

Malay Opera Of The Borneo Island¹: A Historical Perspective

by

Nur Afifah Vanitha Abdullah
Drama and Theatre Program
Faculty Of Applied and Creative Arts
University Malaysia Sarawak
Sarawak, Malaysia
anafifah@dominomail.unimas.my

Abstract

Malay Opera or better known as *Bangsawan* (*bangsa* means nobles or aristocrats and *wan* means people) in Malaysia is a local theatre form, which has both traditional and modern theatre elements. *Bangsawan* was introduced to the Malays² of Peninsula Malaya³, particularly that of the Penang Island⁴, in the late 19th century by Indian sea traders and it was well received by the Malays. By early 20th century, Penang Island became the center for booming *bangsawan* troupes led by local entrepreneurs. These troupes traveled all over Peninsula Malaya including East Sumatra, Batavia and Borneo Island. This theatre form is called *bangsawan* as it depicts stories of the nobles and aristocrats. The Malays adopted *bangsawan* as part of their performing arts culture. They localized its theatrical elements by portraying local names, costumes, localities and legends in its performances (Nur Nina Zurah 19:). Many literatures on *bangsawan*, discuss about the coming of *bangsawan* to Borneo Island, but fail to state the year and place where it entered from to this island. My research paper intends to identify the entry point of *bangsawan*, which is the root of modern theatres in Borneo Island. I will discuss in detail on the historical aspects of *bangsawan* in Borneo Island, namely the place that it entered from, year and names of *bangsawan* troupe/s which could have brought this theatre into being.

¹ Borneo Island lies across the equator (Macdonald 1956: 11) and extends from 7 7' north to 4 12' south latitude, and from 108 45' to 119 25' (Irwin 1955:1).

² The Malays, being the natives of Peninsula Malaya, represent almost 50 percent of Malaysia's population, the Chinese 30 percent, and the Indians and Sikhs 10 percent. Another 10 percent is composed of natives of Sabah and Sarawak-Iban, Kadazan, Melanau and Dayaks (Mohammad Taib Osman 1985:1).

³ Refer to map 1.

⁴ Refer to map 1.

