

Mission Atlas Project

Asia

Brunei

Basic Facts

Name

Brunei or *Negara Brunei Darussalam*. The name means *Abode of Peace*

Population

The total population of 301,000 divides into 70.5% Malay, 16.8% Chinese, 5.3% Tribal, and 8.2% expatriate workers mainly in the oil industry. Brunei population is growing at an annual rate of 2.5% and shows 52 persons per sq. km.

Of the four districts in Brunei, the *Brunei and Muara* district in the north east reports 53-345 people per sq. km. while the *Themburong* district on the east has less than 10 persons per sq. km. *Tutong and Belait* districts fall in between these two.

Area

Total area in Brunei is 5765 sq. km. (2248 sq. mi.)

Economy

Brunei has a GNP of US\$ 6 billion; GNP per capita is US\$ 15,800 (68% of US). The nation is dependent almost entirely on oil/gas. Since only 15% of the land area is cultivated, the nation is forced to import up to 80% of its food needs.

Society

The society of Brunei is highly subsidized with free education, health care, sporting centers, low-interest loans, and rather high, tax-free wages.

Language

Officially Brunei uses Malay but English is widely used. Various Chinese languages are still used among the Chinese populations and tribal languages among the tribal peoples. Some 17 languages are reported in Brunei.

Urbanization

Urbanization is estimated at 59%. Major cities are the Capital *Bandar Sen Begawan* (66000), *Bangor*, *Tutong*, and *Kuala Belait*.

Literacy

Around 85 to 95% of the people are literate.

Religion

Between 69% and 71% of people in Brunei claim Islam. Chinese religions claim some 9%, tribal religions are followed by up to 6%, while Christianity claims as high as 8%. Some 6.5% are nonreligious. Around 1% is considered as evangelical Christians.

Historical Aspects

Early History

Evidences show the area that is now Brunei existed in historical records back to the 6th century when trade with China is reported. *Brunei Darussalam* is one of Asia's oldest kingdoms, having been in existence for more than 1,500 years and was an imperial power from the fifteenth to the sixteenth centuries.

Chinese annuals of the sixth and seventh centuries referred to Brunei Darussalam as *Puni* or *Puli*. It is said that the *King of Puni* or *Puli* sent tributes in the years 518, 523, and 616, and an envoy in 669 to strengthen the ties between Brunei Darussalam and China. In 977, during the *Sung Dynasty* (960-1279), an envoy from the King of Puni led by *Pu Ya Lee (Abu Ali)* came to China to pay homage to the *Emperor T'ai-t'sung*.

During the *Ming Dynasty* (1369-1643) close relations existed between Brunei Darussalam and China, with both countries mutually sending envoys at regular intervals. In 1408, the *King of Puni* and a delegation including his wife and children visited China and were honored by *Emperor Yung-Lo* with royal insignias and other gifts. Unfortunately the king died on the tenth month of that year and was buried in Nanking. His son *Hsia Wang (Si Awang)*, with the emperor's consent, ascended the throne of Puni.

An old register, dated 1368, of the *Majapahit Empire* recorded Brunei Darussalam as one of the kingdoms that sent tributes. The nation thus received some Hindu influence through the Indonesian *Majapahit Kingdom*. This influence waned as Brunei formed closer relations with China.

Islam probably came to Brunei Darussalam much earlier than many historians had previously believed. Chinese accounts indicated that Muslims were already influential in Brunei Darussalam in 977. Chinese records of 1371 described *Sultan Mohammad Shah*, who was *Awang Alak Betatar* before he embraces Islam, as a Muslim ruler of Brunei. During his reign he fostered trade relations with the neighboring kingdoms from *Temasik (Singapore)* to as far as *Pegu* in *Burma*. Islam spread rapidly when *Sharif Ali* from *Taif, Saudi Arabia*, who was a descendent of the Prophet's grandson, *Saiyidina Hasan*, became sultan (*Seri Sultan Berkat*), succeeding his father-in-law, *Sultan Ahmad*.

In 1425, the Hindu ruler of Brunei, *Awang Alak Betatar*, visited *Sultan Mohammed Shah (Parameswara)* of Malacca, and became a Muslim. Arab scholars were invited to the country to engage in missionary work and succeeded in converting a majority of the population to Islam. In the 15th and 16th centuries, especially during the reigns of the fifth ruler, *Sultan Bolkiah*, and the

ninth ruler, *Sultan Hassan*, Brunei was a dominant power in the region with sovereignty over much of Borneo and even parts of the Philippines.

