and the . . . Sea Dayaks. . . . These labels persisted throughout most of the period of European rule before giving way to the current terms of Bidayah (for the Land Dayak) and Iban (for the sea Dayak). More recently the term ‘Dayak’ has been extended to the other native populations of Sarawak, but it is still not generally applied to similar ethnic groups in either Brunei or Malaysian Sabah.” *Indigenous Peoples and the State*, 28, n.2.
24. Robert Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels: The Ibans of Sarawak Under Brooke Rule, 1841–1941* (New York, 1970), 19–20.
25. Michael R. Dove, *The Banana Tree at the Gate: A History of Marginal Peoples and Global Markets in Borneo* (New Haven, CT, 2011), 75. A 1900 Order pertaining only to Sea Dayaks required them to obtain a passport to travel outside Sarawak. See note 1, 279.
26. M.C. Cleary, “Indigenous Trade and European Economic Intervention in North-West Borneo c. 1860–1930,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30 (May 1996): 301–24, 302.
27. *Ibid.*, 321.
28. Amarjit Kaur, “The Babbling Brookes: Economic Change in Sarawak 1841–1941,” *Modern Asian Studies* 29 (February 1995): 65–109, 98.
29. *Ibid.*, 100.
30. In Dutch Borneo, the Sanga Sanga oilfield was discovered in 1897 in East Borneo, and the Pamusian field on Tarakan Island in the northeast was discovered in 1901. In 1909, the Samboja oilfield was discovered near the Sanga Sanga oil basin and a refinery was set up in nearby Balikpapan. Balikpapan became an important destination for expatriate oilmen and a regional center for the oil industry.
31. Kaur, “The Babbling Brookes,” 100.
32. Pringle, *Rajahs and Rebels*, 267.
33. D.J.M. Tate, “Planting in Nineteenth Century Sabah and Sarawak,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 69 (1996): 37–63, 69. Later, between 1924–1930, Javanese labor was recruited for three-year terms with the consent of the Netherlands Indies government. See Georg McT. Kahin, “The State of North Borneo 1881–1946,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* (1947): 43–65.
34. Horton, “The Development of Brunei,” 204. Horton notes that the Chinese in Brunei “were the principal shopkeepers, traders, and entrepreneurs. Before 1941 their interests included rubber estates, sago factories, pig-breeding, pepper, timber, charcoal and dried prawns,” 210.
35. Amarjit Kaur, “Labour Brokers in Migration: Understanding Historical and Contemporary Transnational Migration Regimes in Malaya/Malaysia,” *International Review of Social History* 57 (2012): 225–52, 233.
36. Amarjit Kaur, *Economic Frameworks, Policies and the State* (London, 1998), 103–04. As Kaur documents, in 1889 of the 13,316 workers on tobacco estates, 8,000 were Chinese, 5,000 Malays, and 500 “others.”
37. Amarjit Kaur, *Economic Change in East Malaysia; Sabah and Sarawak since 1850* (New York, 1988), 98.
38. Kaur, “Babbling Brookes,” 100.
39. Kaur, *Economic Change in East Malaysia*, 99.

40. North Borneo abolished indentured labor in 1933 and Sarawak's Passenger Restriction Ordinance of 1922 and its Aliens Ordinance of 1933 served to regulate and check the passage of indentured workers from China.
41. Claire Lowrie's study of North Borneo (now Sabah) points to the continued employment of indentured Chinese workers in significant numbers until the late 1940s. "Shameful Forms of Oppression: Anglo-American activism and the slow decline of Chinese indentured labour in British North Borneo, 1920s–1940s," *Labour History* 61 (2020): 640–57.
42. Kaur, "The Babbling Brookes," 81.
43. T. G. Cochrane, "Empire Oil: The Progress of Sarawak," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 72 (March 1924): 308–19, 315.
Cochrane, "Empire Oil," 309, 310, and 311.
44. This blurring of identities is also seen in labor tabulations in other segments of the economy. For instance, the SGG reporting on the progress on the laying of telephones poles in 1915 noted that "the clearing was done by Dyaks whilst the Malays, Bukitans and Punans of Tatau erected half the telephone poles. All the *native* labour employed was paid for at a nominal rate." Emphasis added. *Sarawak Government Gazette* (Kuching March 16, 1915), 72. Hereafter cited as SGG.
45. SGG (February 16, 1915), 40. The Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company became part of the Royal Dutch/Shell group in 1907 and in 1921 it was registered as a local Shell subsidiary under the name Sarawak Oilfields Ltd.
46. *Ibid.*, 42.
47. SGG (March 16, 1917), 69.
48. Annual Report for 1913, SGG (May 16, 1914), 67.
49. SGG (March 1, 1913), 40.
50. SGG (March 16, 1921), 68.
51. SGG (May 16, 1923), 174.
52. SGG (April 1, 1924), 173.
53. Cochrane, "Empire Oil," 309, 310, and 315.
54. Miri is 41 kilometers south of Seria.
55. G.C. Harper, *The Discovery and Development of the Seria Oilfield* (Brunei, 1975), 2.
56. *Ibid.*, 10.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Horton makes no distinction between Malays and Dayaks from Brunei and those from other parts of Borneo. "Development of Brunei," 309, n. 152.
59. CO 323/1503/7, October 7, 1937.
60. Horton, "Development of Brunei," 310.
61. Cleary and Eaton. *Political and Economic Change*, 83.
62. State of Brunei, *Annual Report on Brunei for the Year 1946* (Kuala Lumpur: 1948), 12.
63. For the years 1946–1947, the first racial category was for Malays/Borneans; Bruneis as a racial category appeared in the 1948 & 1949 Annual Reports.
64. Department of Labour, Kuching, *Sarawak Annual Report of the Department of Labour for the Year 1958* (Kuching, Sarawak, 1959).
65. *Annual Report of Brunei for 1949*, 6.
66. *Ibid.*
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Annual Report of Brunei for 1949*, 6.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Ibid.*
71. *Annual Report of Brunei for 1949*, 5.
72. *The Annual Report on North Borneo for the Year 1947* (London, 1948), 6.