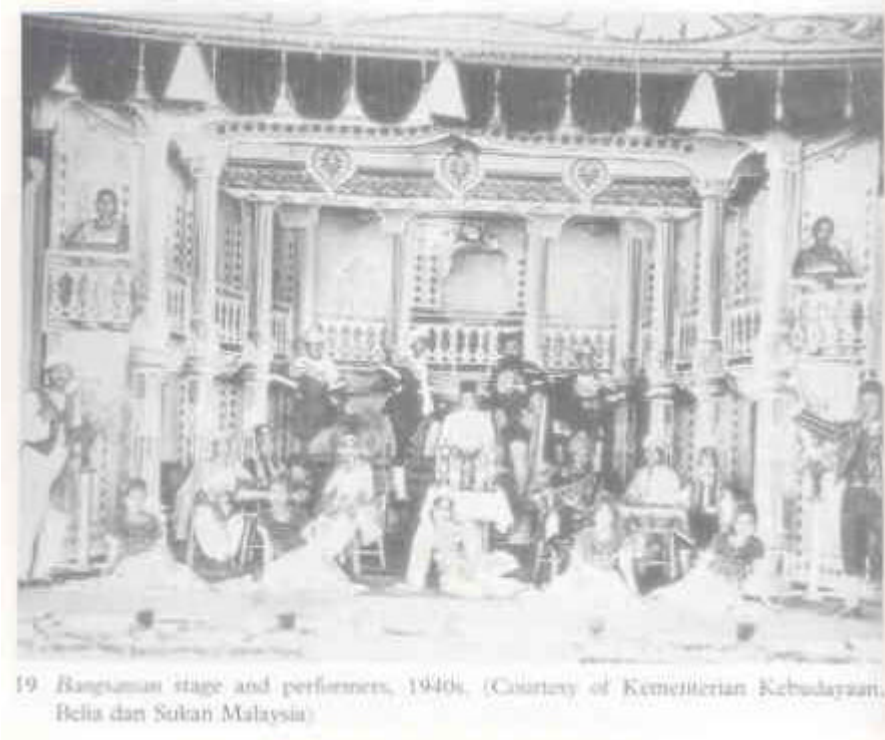
A Glimpse of *Bangsawan*

Bangsawan or Malay Opera was one of many new cultural forms, which emerged in response to and in the wake of the rapid social, economic, and political changes caused by British colonial expansion into the Malay Peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Tan Sooi Beng 1993:8). The term ‘opera’ in Malay drama does not share the same meaning as the Italian Opera or other operas in Western countries. Opera in Malay drama means a staged play with intervention of happy and sad songs that portrayed the mood and context of the given situation (Tan Sooi Beng 1993:27). The Malay opera or better known as *bangsawan* means “noble people”⁵ as this theatre form depicts life and issues concerning members of the noble class (Rahmah Bujang 1975:20).

In the 1870s, many performing arts troupes from India entered and performed in Penang Island⁶. The performers were talented men and women. They used the Hindi language during their interesting performance, which was a new form of performing arts for the locals (Rahmah Bujang 1975:18). Elements of *bangsawan* include illusion with characters of god and goddesses, elaborated costumes and sets, painted backdrops, special effects (known as *tasmat*), live music accompaniment for songs and extra-turns during the change of backdrops (which had no relevance to the storyline). For the first time in Peninsula Malaya’s theatre history, proscenium stage was used (Nur Nina Zurah 1990:15). The visual below portrays casts and elaborated stage of *bangsawan* (Tan Sooi Beng 1993: 82),

⁵ *bangsa* means nobles or aristocrats, and *wan* means people.

⁶ Refer to Map 1.



19 *Bangsawan* stage and performers, 1940s. (Courtesy of Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan Malaysia)

The Malays soon adopted *bangsawan* as part of their performing arts culture. They localized its theatrical elements by using the local language (*Bahasa Melayu*) and used Malay names, costumes, localities and legends in their performances (Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin 2000:101). Miettinen describes *bangsawan* as,

Bangsawan is a melodramatic, semi-operatic drama combining songs with spoken theatre. Its sources include Arabian romances, other Islamic literature, and Malay history and it usually focuses on rulers and aristocrats with some themes borrowed from Western theatre (1992:151).

Yet, *bangsawan* still had traditional Malay theatre elements such as the opening ceremony of the performance. A *tuk bomoh*⁷ or the *bangsawan* troupe head would recite holy verses (*mantras*) before the performance began (Rahmah Bujang 1975:47)⁸. *Bangsawan* was the first theatre form to be commercialized in Malaysia. *Bangsawan* patrons bought tickets, its troupes comprised of full time artists (male and female) and

⁷ Healer.

⁸ Every night before the start of each play the healer would burn incense and recite incantations-cum-prayer invoking the spirits and mighty God to protect the theatre from evils and mishaps. The blessing of the deities would also ensure the success of the troupe (Mustapha Kamil Yassin 1974: 148).

they traveled from one place to another to hold performances (Rahmah Bujang 1989:5). The visual below shows the elaborated proscenium stage, actors and costumes used in a *bangsawan* (Tan Sooi Beng 1993: 82),

In the late nineteenth century *bangsawan* bloomed into a popular theatre and promised a good source of income to *bangsawan* entrepreneurs as well as the artists. The economic intensives helped to spur many *bangsawan* troupes -big and small- into existence. These troupes traveled from Penang Island to Singapore, West Sumatra, Batavia, Borneo and as far as Japan in the 1930s (Rahmah Bujang 1975:30., 1997, 93., Samat Salleh, June 2002).

Bangsawan is very significant to the history of Malay drama because it is a transitional theatre, which has both elements of traditional and modern theatres. *Bangsawan* later, became the foundation for the emergence of modern Malay theatres.

Tracing The History Of *Bangsawan* to Sarawak, Borneo Island

The exact location, from where *bangsawan* could have been brought into Sarawak, is not stated in any written documents or books. Nevertheless, two articles on *bangsawan* in Sarawak⁹ have been found. These articles discuss the social and cultural aspects of *bangsawan* performed by Sarawakians but again fail to state the place it was brought from (Maimunah Daud 1993: 14-19).