Spanish and Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to influence the area. *Magellan* came to the region in 1521. From the end of the 16th century to the 19th century, Brunei began to lose its grip on the empire, which was besieged by problems such as wars, internecine strife, insurrection and piracy.

The *British*, however, in the 17th and 18th centuries began to erode Brunei's power and influence. *Sultan Bolkiah* surrendered to the British. *Sir James Brooke*, the first "White Rajah of Sarawak," consolidated British power around 1888 and the sultanate became a British protectorate. By 1904, Brunei, which became a British protected State in 1888, had shrunk to a small Sultanate surrounded on three sides by Sarawak and to the north by the South China Sea.

Recent History

Brunei slowly lost both power and territory until 1890 when the *Limbang (Temburong)* area was ceded to Sarawak thus cutting the nation in half. In 1929 the discovery of oil restored some power and autonomy to Brunei. The oil was placed into commercial production in 1932, becoming the source of Brunei Darussalam's current wealth.

However, the Economic Depression in the West prevented full development of the oil fields and the Second World War, during which the Japanese occupied Brunei from 1941 to 1945 further interrupted the industry's development. This period also witnessed untold damage and suffering to the whole country.

After the turmoil, life gradually returned to normal but real progress only began to materialize during the reign of the 28th ruler, His Majesty *Paduka Seri Baginda*. Other leaders of influence included, *Yang Di-Pertuan, Sultan Sir Muda Omar Ali Saifuddien Sa'adul Khairi Waddien*, who succeeded his brother *Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Akhazul Khairi Waddien* on 6th June 1950.

Three years after ascending the throne, His Majesty utilized Brunei Darussalam's oil revenues to finance the first Five-Year National Development Plan, which gave the country an extensive infrastructure and turned it into a modern, thriving State. One of His Majesty's great achievements was the promulgation on 29th September 1959 of a written Constitution, which gave the State self-government, made the Sultan supreme executive authority in the country, and changed the post of British Resident to High Commissioner, who continued to advise the Sultan on all matters other than those relating to Islam and Malay customs. The British government was responsible only for matters of defense and external affairs. To assist the Sultan, the Privy Council, Council of Ministers, and State Legislative Council were formed.

The early 1960's saw a series of talks taking place on *Tunku Abdul Rahman's* proposal to group the *Federated Malay States, Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah, and Brunei Darussalam* into a federation called *Malaysia*. Brunei Darussalam eventually decided not to join Malaysia, which formed in 1963, because of a disagreement on several important matters regarding Brunei Darussalam's future.

After the failure of the ill-fated attempt to form *Malaysia* around 1962 the Sultan suspended the Constitution and opted for Independence. In 1967, *Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien* abdicated in favor of his son, *Pengiran Muda Hassanal Bolkiah*.

The country lived under emergency laws until 1984 when it became totally independent of Britain. In 1984 Brunei joined *ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)*; *OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference)*, the *Commonwealth*; and the *United Nations*.

In recent years, Brunei has moved in the direction of Islamic fundamentalism. In 1991, the sale of alcohol was banned and stricter dress code introduced. Brunei imposes the death penalty for narcotics offenses.

Peoples/People Groups

General

The population in general can be divided between Standard Malay 70.5% or 212,500; Chinese 16% or 8,100; expatriate 8.2% or 4,680; tribal 5.5% or 16,550.

Specific Groups

Standard Malay

The Malay population uses the Standard Malay language in formal, but not necessarily in informal relationships. The national language, Malay, is taught in schools through 3rd grade and used in schools through the final year. This language also is the medium for much of radio, television, newspaper, and government transmission.

The largest percentage of the Malay population follows *Sunni Muslim* teachings. The Bible is available in the Malay language. The Jesus Film is available in the Malay language. This population is unevangelized and World A.

Chinese

Some 80% of the Chinese in Brunei are non-citizen residents whose status is always in some question and who experience constant anxiety and insecurity. They are dominant in business and commerce. This population exists in at least five groups (see below), use both Chinese and English languages (16% of the Chinese speak English as their first language), and all five groups have the Chinese and English Bible. The Chinese stem from the *Sino-Tibetan* people group.

