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THE RUNDUM REBELLION OF 1915 RECONSIDERED

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INTRODUCTION

The empire building process of the British in North Borneo began in 1877-1878 and concluded by the turn of the century. To the new colonial masters, their expansionist policy to North Borneo served two agenda, the first to further expand British held territories in Asia and to curb any other foreign powers from expanding their wings to Borneo. The second, being the profits that could be harvested from the new territories. To justify this, a colonial sense of morality needed to be enforced either by law or the use of force with the hope of civilizing the savage natives they encountered.

Thus new territories were in essence a kind of Santa Claus who would provide the colonials with continuous bounties to enrich themselves. It is little wonder that the focus of development in the early stages of colonialism reiterated the two agenda. The expansion of the colonial economy took the form of simple extraction via the collection and exporting of jungle produce, timber and minerals. This was necessary to pay for expenses incurred in expanding territorial boundaries. The next step was to further encourage foreign investments mainly in large-scale commodity productions such as tobacco cultivation in line with making North Borneo profitable to the London shareholders. To further enhance the expanding colonial economy, North Borneo was opened up to traders, merchants and planters. The tentacles of the colonial economy was far reaching and expanded swiftly even to the remotest regions of North Borneo, bringing about rapid change. This saw the enforcement of various laws encroaching on native way of life. The outlawing of various activities such as blood feuds, headhunting, slavery and piracy was intended to civilize the natives. More importantly they needed to be transformed into docile citizens who paid taxes and provided free labour whenever the colonials needed it.

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It was these circumstances that brought about severe conditions of physical hardship coupled with social and cultural disintegration which in turn led to a sequence of violent rebellions contesting these changes. To the colonials, these were nothing more than disgruntled natives resisting the civilizing influence of their all knowing white masters. To the natives of

Borneo, it was to resist the destructive rule of the colonials, to preserve their way of life and lastly to gain freedom and the right to self-rule. This paper is about the largest, most aggressive, best planned and ironically the most underwritten rebellion in Malaysian history. The Rundum Rebellion of 1915 marked the height of Murut resistance and brought about a new era of native warfare and statehood. It differs widely from the accounts presented by colonials and historians who portray it as a simple rebellion to resist company rule. It was neither sporadic nor unplanned. It was well planned, had definitive notions of a Murut nation, a territorial boundary, control of manpower – everything to indicate the evolution of a modern nation-state. This paper attempts then to go beyond the current literature on the rebellion which are trapped within the confines of colonial discourse. To name a few, Owen Rutter's and Ian Black's work on the rebellion draws solely on colonial records while Cecilia Leong's work is no different, very much describing the events through a colonial lens¹. A different version presented by Sue Harris is by far the most mediocre piece on the rebellion – an article that not only lacks historical accuracy but also does more harm in the use of native narratives due to her incompetence as an anthropologist and in reconstructing history². If for the above reasons, the author intends to transcend past what's already being done by merging colonial records and native narratives and reconstructing the fragmented past into a history that does not deny the Other agency³.

BRITISH RULE IN INTERIOR REGION OF NORTH BORNEO – 1881-1915

North Borneo was secured via a number of concessions from the Brunei and Sulu Sultanates. In 1884 the Padas-Klias peninsula, later known as Province Dent came under British rule and later followed by the Padas-Damit region, ceded in 1889. The interior region came under total British rule in 1892 with the signing of an agreement with Dutch Borneo which brought about the clear demarcations of boundaries between Dutch and British territories. The justification for British intervention in North Borneo was noted by Governor Treacher:

The company has paved the way to the ultimate extinction of the practice of slavery; it has dealt the final blow to the piracy and kidnapping which still lingered on at its coast; it had substituted one strong and just government for numerous weak, cruel and unjust ones; it has opened courts of justice which know no distinction between rich and poor, between master and slave; it is rapidly adjusting ancient blood feuds between tribes and putting a stop to the old custom of head hunting; it has broken down the barrier erected by the coast Malays to prevent the aborigines having access to the outer world and is

thus enabling trade and its accompanying civilisation to reach the interior races; and it is attracting European and Chinese capital to the country and opening a market for British traders⁴.

To the company, the bottom line was profit driven and how to make North Borneo profitable to its London shareholders. In line with this policy, Governor Treacher persuaded the company directors to expand their control to the Padas-Damit on the assumption it could yield 11,500 sterling a year in revenue. Expansion also was seen to benefit the company through poll-tax collected on the native populace⁵. Right from the onset of colonial rule, the profitability of North Borneo was becoming evident. Treacher commented:

The value of exports from the territory is increasing every year, having been \$145,444 in 1881 and \$525,879 in 1888. With the exception of tobacco and pepper, the list is entirely made up of natural products of the land and sea – such as bee-wax, camphor, damar, gutta, percha, the sap of a large forest tree destroyed in the process of collection of gutta, India rubber, from a creeper likewise destroyed by the collectors, rattan well known to every school boy, sago, timber, edible birds nest, sea pearls, edible sea-weed . . .⁶

The emphasis on the increasing revenue was further enhanced with the full scale planting of tobacco. Under Acting Governor Crocker who arrived in North Borneo in 1887 made the introduction of commercial agriculture his top priority and with 18 months, 500,000 acres were taken up for the planting of tobacco⁷. The importance of tobacco to the Chartered Company was enormous. In 1885, the value of tobacco exports stood at a mere \$1,619, increasing to \$39,775 the following year, reaching \$1,040,674 in 1892 with the peak in 1896 with a total export of \$1,372,277. Tobacco's contribution moved from being a small contributor to the North Borneo finances to being the major contributor at times with export values exceeding 60 percent⁸.

