

The Battahs of Sumatra *A New Chapter in Missionary Annals*¹

I

John T. Beighton

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One brilliant morning, some sixty years ago, two little boys were playing on a beach of sand, near Deli, on the eastern coast of the island of Sumatra. Their home was not on the coast, but amongst mountains in the interior whence they had come with their friends who had brought produce for sale. These boys were Battahs. While they were playing, a Malay

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prahu (boat), which had not been observed by them, was paddled up to where they were, and two men jumped out, seized them, and dragged them to the boat and carried them off. The boys were sold as slaves to a European at Singapore. Soon after they accompanied their master on a voyage to Penang, and there, as he treated them unkindly, they fled from him. Eventually they found a home in my father's service, and were named Tim and Tom. Tim ran away again, but the other, though older than myself, became my companion and friend, and in the year 1839 he was publicly baptised. It is therefore but natural that I should be interested in the Battahs. The Encyclopaedia Britannica (vol. xxii. p. 640) may well speak of them "as one of the most interesting of all the savage or semi-savage peoples" in the world.

A considerable portion of the Battah race is now under the rule of the Dutch government. Differing as the various communities do in their physical and social characteristics, even in their natural condition, it is necessary to a true knowledge of the race that we should travel beyond

¹ The people call themselves Bataks, but proper nouns in the Eastern Archipelago so ending are generally pronounced by Europeans as if ending in h. There is much of vagueness and even contradiction in the statements about the Battahs in books and Encyclopaedic articles. The writer has taken pains to consult all authorities at his command in the library of the British Museum, and elsewhere. Marsden's "History of Sumatra" (1st ed. 1783) stands foremost among them. Next in order of time comes John Leyden (M.D.) in his "Essay on the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations," published 1808, in the 10th vol. of the "Asiatic Researches." This essay, published in Calcutta, no doubt led to the despatch of missionaries from Serampore, and from the Baptist Missionary Society in 1819-20. I have been favoured with the loan of the "Periodical Accounts" of this Society for these and several succeeding years, and have found valuable information in them, as indicating the state of the people before much contact with Europeans, and specially, in a journal of Mr. Burton's, published in the "Accounts" for the year 1822. This was followed in the year 1824 by an excursion by Burton and Ward into the country, of which a report is given in No. xii. of the "Friend, of India," published at Serampore. I have also read a volume, published by Blackwood, in 1826, written by Mr. John Anderson (a gentleman I knew at Penang), entitled "Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra" in 1823, a book, full of curious pictures and stories, which was reviewed with intimations of incredulity in No. lxxvii of the "Quarterly Review." Another book, also by an old friend, J. H. Moor, entitled "Notices of the Indian Archipelago," Singapore, 1837, has been carefully examined by me. In 1855 appeared Madame Pfeiffer's, "A Lady's Second Journey Round the World," containing an account of her courageous visit to the Battahs. The more recent accounts of the people have been supplied to me by the Rev. A. Schreiber, D.D., of Barmen, who was for seven years a missionary amongst them, and is now Secretary of the Rhenish Missionary Society.

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those dwelling under this rule, and in the outer fringes of the Battah country, to the independent communities found in the original and central home of the race. The people appear to have naturally an inordinate dislike to occupying the districts contiguous to the sea, and at one time shrank from even the sight of the sea, believing it to be peopled with demoniacal spirits. To know therefore the real Battah, we must leave those of the tribe who have become familiar with it, and are settled near the boundary lines of their fatherland, and penetrate into the recesses of the regions which surround the great inland lake of Tobah.

And how shall we get there? The eastern and western coasts of Sumatra are very unlike. I have landed on the eastern side. It is flat, abounds in sluggish streams, and mud deposits, and has only one harbour of any importance, that of Deli. On the western coast there are several ports connected with established settlements, and the hills and plateaus of the interior are much nearer to the sea. The Battah country occupies the lofty regions beyond these lower elevations, some of the mountains rising to heights of six or seven thousand feet above the sea-level. It seems to begin in the south near the equator (the volcanoes of Sumatra are south of the equator), and to end in the north at a boundary line, not certainly known, adjoining the kingdom of Atcheen. The estimated population differs from one and a half million to half a million—Dr. Schreiber puts it at under one million. There are two ways of reaching the independent communities.

We might proceed, and for a considerable distance by water, from the seaport of Deli² on the east coast, or, as is much more generally done, from the west coast, by tracts well-defined through the magnificent forests of the island. We will land, in this case, in the celebrated bay of Tapanuli of which Marsden writes: "Navigators say that all the navies of Europe might ride there with perfect security in every weather." And the "weather" on that coast, washed by the Indian Ocean, is often as fierce and destructive as can be imagined. We shall probably anchor in the harbour of an island in the bay which has been from the beginning of European intercourse with Sumatra a trade station; and thence get across by boat to the town of Siboga on the mainland. Near this several streams enter the bay, and behind rises a terrace of hills—chosen by the missionaries of 1820 as a base of operations, and now one of the head-quarters of the Rhenish Missionary Society.