My hypothesis suggests that *bangsawan* in Sarawak could have manifested after being visited by *bangsawan* troupes from either Java or Singapore. *Bangsawan* troupes, such as Pushi Indera *Bangsawan* of Penang, have been reported to have had traveled till Java and performed. These troupes could have stopped over at Pontianak¹⁰ before or after their trip to Java. On the other hand, local Javanese *bangsawan* troupes could have traveled up to Pontianak and performed there. *Bangsawan* later could have been brought into Sarawak (Kuching to be exact) from Pontianak. Singapore could also be a possible place for

⁹ Situated on the north west of Borneo Island.

¹⁰ Refer to map 2.

bangsawan to have arrived Sarawak because geographically it is closer to Kuching, Sarawak. Besides that, Singapore was also noted as one of the *bangsawan* centers in the late nineteenth century (Rahmah Bujang 1975: 24).

Historical evidence proves that *bangsawan* was brought to Sarawak via Kuching from Singapore, and not from Java. Three historical evidences confirm Singapore as the place of origin for Sarawak *bangsawan*. The evidences show that *bangsawan* troupes had traveled and performed at Kuching, language used by the local *bangsawan* troupes in Kuching, and navigated thru The South China Sea.

***Bangsawan* Troupes That Visited Kuching, Sarawak**

As mentioned earlier, *bangsawan* troupes from Peninsula Malaya have traveled to places such as Borneo, West Sumatra, Java and Japan (Yayasan Harapan Kita 1996:164). Among *bangsawan* troupes that had traveled to these places in the late nineteenth century were The Pushi Indera *Bangsawan* from Penang, and the City Opera, Nooran Opera, Grand Nooran Opera and Dean Tijah Opera in early twentieth century from Singapore (Rahmah Bujang, 1975: 32-36).

Bangsawan patrons in Kuching, Sarawak (Zainab, Saniah, Maimunah Daud, Dawi and Awang Bujang Nor) watched *bangsawan* performances brought from Singapore sometime in late 1930s. They also mention names of *bangsawan* troupes like Nooran Opera and Dean Tijah Opera during my interviews with them. They recalled watching *bangsawan* performances, at movie theatres like the Cathay and Silvia in the late 1930s. These *bangsawan* fans, deny watching *bangsawan*, performed by any Indonesian troupes (Java or West Kalimantan).

Bangsawan by Singapore troupes was well received by Kuching Malays, who then adopted these performance arts. Among *bangsawan* titles that were performed by both Singapore and Kuching *bangsawan* troupes in the 1930s are, *Jula Juli Bintang Tiga*, *Siti*

Zubaidah, Laila Majnun, Selendang Delima, Panji Semirang, Syair Dan Dan Setia and Nyai Dasima (Maimunah Daud, Zainab and Saniah).

Bangsawan could not have been brought to Kuching from Java through Pontianak because *bangsawan*'s form was changed when it arrived at Java from Penang (Yayasan Harapan Kita 1999: 93). Mohammed Pushi, the leader of Pushi Indera *Bangsawan* Of Penang troupe, was declared bankrupt in Java. The troupe was then, bought over by Jaafar The Turk of Java and theatrical alterations were made to the *bangsawan*. Jaafar adapted stories from Turkey that were more realistic in aspects of issues and characters (Yayasan Harapan Kita 1999:164). This new form of theatre art was known as *Komedi Stamboel*¹¹ (Tan Sooi Beng 1993:33). Miss Ribut Opera and Dandarnella are Indonesian *komedi stamboel* troupes that had traveled to Peninsula Malaya (Tan Sooi Beng 1993:57). These troupes were not familiar to the theatre enthusiastic in Kuching, hence, suggests that *bangsawan* did not come from Java.

Further investigations on theatrical aspects of Sarawak *bangsawan*, led my research to another important evidence in regard to the location where *bangsawan* could have reached Sarawak. The second proof -language used by Sarawak *bangsawan* troupes during performances- confirms that, Singapore is the originating place for *bangsawan* in Sarawak.