The Chinese, *Hakka* group has a population of around 3,000 in Brunei. The Chinese, *Mandarin* group has around 15,000 people in Brunei.

The Chinese, *Min Dong* group, who use the *Foochow* dialect, number around 6,000 in Brunei.

The Chinese, *Min Nan* group, who stem from the *Hokkien* people, number as high as 10,000 in Brunei.

The Chinese, *Yue* group (basically Cantonese) number around 3,500 in Brunei.

The Chinese in Brunei are more evangelized than most other groups. The Bible and the Jesus Film are available in most Chinese languages but the majority of the Brunei Chinese use English, many as their first language.

Expatriate

This group largely engaged in the oil industry boasts people from *England* (around 6,000), *South Asia* (around 4,200), *India* (1,000 primarily *Gurkha*), and smaller groups from *Korea*, *Philippines*, and *Australia*.

The expatriate group uses primarily English, makes up a large portion of the church membership in Brunei, and has the Bible translated into their heart languages.

Traditional Groups

The traditional peoples of Brunei all stem from the *Austronesian* group in general and the *Western Malayo-Polynesian* group in particular. Many are counted among the Malay population but consider themselves as members of one of the traditional peoples, often using the traditional languages in their intimate relationships.

Brunei (Brunei-Kadaian, Orang Bukit), the largest of the traditional people groups boast a population of 250,000 or 64.5% of the people in Brunei. Another 54,000 people from the Brunei group reside in Malaysia. Within the Brunei group are numbered the *Kedayan* people, who are also called *Dunsun*.

The Brunei people group are located primarily in the *Brunei and Muara* District in northeast Brunei, in the northern portion of the *Temburong* District, in the northeast section of the *Tutong* District (a primary *Kedayan* region), and a coastal strip of the *Belait* District.

This people refer to themselves as *Orang Bukit (hill people)*. Both the Brunei and the Kedayan people are recognized as an indigenous group. The Brunei and Kedayan languages have a 90% lexical similarity and a 73% to 80 % lexical similarity with Standard Malay.

The Brunei/Kedayan peoples are largely agriculturalists. They concentrate around the two major cities, *Bandar Sen Begawan* in *Brunei* and *Muara* and *Kuala Belait* in *Belait* District.

The Brunei/Kedayan, who follow the Muslim religion (*Sunni*), are considered World A. This people group does not have the Jesus Film in their heart language. In the primary locations of the Brunei People, the population to churches is as high as 49,000 to one church. Many Brunei who live in the area around *Kuala Belait* have around one church for every 15,000 people.

The Belait (Belait Jati), the 700 people in this group are scattered in the *Belait* District and around *Kampung Kiudang* in the *Tutong* District. The *Belait* language has a 54% lexical similarity with *Tutong*.

The *Belait* who have become Muslim relate strongly to the Malay orientation while the non-Muslims retain their *Belait* identity. This group does not have the Jesus Film and are considered World A.

Bisaya, (Bisayah, Bidayah) Brunei, while some 600 *Bisaya Brunei* are reported, over 700 *Bisaya Sarawak* and other groupings in *Sabah* are related. Some evidence suggests the *Bisaya* are related to the *Visayan* of the Philippines. The *Bisaya* language in Brunei has 79% lexical similarity with *Bisaya Sarawak* and around 59% with *Sabah Bisaya*. The *Bisaya Brunei* group is recognized by the Brunei government as an indigenous group. Many *Bisaya* people live in houses built on pilings along the rivers.

Traditional *padi* (rice) planting involves particular rituals among the *Bidayuh* people of Brunei as in Sarawak. Emphasis is given to the ritual of *gawia satak sopa* which is intended to pacify the spirits of the cut vegetation and appease the local spirits, bless the village paths, and protect the rice soul. Construction of altars and killing of sacrificial pigs and oblations also have a part in these rituals.

The *boting romin* (longhouse) is traditional to the *Bidayuh* people of Brunei and Sarawak and constitutes a strong tourist attraction. However, nowadays people are moving to simple detached houses in their gardens or paddy fields or to sites of better access to town and longhouses are falling into disuse and disrepair. The house-building techniques include the consultation of omen

birds and rituals and celebrations surrounding the move to a longhouse. The reasons for living in longhouses in the past were safety, defense, solidarity, togetherness, cooperation, and mutual learning. These needs no longer hold much force. Longhouses are preserved as heritage, educational, and tourist sites.

