

SIR JAMES BROOKE'S GOVERNMENT  
IN BORNEO.

Sir James Brooke attended a meeting of a Metropolitan Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, on Tuesday, to forward the Borneo church mission, when he gave the following narrative of his government at Sarawak:—

In the first place, you must bear in mind those distinctions of race in Borneo. They have bad government; the very bonds of society are loosened; crime is walking abroad; rapine, piracy, oppression, everything that you happily do not know in England, is there. When I went there I had no fixed plan. We found certain laws and customs existing, and a generous, high-minded population, willing to be improved. How could we improve them? They had many difficulties to contend with, and they were constantly coming to me as their protector, though, in fact, they were my protectors. They had arms, and if I told them that certain things were their rights, they would take arms to defend those rights. That was the system by which we attained to the very rudiments of justice. Then we instituted a court—the simplest in the world. The arrangement is this:—We all meet. There is a round table. Every person of respectability, whether Englishman or native, sits down at that table. The prisoner sits on a mat. The whole trial goes on; every person is at liberty to speak, and the decision is given and recorded at the time. All the proceedings are in the Malay language, every native knows what is going forward, and they often take the deepest interest in the cases. You must never imagine that those natives are at all inferior to us in mental capacity, though they lack European culture. In fact, their mind is equal to the European mind, as far as we can judge. If I wish them to do a thing, they will oppose me and say, "It is not proper to do so according to our laws and customs," and then we debate the question. If I alter a law, or say that a law is inapplicable, or cruel, or too lenient, I call the people together in open court, and explain to them why these laws appear unsuitable to the state of society that has arisen. I then tell the chiefs to call the people together in their own towns and consult as to what are the best laws for the country, and I will receive their determination. I say in effect, "Is it your wish that that shall be the law by which you yourselves are to be governed?" It is, as far as possible, a self-government of the people. (Hear, hear.) In my transactions with them I have always found that they are a noble and a highly independent people, and the most generous people in the world; they are highly truthful, with the exception of the class attached to the court, which is a vicious class, both the Malays and Dyaks, taking what you would call in this country the respectable class—are most truthful and generous. They will bear no oppression; they always wear a dagger by their side, and are as ready to use it as an Englishman to use his fist; and if they use it it is just in the same manner as we use our fists, or the same manner in which a gentleman, a hundred years ago, would draw his sword, call on six seconds, and they would turn to in the street and fight six to six. Such was the state of English society a hundred years ago, and of French society still more recently. These people will bear no insult. I saw how easily their native rajahs ruled them by acting on this principle, without even possessing their confidence; and that was a lesson to me which I have followed ever since. Whenever a man is accused of any crime, though he may not be of good character, whether he be high or low, and even if he be accused of murder, he is neither confined nor seized, nor is an insult put upon his feeling in any way. I will narrate to you a circumstance which occurred within the last two years. A man of 27 or 28 years of age, a man of respectability, who was constantly about my house and at my table, and was well known to all our party, was suddenly accused of murder. I sent for him in the evening, and took him into my own room. He had his weapon on; he was one of the chiefs. I said to him, "Rajah Lee, you are accused of murder. You know the custom of the country; you know I have a friendly feeling towards you; I am very sorry, but you must be tried, and if found guilty you will be put to death. He said, "Certainly, if I am found guilty, I will suffer death. I will do you no harm. Do you think I would do you any harm, or the native chief (referring to one present) any harm?" I said, "No, I don't suppose you would, for you are friendly to me; but I know that at this moment you would if you felt inclined." He said, "Why?" I said, "You have got your dagger on, and I am sitting close to you at the table." He instantly pulled it out, passed it across the table to me, in the sheath, and said, "You take that." I refused to take it, saying he was a man of such respectability that I was sure he would submit to the laws. I said, "Go away to-night, but come to the court at twelve o'clock the day after to-morrow; you must be tried for your life; and remember, you will be put to death if you are found guilty." He said, "Give me a fair trial; I will be there." He came; he was in the court unarmed; I am happy to add he was acquitted. The judges and the jury immediately got up, and all shook hands with the prisoner, for we were all very glad of it; he was a very good man, and I believe he was perfectly innocent. This will give you some idea of the state of the country, and of our simple mode of administering justice. So it is throughout; there is a simplicity of government which would be very difficult to imagine in this country. All the proceedings are conducted in the most simple form. Everything is done in the Malay language; there is very little writing, but I hope that good substantial justice is administered. The courts are composed of a certain number of English gentlemen, mingled with a certain number of natives, who form a judge and jury amongst them, or rather the functions of the two are combined. The consequence is, that our institutions have gradually spread, though, as you must be all aware, beyond the province of Sarawak I have no power or jurisdiction; I am limited merely to offering advice to the different parties who may come to ask it. There is always the element of piracy to guard against, though that I hope is at an end; but still there are a number of governments that would demoralise Sarawak if they had power to do so. But they have no such power; and the only question is, whether we may not in future apply the same development that has been applied in Sarawak to the other rivers along the coast.