

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

II

John T. Beighton

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In Battah Land

Let us enter one of the villages. Unhappily we cannot approach them without perceiving that conflict of village with village is the normal state of things. Tread carefully, or you may (unless heavily shod: the natives are bare footed) tear your feet with hidden but sharply-pointed bamboo spikes. Safely past these we reach the one entrance to the village. Sometimes this is underground, and thus easily blocked up. First comes a deep ditch, then a thorny hedge,

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and then a strong palisade. These surround the houses, and thus each village is clearly defined, forming a *kampong* (hence the Anglicised word so common throughout the East "compound"), and can be easily so protected as to become a formidable fort. The houses may so stand as to

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form two or three streets. As soon as you enter one you see the confusion and squalor usual in Malayan streets. Children and pigs, goats and dogs, ponies and fowls, run about as members of the same family, and possessed of equal rights. But look at the houses. These are of two kinds, one occupying one side of the street, and the other the opposite, and each include the house in front of it as its adjunct. The houses are all on piles, but those on one side are boarded and windowless, while the opposite buildings are open or nearly entirely so on all sides. The boarded house is the sleeping house of the father and mother and daughters and younger sons of the family. Sometimes it is of considerable dimensions, and occupied by four or five families, whose rooms are at night divided from each other by mats suspended from the ceiling. The open house (called *sofo*) consists of two storeys: the upper being a storeroom for grain and other produce that will "keep," and the lower is used during the day for consultations or handicraft, such as weaving, and at night as the sleeping place for unmarried men. Each village has also its *balli*, or town-hall, where the village business is transacted and festivals held and strangers received. These villages vary in size from a population of thirty to three hundred souls. There is remarkable uniformity in the customs of each village. As a rule, there are two substantial meals in the day, the first between nine and ten in the morning, and the other about six in the evening. They are fond of palm wine, but are a sober people, and of course inveterate betel-chewers. As to honesty and truthfulness there is very conflicting testimony, but probably as it respects each community in its own limits, they are superior in these respects to the Malays who surround them. Marsden says, "Theft is almost unknown among them; being strictly honest in their dealings with each other." No doubt the communities differ from each other, and hence some who profess to know them declare them to be "sly and mendacious," and the writer of a "Short Account of the Battahs," in Moor's "Notices of the Eastern Archipelago," actually declares: "I am sorry to say I cannot allow them a single virtue!" No doubt, like Malays, gambling is an ungovernable passion with them. I saw much of this among Malays, and I am ashamed to say in connection especially with cock-fighting, and I can readily believe that Battahs can be worked up in games of hazard to such frenzy as to stake on the chances of success all their property, their children, their wives, and even their personal liberty. A man will go on gambling till nothing is left but that he should be sold as a slave. Marsden, however, adds that sometimes "a generous winner" will let off the unfortunate loser, on "condition of his killing a horse and making a public entertainment." Slavery through debt is common, as it is throughout the Indian Archipelago; but cruelty to slaves is well-nigh unknown, and every slave may buy his freedom.

Nothing perhaps more clearly indicates the state of civilisation in any people as its treatment of woman. It is in this particular that Mohammedanism so signally fails; there are no laws among the Battahs to enforce monogamy, but, as a rule, the men have but one wife each. There is a proverb current among them to this effect: "A war between villages comes at last to an end, but a war between women who have the same husband never ends." Of course the customs belonging to marriage, as amongst uncivilised tribes generally, include as their essence the purchase of a wife.<sup>1</sup>

This at once degrades woman to the position of goods chattel, i.e. movable property, like cattle, of which word it is really simply another form, something to be disposed of again when the purchaser chooses; not that he can sell her into slavery, as amongst Malays, except for adultery, but he can return her to her family if she is without an adolescent son. In some districts actually the marriage tie is indissoluble except for adultery. A woman on her marriage seems to lay aside

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<sup>1</sup> As to the special peculiarities found in Sumatra, see Sir John Lubbock's "Origin of Civilisation," &c., 1882.

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all her ornaments. Marsden is therefore probably right when he states that men alone are deemed responsible beings, and women are without proper individuality, and hence, while in cases of adultery the man is punishable with death, the woman is only shaved and sold into slavery, and even from this she may be redeemed. The purchase-money for a wife varies considerably, from about a sum or property equal to five pounds, up to fifty pounds or more, a man often borrowing the money required, and yielding as security for its return his services as a slave. Considering these facts, we shall not be a little surprised to find that on the whole woman is well treated.

A singular usage prevails which requires a man to marry if possible his maternal cousin, and perhaps in this intermarriage within blood relationship is found the explanation that the women look so prematurely old. Certainly it is not because they work hard while their husbands amuse themselves. Comparing Battah women with Malay we shall find both are overworked, that day by day they labour beyond their strength, and hence both become rapidly old, really and in appearance; but all who know both races declare that the Battah women are better off in every way than the Malay, and their husbands decidedly work harder than their wives. Both husbands and wives fondle their children and spoil them.