Some Bidayuh farmers have in recent years adopted vegetable market gardening (VMG). The Bidayuh adopted VMG through emulating Chinese vegetable gardeners. VMG can provide a good income flow and requires little capital; however, it does have its risks due to the perishable nature of the output. Bidayuh farmers have been successful in adopting VMG because of existing linkages with markets and resources. The Bidayuh need technical help in the undertaking of VMG.

As with the Bisaya in Sarawak and Sabah, some of the members of the group follow Christianity, others Islam, and still others traditional religions. The traditional religion patterns show marked syncretism between the traditional and Islam. Their traditional religion practices include sorcery. Bible portions are translated into the Bisaya language but the Jesus Film is not available. They have the Malay Scriptures and are considered unreached but not World A.

Iban (Sea Dayak), some 15,000 Iban live in Brunei but over 400,000 reside in Sarawak, making the Iban the largest people group in Sarawak. Other Iban live in Sabah and still others in *Indonesian Kalimantan*

The designation “Sea Dayak,” as with all uses of the term “*Dayak*” refer to inhabitants of Borneo and Kalimantan is something of a misrepresentation. The term “dayak” probably stems from a *Kayan* word meaning interior and became in Dutch and British usage a term for any group in the interior. None of the people groups or populations in Borneo or Kalimantan uses the term “dayak” in speaking of themselves. The term Sea Dayak has been used extensively in literature for the Iban as outsiders tried to distinguish this people from “land Dayak” who are different in noticeable ways. The correct designation is Iban.

A distinctive feature of Iban culture relates to the *longhouse* which is not a communal living arrangement but rather a series of connected, individual family living areas. Some longhouses have reached the size of several hundred yards although some governmental efforts have strived to limit the houses to ten “doors” or ten family groups.

The Iban territory stretches across the Belait District and into the Temburong District of Brunei. A substantial number of Iban live in the *Limbang* region of Sarawak which divides Brunei and was ceded to Sarawak in 1929. Iban also are found in southern Sabah.

Iban traditional religion is highly animistic and polytheistic. The religion shows evidence of totemic influences. An ancestor is thought to give the Iban person the name of *totem*. The Iban then venerates this animal or object as a matter of worship and trust.

The Iban have had the Bible in their language since 1988 and portion since 1864. While many Iban have assimilated into the Malay culture and turned to Islam, many others have turned to Christianity through the ministry of Anglicans, the Brunei Christian Fellowship, Bethel Chapel, and the Borneo Evangelical Mission (*Siding Injil Borneo*) from Australia. The Jesus Film is available in Iban language but the group is still considered unevangelized.

Melanau, some 200 Malawian, who speak *Mukah*, live in the area of *Kuala Belait*. Others of the group reside in Sarawak (actually as many as 25,300 of the group exist worldwide). The group is largely Muslim in religion.

Murut, the ancestors of the Murut came from Asia and in early times practiced head hunting. In 1915, this people group unsuccessfully rebelled against British control. During the Japanese

occupation of 1941-45, the Murut lost many people to a form of Malaria to which they had no immunity. Their numbers had shrunk to less than 34,000 in 1980.

Punan-Nibong, while only around 50 persons from this group live in Brunei over 9,000 reside in Sarawak. While clearly in the Western Malayo-Polynesian family, the Punan-Nibong language is not closely related to the other languages of northern Borneo nor Indonesian Kalimantan. They have adopted Islam and have tended to become settled. The non-Islamic peoples tend to remain subsistence agriculturalists, almost in a hunter-gatherer tradition. Many of these Punan-Nibong people remain in traditional religion practices.

The Punan-Nibong people had the Bible in their language in 1974 but it is now out of print. The Jesus Film is not available.

Tutong 1 (Dusun), some 15,000 Tutong 1 live in Brunei. The Dusun are accepted as an indigenous group by the government. Around 72% of the parents below age 40 use the Tutong language with their children. In mixed marriages, however, 57% use Brunei Malay with their children.

The Tutong 1 are highly Islamic. They are considered World A; do not have the Jesus Film, or the Bible. No churches are reported in the area of the Tutong 1 people.

Tutong 2 (Tutung), the 15,000 Tutong 2 people live on the coast and central Tutong District. The Tutong 2 language is 54% lexical similarity with Belait. The government recognizes Tutong 2 as an indigenous group.

