



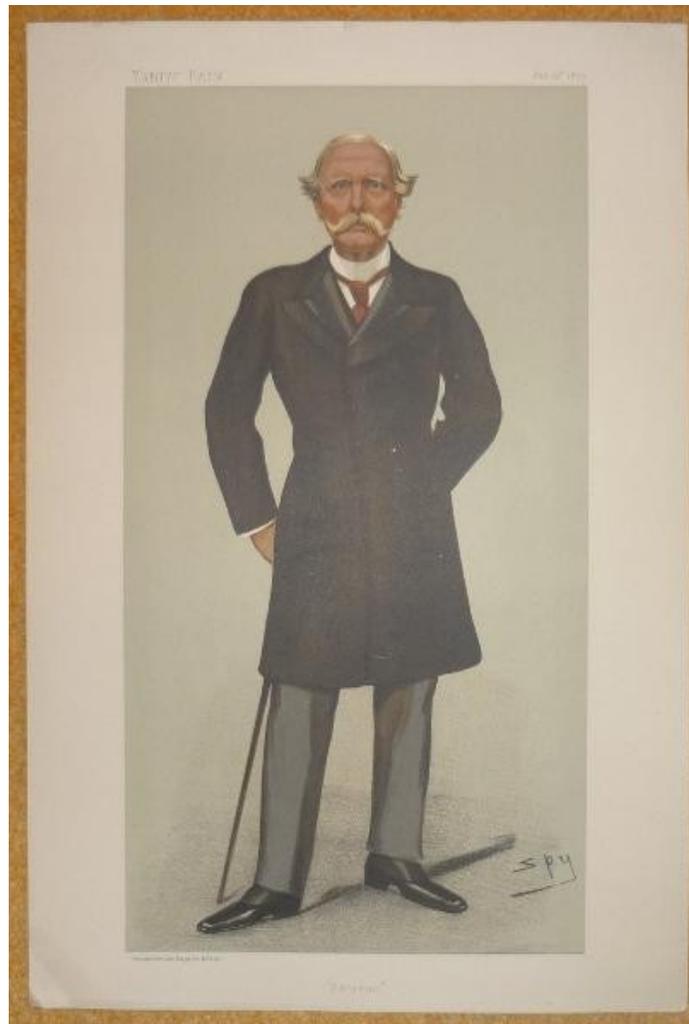
*Insignia of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India
(founded in 1861 by Queen Victoria)*

**Most Excellent:
On the Nature and Validity of Honors and Titles
Bestowed by the Monarchs of Contemporary Southeast Asia**

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In a number of the Southeast Asian monarchies of today, such as Malaysia, Brunei, and Thailand, the practice of awarding orders of knighthood and merit to deserving individuals, both native and foreign, has gained a certain measure of acceptance within the wider field of contemporary state honors. From time to time, however, the entitlement of Southeast Asian monarchs to create and bestow these honors is questioned by scholars who seem to feel that these awards lack historical precedence and/or cultural context, inspired as they doubtless have been by earlier chivalric and honorific creations of European monarchs prior to the early twentieth century. In point of fact, however, one need look no further back in time than to the era of the Brooke rajahs of the Kingdom of Sarawak to find a successful and comprehensive example of the introduction of modern honorific practices into a Southeast Asian realm.

In this brief profile, I will examine three different historical and socio-political contexts which once played important roles within the sphere of Southeast Asia, namely the Kingdom of Saráwak (1842-1946), Meiji Japan (1868-1912), and British India (ca. 1876-1947), and will endeavor to draw some conclusions about the nature and veracity of the argument that the awards and decorations of the modern monarchies of this region lack historical and/or chivalric validity.



*H. H. Sir Charles Anthoni Johnson Brooke,
Second Rajah of Saráwak (r. 1868-1917)*

Sir James Brooke, first of the English “White Rajahs” of Saráwak, had been given his kingdom on August 18, 1842 by the Brunei sultan of his era, Omar Ali Saifudin II (r. 1828-1852) as a reward for his successful subjugation of the area's previously intractable native pirate communities. During the century that followed, H. H. Rajah Sir James Brooke (r. 1842-1868), his nephew, H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Anthoni Johnson Brooke (r. 1868-1917), and the latter's son, H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Vyner de Windt Brooke (r. 1917-1946), successfully transformed this once-savage domain into a reflection of their solid and efficient governance, suppressing the practice of headhunting among the Dayak natives, and ruling in a generally benevolent and forward-thinking manner until the kingdom was absorbed into the holdings of the British Crown in the wake of the Japanese occupation during World War Two.