The Language

Sarawak Malays converse in a language called the *Bahasa Melayu Sarawak* (Sarawak Malay Language). Due to geographical factors, the Malay language used by the Sarawak Malays and the Peninsular Malays (the Malaysians) are somewhat different. Probably this is also the cultural reason for Harisson (1970:158) to state in his book entitled, *The Malays of South-West Sarawak Before Malaysia*, that;

“ . . . it would probably be fair to say that Sarawak Malays

¹¹ He named the form *komedi stamboel*, as most of the stories originated or adapted from *Stamboel* (the Malay name for Constantinople or Istanbul, the capital of Turkey).

are like Malayan Malays, only less Malayan . . .”

The language difference is so obvious, that the Peninsula Malays could hardly understand the Bahasa Melayu Sarawak. The differences between the Malay languages of the two regions can be staggering, with a few words and phrases having either the opposite or completely different meanings (Abang Yusuf Puteh 1998:434). The standard Malay language used by the Peninsula Malays is called the Malay language of the Johor Riau¹² (*Bahasa Melayu Johor Riau*) which was also the language used in *bangsawan* performances in Kuching by the Sarawak *bangsawan* troupes (Maimunah Daud May 2002). According to Maimunah Daud (1993: 14-15),

“. . . *bangsawan* used to be organized by the Malay aristocracy, the *datuk* and the *perabangan* and to celebrate occasions of significance such as weddings and engagement ceremonies. The Dayak¹³ community too, especially the Bidayuh, had their own *bangsawan*, called the *Bangsawan Dayak* because, the manager or the owner of the *bangsawan* troupe was a Dayak. The cast included some Dayaks and Malays, who spoke in the Malay language . . .”

Maimunah Daud (May 2002) confirms that the Malay language used by the Sarawak *bangsawan* troupes is the standard Malay (Malay Language of Johor Riau) and not the Bahasa Melayu Sarawak. This information also confirms that *bangsawan* could not have been brought to Kuching from Java because their Malay language does not sound like Malay language of the Johor Riau. Javanese has their language called Javanese Language and in general Indonesian spoke a Malay language called *Bahasa Melayu Indonesia* (Indonesian Malay Language).

“ Indonesian troupes, which played the komedi stamboel were indeed very popular among the Malay audiences in Malaya. ‘Even though the Javanese Malay spoken made it difficult to follow the speech’, the performances drew large crowds” (Tan Sooi Beng 1993, 53).

¹² Johor is one of the thirteen states of Malaysia and is situated on the south of the peninsula and above Singapore Island. Malay language of the Johor Riau comes from that region.

¹³ The largest ethnic group in Sarawak.

This statement proves that, even if Indonesian troupes could have brought *bangsawan* to Sarawak, they would have played it in their own language. Therefore, usage of standard Malay in Sarawak *bangsawan* performances further proves that *bangsawan* was brought into Kuching from Singapore.

Since sea were transportation route during the late nineteenth century between Singapore and Sarawak. *Bangsawan* troupes from Singapore could had only reached Kuching Sarawak by this form of transportation. Thus the following discussion will elaborate further on the third evidence, the movement of *bangsawan* from Singapore.

Sarawak, Borneo Island: A Brief History Of Colonialization and Sea Transportation

Irwin (1955:1) in *Nineteenth-Century Borneo*, describes Borneo as,

“ . . . Situated in the track of the most extensive and valuable commerce, intersected on all sides with deep and navigable rivers, indented with safe and capacious harbors, possessing one of the riches soils on the globe . . . ”

A land with lots of resources had always been very attractive, especially to the European world in the sixteenth century (Irwin 1955:2). The Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutch and British had all tried in various ways and at different times to establish relations with the coastal princes, but all their efforts had ended in failure. In the Annals of European nations before 1800, Borneo figures chiefly as a land of treachery, violence, and sudden death (Irwin 1955:2).

