



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. LXVII No. 88

December 2010



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Volker Schult. (2010). In Search of a German Consulate Consul Eschke's Journey to North Borneo, 28 August to 27 September 1897. The Sarawak Museum Journal, LXVII (88): 143-158

IN SEARCH OF A GERMAN CONSULATE CONSUL ESCHKE'S JOURNEY TO NORTH BORNEO, 28 AUGUST TO 27 SEPTEMBER 1897

Volker Schult

The document presented in this article was found in the Political Archives of German Foreign Office in Berlin. It is an unofficial report by the German Consul of Singapore, Hans Eschke. Eschke was born in Berlin on 10 November 1856 and started his career in the German Foreign Office in 1885. In 1889 he was appointed Imperial Consul in Singapore and stayed in office as consul until 1898. The consulate was changed into a general consulate with Eschke as head of office in 1901. On 19 July 1904 he died in Singapore.¹

Eschke's report consists of 78 handwritten pages and published and translated into English for the first time. It presents a rare, but of course subjective, picture of North Borneo in 1897. Because this is an unofficial report, some parts are crossed out, mostly dealing with negative or critical issues, such as prison labour. The document offers an insight into the economy, mainly consisting of tobacco plantations owned by Europeans, and makes reference to the various ethnic groups including Chinese coolies. Further, it describes the nature, infrastructure and major settlements of North Borneo, i.e. Kudat and Sandakan.

Thus, in a way it partly completes the first description of early Sandakan by the German naval chaplain Wesenberg on board the German warship "Hertha" making a stopover at Sandakan on 11 April 1875 during its circumnavigation. For an account of the report see the author's article in The Sarawak Museum Journal of December 2006.²

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North Borneo came into the focus of German interest first in the

1870s when German and British adventurer-captains ran the Spanish blockade of the Sulu archipelago. The most famous and influential German adventurer was Hermann Leopold Schück who became a friend, later even a blood brother, of the Sultan of Sulu. Both tried to involve the German Empire by for instance seeking German protection (Schück) or offering naval bases (the Sultan). But in the end no permanent German presence in the North Borneo – Sulu area was ever established.³

Then, the German Borneo Company, founded in Hamburg in 1884, acquired land from the British North Borneo Company in order to cultivate tobacco (cf. The author's article in *The Sarawak Museum Journal*, December 2008). Due to lack of financial resources and severe mismanagement, the enterprise finally failed. In 1889 the company went bankrupt.⁴ Individual Germans as managers or assistants of plantations in North Borneo, however, continued. An increasing economic globalisation and a growing global political influence under Emperor Wilhelm II. ("world politics"), also brought North Borneo back into the focus of German policy.

In the course of an expansion of its political influence in Southeast Asia, the idea was born to establish a German consulate in North Borneo. Consul Eschke in Singapore was instructed to report about the development of North Borneo. Thereupon he contacted the German planter Kedenburg, a resident of North Borneo since 1890. First Kedenburg worked as an assistant on Limbuak Estate, then he took over the plantation in 1892. One year later he founded an export and import business in Kudat and worked as an agent for different shipping lines. According to him, there were 130 European residents, 28 of them Germans, in North Borneo in 1896. Only two German companies were in operation at that time, one of them was Kedenburg's company.

Kedenburg argued in favour of a German consular representation because the British authorities did not grant support and protection. For instance, there had been a coolie revolt on his plantation but the British authorities did not respond to any of his pleas for support.