

A Topographical Note on the Sembilan Islands

By J. WYATT-SMITH, M.A., B.SC. (Oxon.)

(Received September, 1953)

THE SEMBILAN ISLANDS have long been an attraction to naturalists, and records of collections or observations, principally zoological, on the islands have frequently been described in various journals. A recent visit, January 1953, to these islands with Dr. J. R. Audy, J. L. Harrison and M. W. F. Tweedie has however indicated an urgent need to decide on the actual names of the various individual islands to avoid possible confusion. This is particularly the case in view of the possibility of the flora being of an oceanic type, and the importance in consequence that the specific composition of the vegetation of each individual island assumes.

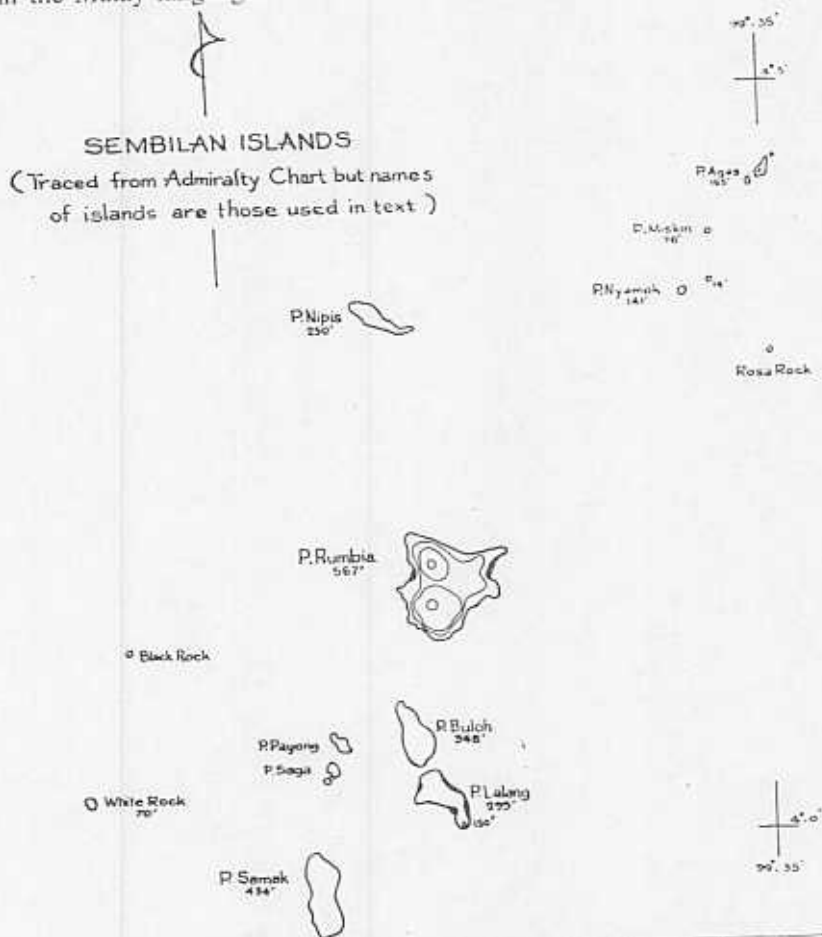
The majority of the islands are named on the Admiralty chart, and on the topographical map (Hind 1035, 2^M₁₅, third edition) produced by the Survey Department, Federation of Malaya. It is felt however that several errors have crept in, as not only do some of the names disagree with those supplied to me by the local fisherman (P.¹ Agas, P. Saga, P. Nipis and P. Rumbia alone agree) but in several cases they are not particularly descriptive of the islands to which they have been applied, though particularly apt as applied by the fishermen. Furthermore the Admiralty chart refers the name P. Lalang to two closely lying islands, whereas the topographical sheet erroneously shows these two islands as being joined (there is admittedly a shallow coral reef between them) and places the name P. Lalang opposite the southern half; this is in fact P. Lalang, but it is not clear whether it is also meant to refer to the northern half. The height of the highest point on the various islands differs considerably between that shown on the Admiralty chart and that on the topographical sheet due presumably to the former being taken to the top of the tallest tree and the latter to ground level.

In figure 1 I have shown the names of the islands as supplied to me by the local fishermen and I propose that these names should be adhered to in the future because they appear to be the names likely to be given by a local fisherman guide to anyone visiting these islands and are also descriptive of the various islands as revealed below. They do not agree with those used by Gibson-Hill (1950) who according to his map 3 on page 31 has followed those on the topographical sheet.

1. Pulau, the Malay word for an island.

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P. Rumbia (*rumbia* is the Malay name for the sago palm). This is the largest island in the group, rising to a height of 450 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet; 567 feet on Admiralty chart) and the only one inhabited at the present time. Allen (1951) has pointed out that *rembia* is the correct Malay romanization, but be that as it may Wilkinson (1932) under *rembia* refers one to *rumbia* and as such it is shown on both the Admiralty chart and the Malayan topographical sheet. Allen states that Rumpia has frequently been used by earlier naturalists¹ but that it is almost certainly wrong as it has no meaning in the Malay language.



1. A list of birds collected on Pulau Rumpia, Sembilan Islands by H. C. Robinson and C. Boden Kloss, *Journ. F.M.S. Mus.*, 1922, 10, pp. 253-55.

Rumbia is the Malay name for the sago-palm (*Metroxylon sagu* Rottb.), the leaves of which are greatly valued by Malays for roofing thatch. I confess that I did not find any *rumbia* palms on the island, but an old sage on Pangkor Island says that there were plenty there a long long time ago. The only palm favoured for roofing thatch that I noticed on the Sembilan Islands was on P. Lalang where there are many plants of *kelubi* (*Zalacca conferta* Griff.) along the stream bed of the conspicuous valley on the north side of the island. These have presumably been planted both for their value as thatch and as food, Malays liking the acid fruit-pulp.

