

## Contesting Colonial Discourse: Rewriting Murut History of Resistance in British North Borneo from 1881 to 1915

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to contest the colonial discourse on the history of Murut anti-British resistance. Anti-British resistance was part and parcel of reactions towards the British in the early periods of colonial rule from 1881-1915. In over three decades, the Muruts launched numerous rebellions against the British with disastrous defeats and heavy loss of lives. For the British, these actions were considered irrational, driven by the Muruts' desire to return to their past ways of lawlessness and savage practices. To the Muruts, each rebellion marked a sign of resistance against the colonial encroachment into their social, economic, cultural and political life. Contrary to colonial views that downplay the significance of the Murut rebellions, the latter did forge a unified nation by 1915. The Rundum Rebellion of 1915 was the climax of Murut resistance. It contained features of a unified nation, a fixed geographical boundary, a leadership hierarchy, mobilization of labour and the control of violence to oust the British from Murut country. In essence, Murut resistance had a single goal – to gain independence from colonial rule.*

*Key words: Colonial discourse, Murut rebellion, nation, British North Borneo*

### ABSTRAK

*Makalah ini bertujuan mempersoalkan wacana kolonial mengenai sejarah penentangan kaum Murut terhadap Inggeris. Penentangan itu ialah sebahagian yang padu daripada reaksi kaum Murut terhadap Inggeris yang bermula sejak bahagian awal penguasaan Inggeris iaitu antara 1881-1915. Dalam tempoh lebih tiga dasawarsa itu, penentangan Murut telah berakhir dengan kekalahan serta kehilangan banyak nyawa. Bagi Inggeris, penentangan Murut dianggap sebagai pencerminan keinginan kaum Murut untuk balik ke cara hidup lama yang didasari oleh ketiadaan undang-undang serta amalan primitif. Namun bagi masyarakat Murut, penentangan ini berlaku kerana mereka menentang dasar campur tangan Inggeris dalam kehidupan sosial, ekonomi, budaya dan politik mereka. Berlawanan dengan pandangan Inggeris yang meremehkan penentangan tersebut, keadaan ini telah menjadi*

*pencetus kepada pembentukan nasion Murut menjelang 1915. Pemberontakan Rundum 1915 adalah kemuncak kepada penentangan Murut. Penentangan itu mempunyai beberapa ciri seperti satu nasion Murut yang bersatu, sebuah wilayah yang tetap, hiraki pentadbiran, mobilisasi buruh serta pengawalan keganasan yang bertujuan menghalau Inggeris daripada Negeri Murut. Pada hakikatnya, penentangan Murut mempunyai satu tujuan, iaitu membebaskan diri mereka daripada genggaman penjajah.*

*Kata kunci: Wacana kolonial, pemberontakan Murut, nasion, British North Borneo*

## INTRODUCTION

The literature on native resistance fills the pages of the writings of colonised nations as they strive to construct a post-independence history. In the context of Malaysia, much of the literature has understandably been about Malay rebellions against British colonial intrusion. In Sabah, formerly known as British North Borneo, the popular rebellion of 1895-1900 led by a Sulu-Bajau leader, Mat Salleh was one of the fiercest. However, it should be remembered that the Muruts also played an important role in resisting colonialism. Ironically, the importance of Murut resistance occupies a small place in Malaysian historiography. This arose in part from colonial writings which painted them as a savage group who resisted the civilising influence of the white men and wanted to return to their savage past of head hunting and blood feuds. The stigmatisation persisted through time and changed little in post-colonial Malaysia. Their history remains marginal and the Murut-phobia continues to be evident among various sections of the peoples of Sabah.

However, the history of the Muruts was not one of easy subordination, but one filled with resistance and armed conflicts against British rule. It did in the broader sense encompass an aspiration for nationhood bonded by a common history of resistance and the experience of violent oppression. The Rundum Rebellion of 1915 launched by the Muruts was the climax of a struggle to rid themselves of colonial rule and to forge a nation.

