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KAMPONG GERMAN - THE EARLY BEGINNINGS OF SANDAKAN

Volker Schult

INTRODUCTION

Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Taosug of Sulu in the south of the Philippine archipelago were able to keep their independence from Spain. Spanish attempts to conquer the Sulu archipelago failed and in 1871 they finally proclaimed a blockade, sent steam gunboats to the Sulu archipelago and tried to destroy the Taosug settlements. The blockade soon had an impact on the resistance of the Taosug because their trading links with Borneo were interrupted. That was the opportunity for European adventurers. In 1872 the Scot William Clarke Cowie joined the German trading house of Carl Schomburgk & Co. in Singapore. Along with Captain John Dill Ross they founded the Labuan Trading Company. Its only purpose was to run the Spanish blockade in order to transport firearms, ammunition, opium and other contrabands to Sulu. Huge profits could be expected.

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The Sultan of Sulu, Jamal-ul Azam, however, did not only rely on the gun-runners but made attempts to gain European powers as allies. The German adventurer captain Hermann Leopold Schück played a crucial role in this context. After Schück's first contact with the Sultan of Sulu in 1864, a friendship had even developed. As the German gunboat "Nympe" visited the Sulu archipelago in 1873, Sultan Jamal-ul Azam offered ports as naval bases in the Sulu archipelago in exchange for Germany's support against Spain. For his role as intermediary, interpreter and loyal friend, Schück was granted a track of land in Sandakan Bay in the northeast of Borneo by the Sultan in order to establish a trading post. Further, he was given the monopoly of the rattan trade. This was the beginning of

Sandakan, soon called Kampong German. Because Schück had good relations with Carl Schomburgk in Singapore - the latter financed Schück's commercial activities - Kampong German became the centre of the Labuan Trading Co. for running the Spanish blockade. The company's trading system was organized along the following lines: The British Ross sailed the route Singapore - Labuan transporting cheap textiles, opium, tobacco, guns and ammunition. In Labuan these goods were transferred to Schück's ship "Augusta", bound for Sandakan. From Sandakan the small steamers "Far East" and "Tony" sailed to Sulu and ran the blockade.

The small and manoeuvrable steamers were quite successful. This fact posed a serious threat to Spain's efforts to conquer the Sultanate of Sulu. Although the German Emperor Wilhelm I declined the Sultan's offer of naval bases, Spain remained suspicious of any German activities. The Spanish government particularly feared the secret annexation of Sulu by Germany. In 1873 the Spaniards struck back. In August and September two German ships on their way to Jolo were seized, accused of breaking the blockade and confiscated. The seizure of the German ships severely strained the political relations between Germany and Spain. In that situation the German government decided to send a gunboat to Sulu as a demonstration of strength. The "Hertha" under the command of Captain Knorr started its circumnavigation in Germany on 28 October 1874. She was launched as a corvette of 2,500 tons in 1864. Her length was 73.32 metres with 380 sailors on board and her steam engine made up to eight knots an hour. The "Hertha's" armament consisted of 17 six-inch guns. On 11 March 1875 the ship arrived at Singapore and departed on 25 March. On 30 March she arrived at Victoria in Labuan. Then the "Hertha" continued her journey to the Sulu Sea and returned via Manila to Hong Kong where she finally entered the harbour on 27 May.

On board the warship was naval chaplain Wesenberg who wrote an account of his voyage. It was published with the title "The Bay of Sandakan on Borneo" in the magazine "Globus" in Germany in 1879. His account is a very early and rare report of the early beginnings of Sandakan and is presented here in extracts (translation by the author).