At the beginning of the 17th century the Portuguese and Spanish trade monopoly was broken by the Dutch, who, intervening in the affairs of the Muslim kingdoms, succeeded in imposing their control over most of Borneo. British interests, particularly in the north and west, had weakened the Dutch control.

The Brunei sultanate was an Islamic kingdom that at one time ruled the whole Borneo island. But by the 19th century it ruled only in the north and northwest regions.

Sarawak¹⁴ was eventually ceded by the Sultan of Brunei to the British adventurer James Brooke (Macdonald 1956:33-34). James Brooke had declared himself as the Governor of Sarawak on 24th of September 1841.

The Sarawak Governor- James Brooke (a British man)- had materialized the interest of the English East India Company¹⁵ who had no immediate territorial ambitions in Borneo Island but noticed it as a strategic place, for it lay on the flank of their vital sea routes to China. The mainspring of British policy in Borneo was a belief that the northern portion of the island, where trade routes met, must in no circumstances be permitted to fall into the hands of a foreign power (Irwin 1955: 10-11).

During the season of the south-west monsoon (April to October) the normal route to China from England or India was via Sunda or Malacca Straits and the South China Sea- that is the west of Borneo. This channel was known as the “Western Passage”. When the north-east monsoon was blowing, the route became impracticable, and ships clearing Sunda or Malacca Straits for China had to take either the “Eastern Passage”, which ran south of Borneo and then north via Macassar Strait and the Sulu Sea (and thus the east of Borneo), or the “Pitt Passage”- south of Celebes and north between Halmahera and western New Guinea (Irwin 1955:11).

The History Of Sea Transportation Matches The History Of Bangsawan

The documented date of trading vessel from Singapore to Sarawak is before July 1838 (Irwin 1955:69). Irwin (1955:69) in the *Nineteenth Century Borneo* stated that,

¹⁴ Sarawak was one of the less important provinces at the southern extremity of the Brunei Sultanate. It was not marked on any British Admiralty chart and very little known of it before Brooke’s time. Brooke assisted Raja Muda Hassim in a civil war and as a token Sarawak was handed over to Brooke (Irwin 1955:71-76).

¹⁵ The English East India Company was based in India and was in charge of the Negeri-Negeri Selat (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) by having Residents to control trade in these parts of Peninsular Malaya. The English East India Company was amongst (Dutch and Chinese) competitor in the Borneo trade from the early seventeenth century (Irwin 1955: 7).

“. . . in July 1838, it was reported to the Assistant-Resident of Sambas¹⁶, R. Bloem, that an English vessel had arrived at Sarawak from Singapore on a trading visit”

If English trading vessels had been reported reaching Sarawak from Singapore during this time, this sea route must have had been very busy, by the peak time (1885-1902) of *bangsawan*, considering that Sarawak was governed by an English man and Singapore at that period belonged to English too. Sarawak and Singapore had been noted to establish economic understanding by mid nineteenth century. Irwin (1955:191) further quotes that, the country between the Rajang and the Bintulu included the districts of Oya and Mukah¹⁷, which together supplied most of the sago then being exported from Kuching to Singapore.

1885-1902 is noted as a period where *bangsawan* was accepted as part of the Malay performing arts culture. On 1885 the Pushi Indera Bangsawan troupe of Penang was formed. This troupe is known to have performed in many places including Singapore, West Sumatra to Java (Rahmah Bujang 1975:40). *Bangsawan* in Peninsula Malaya began to bloom during 1902-1935. Many *bangsawan* troupes were set up during these times (Rahmah Bujang 1975:40).

Bangsawan performances in Sarawak, on the other hand is stated to have been staged in Kuching during the 1900s and earlier. Maimunah Daud (1993: 14-15) further elaborates,

“. . . Dayang Hajjah Rahmah binti Haji Arbi of Kampung Muda Hashim said during her own wedding in 1935, her parents invited a theatre group known as the Bangsawan Dayak to perform for three nights at the compound of her house”

This statement proves that people of Sarawak had been exposed to *bangsawan* theatre before 1935. There are two possibilities of which could be the cause of this situation. It is either troupes from Singapore had come to Sarawak to perform, or people of Sarawak had access to Singapore and had watched *bangsawan* there. Since there are not many

¹⁶ Situated in West Kalimantan and was under the Dutch colony. Refer to Map 2 and Map 3.