Another major contributor was timber, which supplemented the annual income of the company. In 1890, timber contributed for an export value of \$44,584, increasing to \$374,911 in 1902 and nearly doubling in 1910 with an export value of \$642,935⁹.

The economically motivated Chartered Company adopted cost cutting measures which created a skeleton staff of British Officers and Dayak police administering North Borneo. British notions of their presence in North Borneo is best described by Black:

The policies of government by occasional expedition and in the interior by non European agents and chiefs has been established of course by necessity. Treacher and his contemporaries seem to have thought that these methods were satisfactory. Upon the company's coming, it had not met no serious

opposition and from this Treacher concluded that it had a docile population to deal with. Nothing happened in this period of governorship to challenge seriously this view. The occasional expedition to proclaim the company's presence in Sabah, to settle feuds or stop head-hunting seemed to be all that was required to keep the peace¹⁰.

Clearly this brought about a vicious cycle of events affecting every aspect of Murut life. Colonial rule threatened Murut survival, caused cultural and social disintegration and led to various forms of exploitation even to the level of turning them into unpaid labourers, a type of civilized slavery. The changes affecting Murut life can be divided to a few areas:

1. The impact of traders on the Muruts
2. Infringement on Murut culture (banning headhunting, taxes on liquor and shifting cultivation)
3. Forced labour mainly in the construction of bridle paths and other government works.
4. Excessive use of force by the colonial authorities in dealing with the Muruts.
5. The Dayak factor (Dayak-Murut relations)
6. The essence of Murut culture (kinship, blood-feuds and headhunting)

The Impact of Traders on Muruts

The influx of traders and trading activities was one of the main agenda of the colonial government to further exploit the rich bounties yielded by the forests of North Borneo. In fact on the eve of company rule, virtually all income derived from natural products. Thus the extraction of these products required the role of the natives of the region. It is little wonder then the relationship between the Muruts and the traders favoured the traders in every instance. The exploitation of the Muruts is noted by John Whitehead:

... that by trading, the Muruts receive no more than one hundredth part of the value of barter with the orang Sungai¹¹.

Likewise trading also resulted in the Muruts becoming debt ridden and forced into collecting more jungle produce for the traders. For instance Brunei and Dayak traders told Pryer that the local natives owed them 30,000 bundles of rattan¹². As a result of excessive exploitation, traders have been the source of conflict. For instance the Flint massacre of 1890 was a result of Charles Flint asking for his loans to be settled and resulted in his killing. This eventually led

to the worst massacre in North Borneo by Raffles Flint in retaliation for the death of his brother¹³. The Malingkote of 1891 too targeted traders and in the course of a few months various Murut tribes retaliated in killing 21 persons, mainly traders in a vast territory¹⁴. This prompted the British to further open up the interior region so as to avoid more acts of lawlessness and murders of traders, the source of increasing profits.

Infringement on Murut Culture

After figuring out the profit potential of North Borneo and establishing methods to extract surplus in the name of profit for the London stock holders than came the need to establish a form of English civility. This was no more than an act to define native actions into stereotypical notions of primitive in contrast to modern. The first act was to bar headhunting and slavery, both activities being central in the ordering of Murut society. Headhunting was the continuity of blood feuds that extended into generations. To lose a head, means a kinsmen is obligated to regain a head. In its simplest form, it acted to settle a score and maintain equilibrium among warring factions. Banning head hunting seriously disrupted the ordering of society as old scores could not be settled and a lost kinsmen not avenged. The intricate designs of Murut society allowed peace settlements via negotiations where head counts would be made, and the side with less heads would receive a slave in equal proportion to the dead kinsmen in settlement¹⁵. Thus a peace settlement was reached by an exchange of slaves. To further complicate things, slavery too was banned. In short, the Muruts were expected to stop headhunting and slavery was abolished. To further complicate matters, headhunting tribes from across the border continued to take heads in British North Borneo and the Muruts were barred from retaliatory raids. This was seen as a denial of self-protection and the avenging of a dead relative. It is little wonder, that the anti-colonial resistance such as the Padas-Klias affair and the Malingkote were intended to revert back to headhunting as soon as the colonial intruders were defeated.

The enforcement of taxes too made life hard for the Muruts. The first was the poll-tax where every adult was taxed \$1. To make things worse, the native Dayak administrators exploited the Muruts for more, taxing them at will¹⁶.

In 1913, the Native Liquor Tax was introduced to curtail excessive drinking among the Muruts. The ingredients used in liquor production such as cassava, rice, coconut were taxed. For instance, three kilograms of rice used to make rice wine or *tapai* was taxed 2 cents, one cent for three kilogram of cassava, 25 cents for each coconut tree used in the making of *bahr*¹⁷. What