The Tutong 2 have pride in their language and use it for interethnic communication. Some 63% of parents below 40 years of age use Tutong 2 with their children while 48% in mixed marriages use Brunei Malay with their children.

Like the Tutong 1, the Tutong 2, are considered World A as to the status of evangelization. This people also do not have the Jesus Film in their own language. These people follow Islam and traditional religion patterns. No churches are reported in the Tutong 2 area.

Christianity in Brunei

Christianity has not become a significant factor in Brunei as to the numbers of churches nor the total of adherents. The combined membership in both Roman Catholic and non-Catholic congregations numbers around 5,247 members with some 12,900 in the church communities.

Marginal Christian Groups

Roman Catholic

The Roman Catholic Church in Brunei reports 3 congregations with some 2,277 members and 5,300 adherents. The Catholics are growing at a rate of 0.7% per year. Catholics operate 3 primary and 3 secondary schools but growth and ministry of the Church was restricted when most of the priests and nuns were expelled in 1991.

Most of the Catholic membership is Chinese, Indian, and European expatriates.

Jehovah's Witnesses

The Jehovah's Witnesses have one congregation with around 45 members in Brunei.

Protestant (Non-Catholic)

Churches from protestant traditions report a total of some 16 congregations with 2,277 members and 7,688 adherents. Protestant churches are growing at a rate of 2.2% per year.

Evangelical Christians are estimated at 977 with 2,652 adherents (see Johnstone, 133).

Churches are reported in only three of the sixteen main cities and towns in Brunei. While this is the picture of the map, some Christian communities do exist in the interior regions among the tribal peoples.

The picture of Christianity in Brunei seems to be of churches primarily among the expatriates and overseas Chinese with only small penetration among the traditional, tribal peoples. While evangelization among the Muslims is not permitted and no known converts have come from the group, there is a steady stream of converts from the tribal and immigrant communities to Islam.

Among the Protestant Groups

The Anglican Church Supports 3 congregations with some 630 members and 4,400 adherents. Anglican churches are composed of approximately 60% Chinese, 13% Indian, 13% European, and 10% Iban.

The Tribal Churches number 4 congregations with over 500 members and 1,000 adherents. Most of these churches are composed of converted tribal peoples and are the result of the work of the *Siding Injil Borneo* which is affiliated with the Borneo Evangelical Mission from Australia.

The Brunei Christian Fellowship reports 2 congregations and 450 members (900 adherents).

Bethel Chapel (Brethren) have 2 churches with around 250 members and 625 adherents.

Methodist Church has 2 congregations and some 210 members. This church group is affiliated with the Chinese and Iban Conference, centered in Malaysia and Singapore.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church has 2 congregations with some 300 members and 500 adherents. This group is affiliated with the Sarawak Mission of the SDA.

The True Jesus Church has 9 congregations with over 900 members. This church was founded in China in 1917 through an indigenous revival movement. The Church serves in numerous countries in the Chinese diaspora and ministers almost exclusively to Chinese people.

Missiological Implications

1. The picture of Christianity in Brunei seems to be one of a foreign Church ministering primarily to expatriates (Chinese, Other Asian, and European). The churches are basically seen as foreign to the peoples of Brunei. This kind of Church will find it difficult to penetrate the peoples of Brunei.

2. Some (if not all) of the people groups might be better approached through their own languages rather than simply in the Standard Malay. The Scriptures and the Jesus Film in the indigenous languages might facilitate opening some of the peoples to the Gospel.
3. While the Church should seek a more contextualized approach and nature in the attempt to reach out to indigenous peoples, Christians should not shy away from continuing efforts to evangelize the Chinese and expatriate groups.
4. Efforts should continue to find ways to relate to and win the traditional, interior peoples (*Iban, Kelabit, Murut*) before they assimilate into the Malay society and the Islamic faith. One approach to the Tribal Peoples might be through agricultural technology that would enhance such efforts as Market Vegetable Growing.
5. Evangelicals should express support for the persecuted and threatened Chinese minorities in Brunei.
6. Christian groups should express in actions their concern for the fact that streams of converts are entering the Islamic faith both from expatriate and tribal peoples.
7. Evangelical Christians should seek ways to encourage and strengthen the work of those already serving in Brunei, especially those serving the traditional peoples.