¹⁷ Rajang, Bintulu, Oya and Mukah are situated in Sarawak. Refer to Map 3.

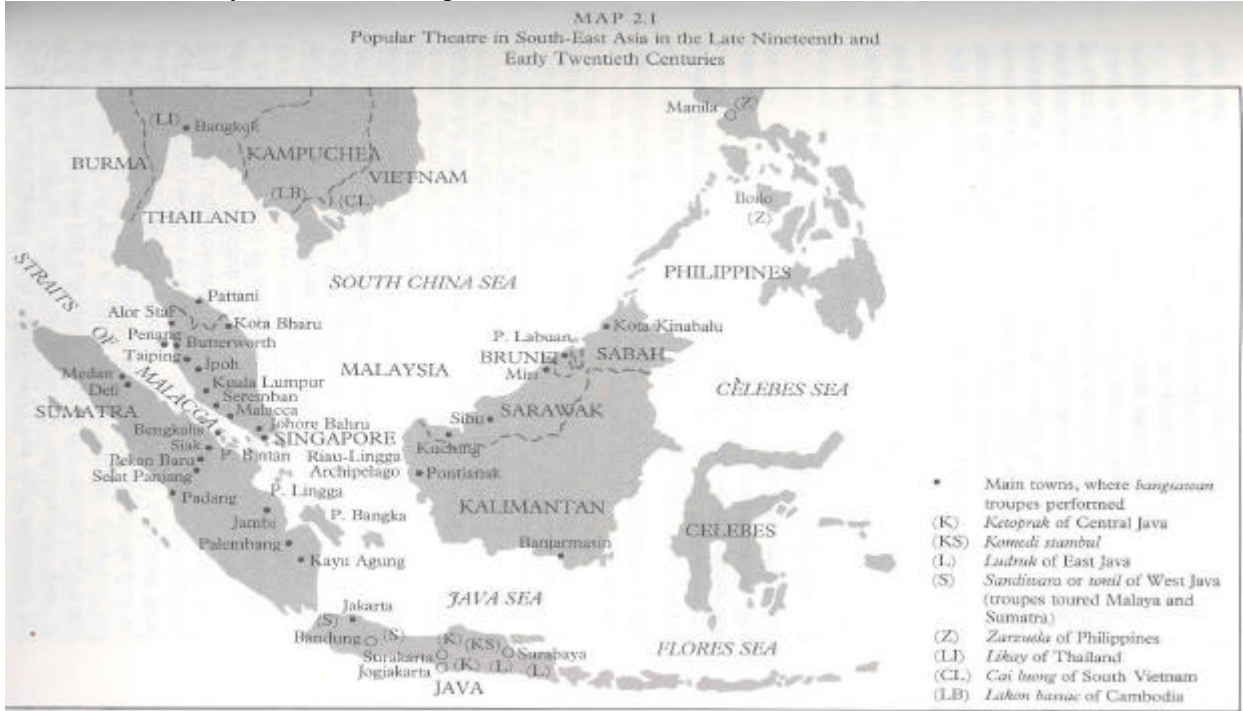
written documents on these facts and considering all my informants are in their mid 70s of age, a definite conclusion could not be made on these possibilities. Whichever possibility it may be, it is proved that through sea routes, *bangsawan*'s influence came from Singapore and had reached Sarawak.

Conclusion

The three main evidences discussed in this essay - *bangsawan* troupes and performances in Kuching, language medium used during performances and the history of sea route of these two places - confirm that *bangsawan* in Sarawak was influenced by the Singapore *bangsawan* troupes and not those from Java.

This finding puts forth another possibility that is, Sarawak *bangsawan* could have spread to other parts of Borneo Island. The answer to this question could only be tested by analyzing theatrical aspects of Sarawak *bangsawan* and other types of *bangsawan* in Borneo Island. The second phase of my research intend to analyze the theatrical aspects of *bangsawan* that could be the foundation for future research on *bangsawan* performances of the Borneo Island.