The rajahs of the Brooke dynasty of Saráwak, although they were to comprise an entirely foreign, genetically non-native house, were fully recognized as regnant by the Court of St. James in London. In their capacity as Southeast Asian sovereigns, they granted a number of decorations and awards that had previously been entirely unknown in the native traditions of their extensive domains, decorations which were to successfully receive official recognition throughout the world, including the vast territories of the then-dominant British Empire.



*Insignia of the Most Excellent Order
of the Star of Sarawak*

Among these decorations was the Most Excellent Order of the Star of Sarawak, founded by H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Vyner Brooke on September 26, 1928, and which was divided into three classes: Master (MSS), Companion (CSS), and Officer (OSS), with distinctive insignia for each class. Royal and nobiliary scholar Christopher Buyers writes, in the section of his Royal Ark website devoted to the Brooke Kingdom of Sarawak, that “[t]he insignia of the first class consisted of a breast star, sash and sash badge. The second class insignia was a badge worn from a necklet, and the third class a medal worn from a ribbon on the left breast.” This three-tiered membership, similar to that of the Institution of Military Merit created on March 10, 1759, during the reign of King Louis XV of France, marked the Brooke Order of the Star of Sarawak as part of

the lineage of European-style orders and decorations that had initially come into being with the foundation of the great Royal and Military Order of Saint-Louis, first of the modern orders of merit, instituted by royal decree of King Louis XIV on April 5, 1693.

In addition, this royal decoration of the Brooke dynasty, which marked something of a culmination in terms of the distinctions awarded within the Kingdom of Saráwak, may well have been at least partially inspired by the similarly-named Most Exalted Order of the Star of India (founded in 1861 by Queen Victoria), as well by as the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (founded in 1917 by King George V), but was by no means the first such species of honor to be bestowed under the sovereign authority of the foreign-born rajahs.

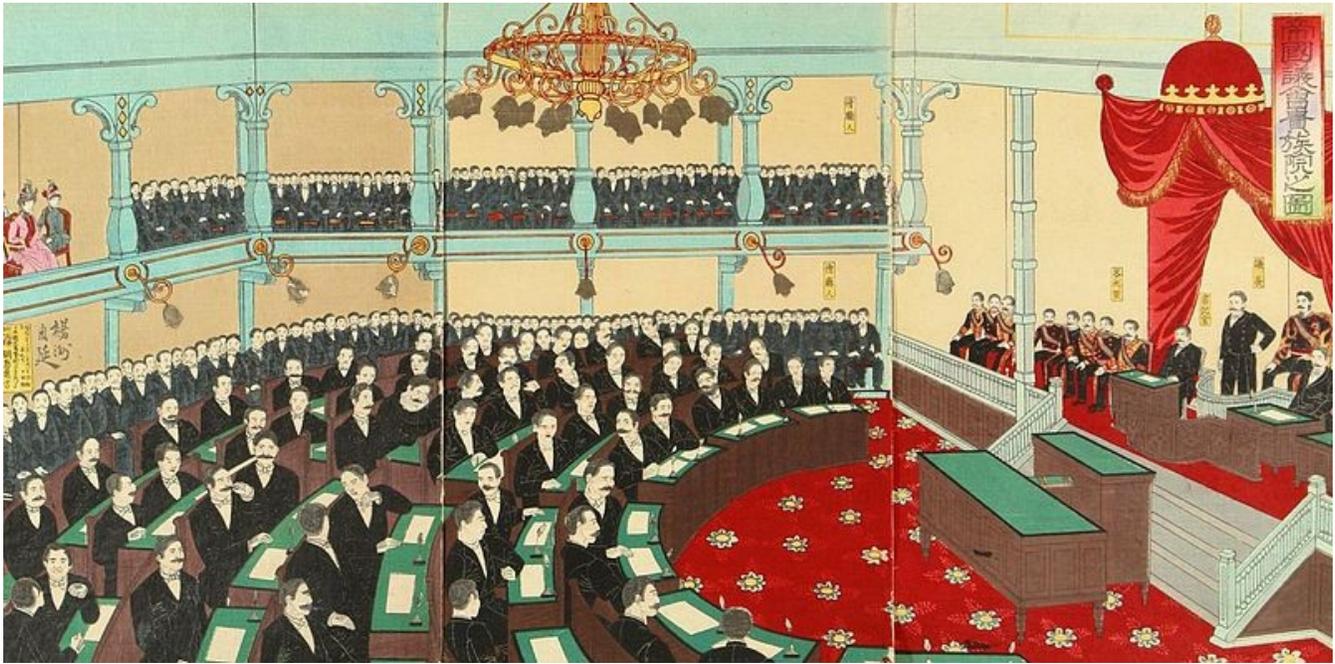
The Saráwak Government Long Service Medal had been instituted during the reign of H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Brooke, and was awarded for long and faithful service to civil servants, local leaders, native chiefs, and nobles. Its insignia consisted of a silver hexagonal medal, which was awarded in one class only. This distinction was later altered and renamed by H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Vyner Brooke in 1940, and became obsolete upon the cession of the Kingdom to the British Crown in 1946.

