

An Amalgamated History of

Pulau Sibubesar

Very little is known about the history of the tiny island of Pulau Sibubesar. In fact, in government records, the only statement made about the island is that it was declared a part of the Iskandar Marine park in 1993. No written records are kept by the indigenous population and most history is passed down through stories. However, from these stories and from both arboreal and structural archaeology, one can start to see a history that is a vibrant and colorful as the history of Malaysia itself. Even the name Sibubesar is the subject

of some debate. When speaking to the indigenous population, the land is named after Sibubesar, the dragonflies that are a product of the island's mangrove swamps and old river beds. However, etymological evidence would suggest that Sibubesar actually comes from the Iban word "Buah Sibau" (or Pulasan in Bahasa Malayu), a type of fruit similar to a lychee or rambutan. Since the home of the Dayak people (the native speakers of Iban) is only 600 km to the east of the island, it is fairly likely that people of that region mixed with those from mainland Malaysia.



Sibu would appear to be a melting pot of culture due to those who have inhabited it throughout the centuries with Bugis, Orang Seletar and Dayak cultural traits still being in evidence. However, the general term for any culture that makes its living from the sea in Malaysia is “Orang Laut” literally People of the Sea. Historically, the Orang Laut of the country played major roles in the ancient Srivijaya Empire and the Sultanate of Johor. They patrolled the adjacent sea areas, mostly sustaining themselves off fishing and trading. Orang Laut leaders were often given prestigious titles by native rulers both for directing traders to the ports owned by them

and for maintaining the dominance of their ports in the area. It is because of the Laut tribes that modern day Mersing and Kuantan remain major shipping ports to this day. Excellent knowledge of the countless island and treacherous seas made the Orang Laut both skilled navigators and naval commanders. The area itself, off the east coast, is full of a complex series of islands, straits and reefs that are influenced by the unique land formations that border them, as well as the monsoonal winds that push trade toward them. Hang Tuah, one of the most famous figures in Malay admiralty and a classic example of a warrior knight in Malay folklore, was a part of the Orang Laut.

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Knowledge of the seas also made Orang Laut tribes masters of piracy and sea raiding. Sibu is very close to the Riau islands, now part of Indonesia, and the island of Pulau Aur, both notorious South Asian pirate havens due to their proximity to the China-India Maritime trade route. Riau has had close ties with the state of Johor for centuries and, with the Raja Kechil moving the centre of the Malay kingdom from Johor Lama to Ulu Riau in 1719, it is fairly likely that the natives of Sibu have ancestral Riau family members. In fact it is almost a certainty that pirate raids took place from Sibu’s numerous hidden coves.

An Arabian explorer, Ibnu Battuta, wrote of the area as early as the 13th century; "Here there are little islands, from which armed black pirates with poisoned arrows emerge, possessing armed warships; they plunder people but do not enslave them" Another, slightly later account of Orang Laut appears in the Suma Oriental, written by Tome Pires, a sixteenth century apothecary who lived in Portuguese Melaka. Pires named the sea people as Celates, probably from the Malay name "Orang Seletar", or People of the Straits, one the five Orang Asli tribes that made up the broader term

of Orang Laut. He described them as "corsairs in light craft.... they are men who go out pillaging in their boats and fish and are sometimes on land and sometimes at sea, of whom there are a large number now in our time".



Evidence of Dutch, British and Portuguese colonial influences can be seen in the island's government, architecture and even plants that can be found in the jungle or grown agriculturally. Case in point is the cashew nut tree, which is grown on the small hills above the lowland plains of sand. First discovered by Portuguese settlers in Brazil in 1558, cashew nuts reached Malaysia through Portuguese traders in the second half of the 16th century. Their presence on Sibu, along with its Orang Laut population, shows that the island was a definite stop along the South China Sea trade routes. British influence can be seen

in the language and administration of the island, with the Kampung chief still following British edicts for leadership and its people still using British derived words in every day communication.

As can be seen, there is a great deal to explore in the history of Pulau Sibu Besar and any student coming to the island will benefit from observing the living traditional culture and agro - archaeology of the land mass. Exploring the abandoned villages and jungle will also give students the chance to experience history in a very real context.