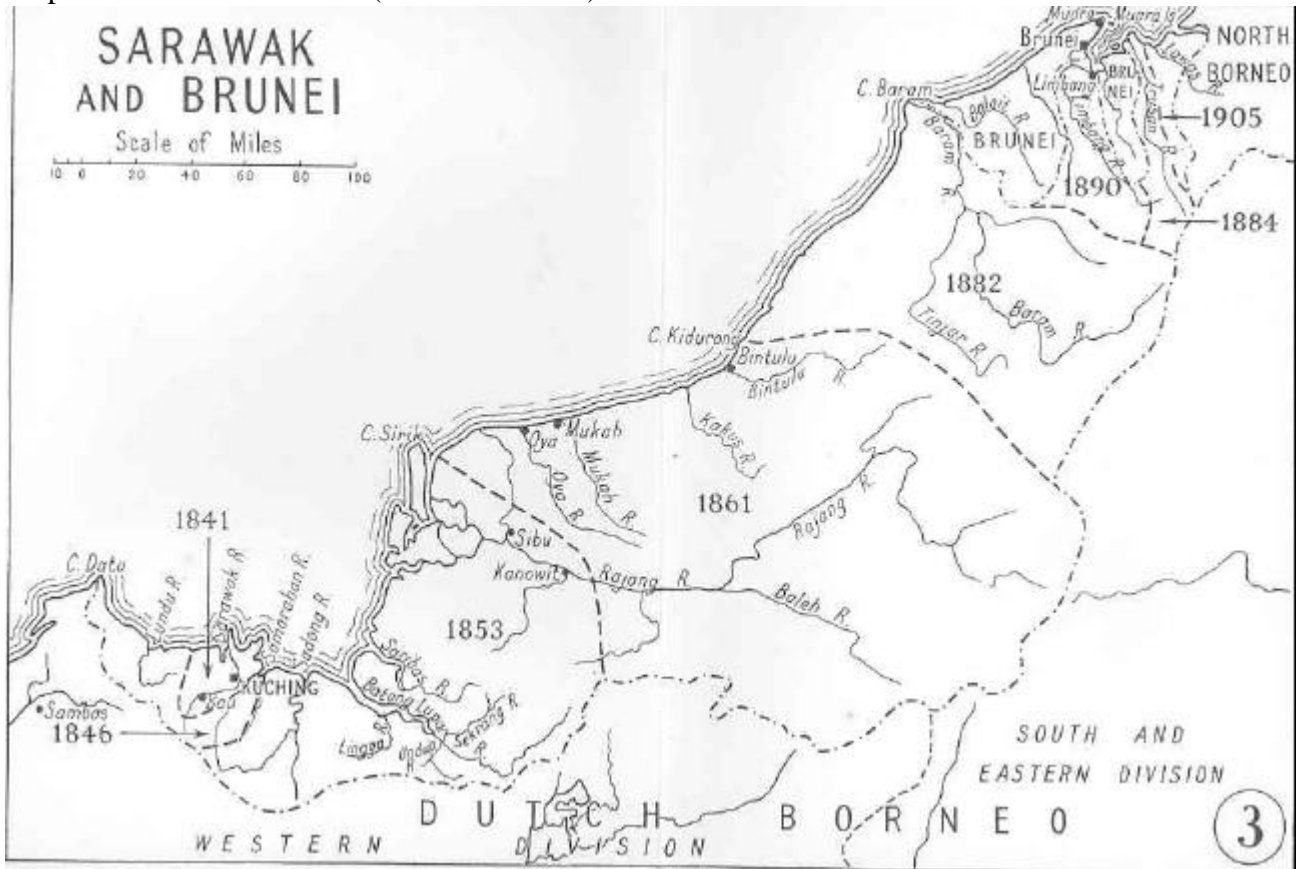
Map 1 Popular Theatre In South-East Asia In The Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century (Tan Sooi Beng 1993: 19)



Map 2. West Kalimantan (Irwin 1955:252)



Map 3. Sarawak and Brunei (Irwin 1955: 254)



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