There is an impression which would be immediately produced by an observation of the people. It is the absence of a central and governing authority. As we move about among them, we hear nothing of a king or general council. There have been pretensions to a principal chieftainship, based on hereditary office, but there has never been any real power; no central authority giving law and coherence to the entire tribe. I am told by Dr. Schreiber of a particular chief

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who lived near the lake who managed by his ancestral relationships to acquire some authority over the surrounding country, but he has lost his assumed position entirely, and is now practically an outcast. The unit with the race is not so much the individual as the family, or the families, which, in combination, form a village community.

The people consist, in fact, of a collection of separate and often contending republics. Each village has its chief, and this chief has his village council; chief differing from chief in importance by his hereditary position, the dimensions of the villages, and the extent of the lands belonging to it, and also by his personal accomplishments. Throughout those communities certain race customs prevail, but each contains within itself the power and the functions of government, though, of course, in the most primitive fashion.

Between village and village there are prevailing jealousies, and standing questions of contention, and incidental quarrels, which bring them into the habit of petty but persistent conflict. Often, as in the village communities of India, the antagonism is caused by some dispute about a bit of land. One of the Rhenish Missionaries writes in the report of 1887, "Since I have been here I have built a beautiful new house close to the Tobah lake on an open space fifty feet above its level; the new station lies between two inimical parties. Both declare that the land belongs to them, but both have made over their rights to me."

These chronic animosities are in many cases perpetuated from generation to generation, though the original occasion may have been very trivial and long since disposed of. Sometimes, when the actual fight takes place, it is ended by the killing of the first man, when the side to which he

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belonged is adjudged defeated, and the warriors on both sides retire from the field. But the fight may soon be resumed from some new offence, to end again in like fashion. Sometimes, especially where we are now supposing ourselves to be looking around us, the conflicts are on a larger scale and seem never to cease. Not that many lives are ever lost in actual conflict, but the miseries of war are constantly present, owing to the ordinary industries of the people being abandoned.

Sometimes famine follows the neglect of cultivating or wasting the crops. To prevent this, as has been intimated, it is sometimes agreed to suspend - the activities of war during the intervals required for attention to the fields under culture. As soon as the reaper's work is done the fighting begins again.

This state of habitual conflict (and yet the Enc. Brit. vol. iii. 442, declares, "The people show a very peaceful disposition, but are valorous when occasion demands") no doubt explains the remarkable fact that the Dutch government has so far extended its paternal rule, not through conquest, but because these communities have voluntarily sought it so as to secure a principal and indisputable authority which shall settle their disputes and compel peace. The government, however, moves but slowly. The country comprising Silindung and Tobah came under its dominion in 1878, but apparently, it was not till 1885 that its sagacious system of electing and appointing a native chief for each defined district came into operation.

I have ventured in the foregoing sketch to act as a guide to my readers, but I cannot undertake to be their interpreter. True there are Malay words (which I can understand) in the Battah language, and other words resembling Malay words (the numerals, for instance (1) M. Satu, B. Sada, (2) M. Dua, B. Dua, (3) M. Tiga, B. Tolu, (4) M. empat, B. opat); but the languages are essentially different, while the characters used in writing are with the Battah original, and with the Malays Arabic. Sanscrit words are to be found in both. Some have hence inferred that the Battahs have Hindoo blood in them. But the particulars cited are of very doubtful value for this inference. The indications of the once dominating presence of Hinduism, such as the occurrence of Sanscrit words, resemblances in features, the remains of temples, the veneration for the pepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*) and current traditions, belong to the whole island of Sumatra, abound in Java, and are found in islands beyond, and, in fact, throughout the Indian Archipelago; but it certainly is very remarkable that a people so isolated as the Battahs, and with certain habits and customs of so savage a type, should possess a language of their own, with a vocabulary much more copious than that, for instance, of the bulk of the English people, and have this language in a written form, and possess an ancient though meagre literature, and number amongst themselves so many who can read, that Marsden actually declares that according to the reports received by him "the proportion of the people who know how to read is much greater than of those who do not." Burton, the first missionary who went amongst them, got possession of several books, and writes of the language as having "many words in common with Malay. I have begun to read it and find there is nothing to fear as to its acquisition; the character is remarkably simple, and every sound has its representative mark. The language may be pronounced correctly by any person who has acquired the character, though he may not understand what he reads." There appear to be three dialects, pointing therefore to three divisional tribes—Mandailing in the south, Tobah in the centre, and Dairi in the north. I find from "The Gospel in Many Tongues," issued by the British and Foreign Bible Society, that there have been translations of the Scriptures into the first two dialects only, and infer that they only are of importance in our consideration of the people.

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The following is a copy in the Battah version of St. John iii. 16:—

Handwritten text in the Battah script, consisting of six lines of characters.

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