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CONSERVATION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF FORT ALICE MUSEUM, SARAWAK, MALAYSIA: A TESTIMONY OF PUBLIC AND LOCAL COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

Ipoi Datan

INTRODUCTION

Sarawak, located on the island of Borneo, is the largest state in the federation of Malaysia which was formed on 16th September 1963. Prior to this, Sarawak was ruled by the Brunei Sultanate (before 1841), the Brooke Dynasty (1841-1941), was under Japanese Occupation (1942-1945), became a British Colony (1946-1963) and presently, Malaysia (since 1963). During the Brooke regime, several forts were built as administrative and defensive stations to keep law and order in the then turbulent days where the local communities, especially those who opposed the Brooke rule, needed to be pacified or punished accordingly.

This paper will present the challenging efforts faced by the Sarawak Museum to conserve and establish the Fort Alice as Muzium Warisan Sri Aman (Sri Aman Heritage Museum) and to demonstrate how the public and private (consultants, NGOs and local communities) sectors could collaborate to restore and put to good use a famous historical landmark. The Fort Alice Museum was officially opened by the Chief Minister of Sarawak on 18th April 2015.

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Construction of Fort James

In 1849, Fort James was built at Skrang, about 8.5 kilometres upriver from Simanggang (now known as Sri Aman) along the Batang Lupar River. It was named after the first Rajah, Sir James Brooke, who was proclaimed the Rajah of Sarawak on 1st August 1842. It was built to mainly control the marauding Iban (formerly known as Sea Dayak) at Skrang from going downriver to join their powerful Saribas Iban allies on their piratical attacks on coastal shipping and to embark on headhunting raids against the weaker Balau and Sebuyau Iban of the lower Batang Lupar. Prior to this, there were two main battles fought; in 1844 at Skrang and in July 1849 at Beting Maru. The last clash was won convincingly by the Rajah's force which was aided by three British warships (Chater 1965: 15). Soon after this victory, Mr. Crookshank was sent to build the fort with the help of friendly tribes in the

district. The local communities, especially the Iban and Malay, contributed manpower or voluntary assistance (known locally as *gotong royong*) and building materials, especially the *belian* or ironwood (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*). Fort James was put under the supervision of a Malay leader, Sherip Matusain, who had gained the trust of the Rajah. Matusain was later assisted by Mr. Brereton and Alan Lee. In 1853, the famous Iban leader Rentap (Earth Tremor) who felt frustrated as the fort prevented him from going downriver to continue his old past times, planned to attack it. However, Mr. Brereton and Lee supported by a strong force of Balau Iban from Lingga River went upriver to intercept Rentap and his followers. Though, Lee was unfortunately killed in the ensuing battle, the fort remained intact and was never threatened since then. Rentap and his men retreated and fortified themselves at Bukit (Mount) Sadok. Rentap was eventually defeated on 28th October 1861, after two earlier (1857 and 1858) expeditions were unsuccessfully launched against him. After that, peace prevailed in the Batang Lupar district.

Fort Alice at Simanggang

Though the fort achieved its main objective of controlling the notorious Skrang Iban, it however failed in its second goal, i.e., to become the nucleus for settlement and trading centre in the region. This was because the site was unsuitable as it was too low-lying and thus prone to constant floods (Plate I). As such, in 1864 it was dismantled and most of the materials were taken to Simanggang, where it was re-erected and remained unnamed until the arrival of Ranee Margaret, wife of the second Rajah, in Sarawak in 1870 (Chater 1965: 15). It was renamed Fort Alice after her second Christian name (Margaret Alice Lili de Windt). The fort was re-constructed on a small hill over-looking the Batang Lupar River to afford a commanding view over a long extent on either side of the river which was strategic for the position of a fort in the old days (Plate II). Fort Alice has a unique design and is built entirely of *belian*. It is square in shape with a small tower at each inland corner. Its peculiar features are an open court yard in the centre, a spiked iron fence running round the outside. There are several gun turrets and a cannon stands facing the river front while a strong detachment of Sarawak Rangers or fort men were stationed near it.

It was duly occupied by the Brooke officers and served as a residence for the officers, government offices, magistrate court, police station and prison. The second Rajah of Sarawak (Charles Brooke) who was then known as Tuan Muda was in charge of the fort from 1854 till 1863. In 1891, the third

Rajah of Sarawak (Charles Vyner Brooke) served his cadetship at the age of seventeen at Fort Alice under Mr. Bailey (Chater 1965: 15). Malay villages and Chinese shop houses gradually clustered around it as it afforded security and tranquility. In 1921, the famous writer, Somerset Maugham, spent a considerable time at Fort Alice and wrote a few amusing short stories. The more well-known story is entitled, 'The Yellow Streak' which narrated his close shave with death after his boat was capsized by a big tidal bore (locally known as *benak*) while being rowed in the Batang Lupar River (Munan 2015: 73).

After Malaysia, the fort was occupied by several state departments and later by federal agencies. In 1971, it was gazetted as a historical monument, which meant that any renovation or repair works to be done on the fort needed to be referred to and be approved by the Sarawak Museum Department, as stipulated under the then **Antiquities Ordinance 1958** (now replaced by the **Sarawak Cultural Heritage Ordinance 1993**). It was eventually vacated when newer and more spacious government offices were constructed and made available in the 1980s. Though Fort Alice was made wholly of *belian* but even then over the years, it needed to be repaired and maintained especially since it was unoccupied.

Fort Alice in a dilapidated condition

Some minor renovation work was done at Fort Alice in 1984 under the supervision of the Public Works Department or better known as Jabatan Kerja Raya (JKR) but since it was not utilised immediately it started to deteriorate and became the talk of the town for the wrong reason. Local administrators, associations and politicians jointly expressed their concern and proposal, through letters and local media, to have the historical fort properly and promptly restored and converted into a heritage museum for visitors to see.

Though the Sarawak Museum Department was tasked as the custodian of historical monuments and sites in Sarawak it has limited annual budget to undertake renovation work, which involved a substantial sum of money. The Sarawak Museum requested JKR Sri Aman, being the officially recognised technical agency, to conduct a structural assessment of Fort Alice in 2002 and 2009. JKR in turn appointed an engineering consultant to undertake the job. The consultant eventually reported that the vacated building was in a dilapidated condition, not structurally stable and unsafe for use due to serious fungal and parasitic attacks (Plate III). It further recommended that the building be dismantled and re-constructed as near to its original shape and