Early North Borneo

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The history of North Borneo reaches far beyond the modern political era. Archaeological findings in present-day Sabah show that this land was inhabited in very ancient times. In the Mansuli Valley of eastern Sabah, archaeological research has revealed evidence of human habitation dating back about 235,000 years, and Malaysia's National Heritage Department describes the site as the oldest known Palaeolithic site in the Borneo archipelago. Sabah's own official history also states that the history of Sabah can be traced back roughly 20,000 to 30,000 years, confirming the deep antiquity of human settlement in the territory.

Over many centuries, North Borneo was inhabited primarily by indigenous peoples whose roots in the land long predated colonial rule. The territory was home to communities now known as the Dusun, Murut, Rungus, Bajau, Ida'an, Orang Sungai, Bisaya, and many other native groups. Their societies developed through their own relationship with the rivers, coasts, forests, valleys, and uplands of the territory. In modern Sabah, the state government recognises 33 indigenous groups and identifies the Kadazan-Dusun as the largest ethnic group today. For historical writing about the early period, however, it is more accurate to speak of the principal indigenous communities of North Borneo than to impose modern census language on a much older era.

Early North Borneo was not isolated. It was connected to wider regional networks of movement and exchange. Encyclopaedia Britannica notes evidence of Chinese trade from the 7th century onward, showing that the northern part of Borneo already had links to the wider maritime world. Archaeology supports this picture as well. The

prehistoric site of Bukit Tengkorak near Semporna has been recognised as a major Neolithic pottery centre, reflecting early craftsmanship and participation in wider regional contact long before formal colonial administration.

As North Borneo developed through its indigenous communities and regional trade connections, it also came into contact with larger neighbouring powers. Among the most important was Brunei, which emerged historically as a major regional polity in northern Borneo and exercised influence across parts of the wider coastal world connected to North Borneo. The fuller history of Brunei, Sulu, and their relationship to North Borneo is addressed separately in the next section.

The early history of North Borneo should therefore not be understood as the history of an empty frontier waiting to be discovered or administered by outsiders. It was already a land of settled communities, cultural continuity, local knowledge, and regional interaction. Its peoples developed their own social structures, material culture, and local authority long before the arrival of formal colonial government. This foundation is essential for understanding the later history of North Borneo in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In summary, the early history of North Borneo is the history of an ancient and inhabited land with deep indigenous roots. Its story begins not with colonial treaties or external administration, but with the long presence of its native peoples and their enduring connection to the territory. Any truthful account of Sabah’s past should begin with that historical reality.

Historical Note

This section provides a concise public overview based on archaeological, official, and historical reference sources. It is intended as a foundational history summary. More detailed treatment of regional political influence, external claims, colonial administration, and constitutional transition appears in the subsequent sections of this website.

Sources

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Source: https://www.rsnbgie.com/history/early-north-borneo