Another of the decorations created during the reign of H. H. Rajah Sir Charles Vyner Brooke was the Saráwak Government Conspicuous Bravery Medal, which was awarded to rangers, police, and civil servants of the kingdom for heroism beyond the call of

duty. Its membership was later broadened to include those subjects who had acted valiantly during the Japanese occupation, and it was awarded in a single class, its insignia being a circular silver medal suspended on a ribbon which bore the heraldic colors of the Brooke dynasty (or, sable, and gules).

It is plain to see that although the earlier history of Saráwak had featured no decorations of the sort awarded by British or European sovereigns of the day, during the period of the Brooke kingdom, a number of honors in the Western European mold were successfully introduced. Furthermore, the Most Excellent Order of the Star of Saráwak was later to serve as a direct inspiration for the Most Illustrious Order of the Star of Saráwak, which was introduced on July 10, 1964, by the government of this component state of the present federal constitutional monarchy of Malaysia.

If one searches a bit further afield, there is also the example of Meiji Japan to be considered. After the ascent of the Emperor Mutsuhito (reign name Meiji) to the Imperial Throne of Japan in 1868, a wholesale reorganization of the honorific structures of the Japanese Empire took place. In direct imitation of the ranks and titles of the nobility of the British Empire, Mutsuhito and his advisors devised a new system of honors and noble ranks, known collectively in Japanese as the *kazoku*, or “flowery lineage.” This “flowery lineage” included ranks and titles inspired directly by those of the British and European nobility of the time, and also drew upon ancient Chinese designations for the aristocracy and gentry.



Emperor Meiji (r. 1868-1912) in a formal session of the Japanese House of Peers

In the wake of the Meiji Restoration, the old court nobility of Kyoto managed to reassert itself, and to regain a certain measure of its once-hallowed prestige. Later, with the Peerage Act of 1884, which was engineered largely by Hirobumi Ito after visits to Europe, the Meiji government expanded the hereditary peerage with the granting of *kazuko* rank to those who had performed outstanding services on behalf of the Japanese Empire. These *kazuko* were also divided into ranks clearly based on those of the British peerages, to wit:

Prince/Duke (*daikōshaku*)

Marquess (*kōshaku*)

Earl/Count (*hakushaku*)

Viscount (*shishaku*) and

Baron (*danshaku*)

Thus, given the precedent that has existed since the era of the so-called “White Rajahs of Saráwak,” as well as that of the Japanese imperial restructuring of its nobility on the British/European model, it is patently obvious that there exists no reason whatsoever why the reigning sovereigns of Southeast Asia should be in any way discouraged from awarding the highly-prized honors that it has been their wont to bestow to those who have rendered important services to the public welfare and general prosperity of their respective kingdoms.

In addition to questions about the nature and origin of the honors and titles bestowed by the rulers of this region, there is also the matter of the heraldic achievements and devices granted to certain individuals within the context of the contemporary monarchies of Southeast Asia. This matter, as well, can be addressed by referring to the example of another Asian state, in this case, British India.



*Arms Granted under the Authority of the British Crown to
Maharaja Dungar Singh of Bikaner (r. 1872-1887)*

During the period of hegemony of the British Empire in India (ca. 1707-1947), and particularly during the 19th and 20th centuries, not only were specifically Indian orders of chivalry created and bestowed by the British Crown to Indian subjects (e. g., The Most Exalted Order of the Star of India, founded 1861; The Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire, founded 1877), but personal armorial bearings, demonstrating a distinct hybridization of British and Indian styles, were also granted to Indian notables and potentates. Indeed, many of the native princes of the various Indian states

requested that such heraldic achievements be created for them under the authority of the British Crown, and they were used to identify and embellish everything from princely letterhead to royal automobiles. Indeed, many of these arms persist in use today, and the heraldry of the British Raj has had a lasting impact on the style and content of modern Indian armorial representations.

Thus, based on the information and examples provided above, I would like to take this opportunity to most humbly suggest that those who persist in asserting that the honors, titles, and awards of modern Southeast Asian sovereigns fly in the face of tradition and/or precedent within the region should reconsider their position, especially given such plain and indisputable evidence to the contrary.

Sources:

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