Starting thence we must push on till we reach the famous valley of Silindung—a stretch of picturesque country, some ten miles in length, having within its basin no less than one hundred and fifty villages, with an aggregate population of some 25,000 people. Beyond it lies the magnificent lake Tobah—seen from a distance by the missionaries Burton and Ward in 1824, whose rough estimate of its dimensions was singularly correct—having an area of about 1400 square miles, and thus nearly corresponding to that of the Zuyder Zee. It has a sandy shore, studded with picturesque islands (one of which in the centre, is three miles in circumference), and is backed by two lofty mountains, one of which, Palakir, is held in awe as the chief abode of evil spirits. The entire region is an elevated plateau, grassy, but almost treeless, broken by deep ravines, with a climate contrasting favourably with that of the coast and described by the missionaries as healthful and even bracing. One of the stations is 2000 feet above the sea level. In our journey from Siboga we have seen the towers of several Christian churches, and near to the lake we arrive at the station of Balige; but leaving this and moving eastwards, we finally

² Whence are exported the sturdy but agile ponies so well-known and highly prized in the "Straits" and beyond them. They are called "Deli ponies," but they are really Battah ponies, reared in the uplands of the interior.

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reach the recently established mission of Sigumpar where, and in the regions beyond, we see the people, as far as they can be seen, in their pristine condition and their ancestral home.

In the days of Mr. Burton's excursion these characteristics were found in districts far nearer the western coast. He writes: "I feel great pleasure in having seen natives perfectly independent. These people have no idea of their inferiority to any people on earth, and their carriage and behaviour tell you so. They are very polite in their own way; they are good speakers, and know how to manage every point of an argument, so as to turn it to their own advantage to perfection. He is the most celebrated chief who possesses undaunted courage, and can make the best of a bad cause. During my whole journey I saw nothing like religion."

First, as to personal appearances. How shall I describe them? Savage in some of their habits and customs, as we shall hereafter show them to be, they are all decently attired. The cotton cloth they use is thick and coarse, but it is woven by themselves, and is dyed blue (with indigo) and also red and yellow, and sometimes with the colour mixed and in picturesque patterns, and with the addition of strings of beads imported

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from other countries. I can distinctly recall the face and the voice of the Battah friend of my youth. The descriptions of travellers vary, doubtless, because the people, according to their diverse descent and surroundings, differ as much among themselves as they do from their neighbours. My friend probably came from the very heart of his race, and was therefore a fair type of its original characteristics. His was of its kind a comely face. In colour, a dusky yellow, with large black eyes; the cheekbones slightly prominent, the mouth straight and large, the nose flat, the lips thick, the forehead decidedly lofty, and his hair thick, coarse, and black. The Battahs generally who have not come under outside influence wear no head-dress; but he always wore on his head a cotton handkerchief, and its very colours I can recall: light yellow with spots of red. His look was that of an intelligent and amiable man: somewhat plaintive, but always ready for a smile. His manners were gentle, and his voice a sweet tenor. The description in the "Enc. Brit." (vol. xxii. p. 840), which may, I presume, be quoted as authoritative amid the divergent accounts of travellers, seems to accord with my recollections: "In many points the Battahs are quite different from the Malay type. The average stature of the men is about five feet four inches, of the women four feet eight inches. In general build they are thick-set, with broad shoulders and fairly muscular limbs. The colour of the skin ranges from dark-brown to a yellow tint, but the darkness apparently is quite independent of climatic influence or distinction of race. In marked contrast to the Malays are the large black long-shaped eyes beneath heavy black or dark brown eyebrows. The cheekbones are somewhat prominent but less so than among the Malays."³

Arrived amongst them we are at once struck with the signs of pastoral and mechanical industry. Marsden was wonderfully accurate when he described them as occupying "extensive plains between two ridges of hills on the borders of a great lake; where the soil is fertile and cultivation prevalent." On the other hand he could not be describing the real and original Battahs, when he

³ Burton remarks of one of the villages visited by him: "The inhabitants of this place, however, are a fine, tall, stout, good-looking people, much superior in appearance to the generality of Malays. They have nothing of the soft expression of the Malay countenance, but, on the contrary, a peculiarly fierce /and independent look. They are well dressed with cotton cloth manufactured by the women, and ornamented with beads (English) which they obtain from Nattal."

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says: "The men when not engaged in war, their favourite occupation, lead an idle, inactive life, passing the day in playing on a kind of flute, crowned with garlands of flowers. The women alone, beside the domestic duties, work in the rice plantations." So far is this from the truth as to the region we are supposed to be now visiting, that we shall find all the ordinary forms of industrial life. Here are fields of rice, and there of maize, and there again of sweet potatoes. All the agricultural processes follow each other with the seasons—ploughing and sowing, and planting, irrigation of the soil, and reaping of the harvests. Even in times of war there is a suspension of arms when the season arrives for sowing and reaping. The people rear fowls and pigs and buffaloes and horses. Time was when they fattened horses for their feasts, but now they find it of far greater advantage to feed and groom them for the foreign market. Enter the woods, and you see men gathering camphor in its liquid form by incisions into the stems of the young-camphor tree or in solid pieces by cutting down the old tree and emptying the fissures within it. The very word camphor is supposed to be derived from the Battah word *kapur*. The finest Benjamin or Benzoin, used in so many rituals as incense, is obtained by the people through incisions in the trunks of the producing tree. Inspect their villages and you will see the weaver at his loom, the blacksmith at his forge, the engraver with his tools, and the worker in ivory busy with his ring for the adornment of the arms of men. Swords and lances and bits for horses and the various and often elaborately carved cases for their weapons, and the many elegant and costly betel-nut boxes which they use, and even gunpowder, are manufactured by themselves. Nor are there signs of systematic industry only, but the men are provident and thrifty, and well-to-do people are met with everywhere.

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