P. Samak (*samak* is the Malay word for tanning material). This is the second largest island of the group and is shown as being 450 feet high (tree top height ?) on the Admiralty chart (the Survey Department, Federation of Malaya have not produced a map of this island). It is marked as P. Buloh on the Admiralty chart, and was described as such by Gibson-Hill. P. Buloh is however not at all a descriptive name; I certainly found no bamboo on it, admittedly no criterion, except when it is considered with the fact that P. Buloh is applied by the local fishermen to the northern island of the two shown as P. Lalang on the topographical sheet, and that this latter island has two large thickets of bamboo a feature not present on any other island. P. Samak is a very steep sided, heavily wooded island with a rocky coastline and no beaches. *Samak* which is the Malay for tanning material is frequently obtained from the bark of certain species of *Eugenia*. This is an appropriate name for the island as there are many trees of *E. grata*, a species with orange brown papery flaky bark.

P. Lalang (*lalang* is the Malay name for the grass *Imperata cylindrica*). This name refers on the topographical sheet to two islands but is applied by the local fishermen only to the southern one which rises to a height of 223 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet; 299 feet on Admiralty chart), the northern island being called P. Buloh. Robinson and Kloss (*l.c.*, p. 259) mention Pulau Lalang but it is not clear to which island they are referring. Gibson-Hill's photo of P. Lalang (Plate 1, top figure, facing p. 16) is in fact the north-western tip of P. Buloh. I did not find any *lalang* on the island, but the vegetation on the island has certainly been disturbed more than that of any other in the group, large areas of both secondary forest and *resam* (*Gleichenia*) occurring, and there is every probability that *lalang* was present in quantity at one time. This island has had some settlement in the past along the small stream in the north east, for there are many coconut palms and *kelubi* palms (*Zalacca conferta*) present and I also found a

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chempedak (*Artocarpus integer*) tree. More recent signs of cultivation are those of a large number of moribund pineapple plants still surviving under secondary forest.

P. Buloh (*buloh* is the Malay word for bamboo). This name refers on the topographical sheet to the island called P. Samak, but it is applied by the local fisherman to the northern island shown on the topographical sheet as P. Lalang. P. Buloh is a very appropriate name for this island which attains a height of 320 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet; 368 feet on Admiralty chart) as it is the only one that has any large thickets of bamboo, the upper catchment area and saddle of the two small valleys on the east of the island consisting of almost pure bamboo, which I suspect was originally planted. Gibson-Hill's photo of P. Lalang (Plate 1, top figure, facing p. 16) is in fact the north-western tip of this island.

P. Saga (*saga* is the Malay name for the trees of the genus *Adenanthera*). This is a very small island which rises to a height of 140 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet). There is only a little woody vegetation present, which is mainly restricted to the north-east side, the remainder being mainly *resam* (*Gleichenia*). No tree of *saga* (*Adenanthera pavonina*), common in Malaya on rocky headlands and islands, was seen but it is admitted that no intensive search of the woody patch of vegetation was made.

P. Payong (*payong* is the Malay word for umbrella). This island is unnamed on the topographical sheet and the name P. Payong is there referred to what the local fishermen are calling P. Nyamok (see below). The reason for the name is obscure though at the present time there is a tree of *Ficus glabella* which stands alone on the south eastern rocky mound and which definitely has an umbrella-like appearance.

P. Nipis (*nipis* is the Malay word for narrow). This name is very appropriate as the island is certainly long and very narrow; it reaches a height of 150 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet; 250 feet on Admiralty chart). Vegetationally this island is most interesting as the large trees consist mainly of two dipterocarps, *Shorea glauca*, which I found nowhere else in the Sembilan Islands although very common on Pangkor Island and on the mainland nearby, and *Dipterocarpus grandiflorus*.

P. Agas (*agas* is the Malay name for the sandfly, *Culicoides*). This is a small, steep sided rocky island rising to a height of 120 feet (Survey Department topographical sheet; 165 feet on Admiralty chart) which is covered with woody vegetation. It is called P. Agas on both the topographical sheet and Admiralty chart. We were not troubled with

sandflies on the island, although the same old sage (see under P. Rumbia) says there were swarms there when he remembers it; a small ant however was a plentiful and tenacious pest and the island could well have been named after it (*sēmut*).

P. Miskin (*miskin* is the Malay word for poor). This is a very small rocky island to the south-west of P. Agas which is unnamed on both the topographical sheet and Admiralty chart; the latter show it as being 76 feet high (tree top height ?). There is very little vegetation present, doubtless due to its small size and bare rocky habitat. The name, so I was told by the fishermen, does refer to the paucity of vegetation.

P. Nyamok (*nyamok* is the Malay name for the mosquito). This is a small rocky island, considerably small than P. Agas, lying to the south-west of P. Miskin. It is called P. Payong on both the Admiralty chart and topographical sheet, the former showing it as being 141 feet high (tree top height ?). The vegetation is of a poor scrubby nature while the whole of the centre of the island and the western side has within the past year been burnt and a new woody vegetation is colonising the area. It is admitted that no mosquitoes were noticed on the island, although the same old sage from Pangkor (see under P. Rumbia) says that swarms existed previously and that they were a nuisance to any fishing boat near the island; cleaning and burning of the vegetation however would certainly have tended to eliminate them. Most islands in fact had a small black mosquito, which according to Dr. J. R. Audy is a species of *Aedes*, and which was a definite nuisance in the forest.

References

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