## CONTESTING COLONIAL CONSTRUCTS

The context of British-Murut relations is very much dominated by the views of the former imposed on the latter. This is the foundation of colonial knowledge, built on the limited perspective of the coloniser, grounded on their presuppositions of what reality is. Colonialism not only colonises the geographical space, but also the epistemological one (Cohn 1996). It is a

one-sided relationship, plaguing the societies it came into contact with epistemological hegemony, so much so that its constructs of the Other became dominant and later accepted by the Other as reality.

It is the conquering of the epistemological space by colonialism that brought about a reconstruction of the 'native's' identity. In the case of the Muruts, the conquest of their physical space was followed by the construction of what a Murut was. The Murut people were regarded as a lowly human species, primitive, vile and barbaric. There was nothing positive about them, their culture was regarded as filled with barbarism, blood feuds, head hunting and excessive drinking. They lacked personal hygiene, their dressing had no sense of morality, with bare-breasted women, and scantily clad women and men (Roth 1896). Mr. Yesse, a colonial officer noted this on the Murut:

With respect to the Idaan or the Muruts, as they are called here, I cannot give any account of their disposition, but from what I have heard from Borneyans; they are a set of abandoned idolaters, one of their tenets, so strangely inhuman, I cannot pass unnoticed, which is, that their future interest depends upon the number of their fellow creatures they have killed in any engagement or common disputes, and count their degrees of happiness to depend on the number of human skulls in their possession, from which, and the wild, disorderly life they lead, unrestrained by any bond of civil society, we ought not to be surprised if they are cruel and vindictive disposition. (quoted in Treacher 1890 : 94-95)

To which Treacher commented, "I think this is rather a case of giving a dog a bad name" (1890: 95).

Likewise De Crespigny wondered if the Murut were the long-sought 'missing link', in what he perceived as their 'unmistakable' and 'ludicrous' resemblance to the *Orang Utan*. To this Black commented, "his reaction to the Murut was to be a typical European one for many years, they were dismissed as inferior racially to other ethnic groups of Sabah...the Muruts were there to be exploited and in some cases enslaved" (Black 1983: 96).

Perhaps most interesting is the fact that the Muruts ranked so low in the mental constructs of civility among the British. They were regarded as incapable of logical thinking and governance and needed to be 'civilised'. They needed to be brought under direct control via the opening up of the interior region, with a resultant abolition of their primitive and savage culture of head hunting, slave ownership and blood feuds. Their primitive shifting cultivation should be taxed to further curb the revenue lost to the company as a result of jungle felling. They justified usage of Muruts as labourers in building bridle paths in order to make the Muruts more accessible to the civilising influence of the British – another kind-hearted gesture from the British!

For this and other reasons, there is a need among scholars to be conscious of some of the shortcomings and distortions of colonial versions of history. This is especially true when the history is written by colonial officers for they tend to

be highly prejudicial of the Muruts. They justify the cruellest of actions and the imposition of unjust laws by the British on the Muruts. As for traditional historians, their arm chair approach is merely documenting events as found in colonial records (and through their colonial lens) and is rather close-minded towards other forms of narratives. One such instance is when Ian Black dismisses A.N. Keith's discussions with the Tengaras she interviewed as nothing new as her major findings were already found in colonial records (Black 1983).

On the other hand, a refreshing approach to history is offered by Fernand Braudel (1980: 11) who provides us with a concept of total history, encompassing 'major forms of collective life, economies, social structure, in short and above all, civilisations'. Interestingly, Braudel advocates that historical construction should be comprehensive and include all aspects of human social realities. I find this perspective far superior as an analytical tool as we cannot expect to understand events in isolation. There is a bigger picture to look at with questions such as what are the relationships between the various incidences of revolt and violence among the Muruts? And was there a concept of "nation" among the Muruts? Braudel's concept of total history allows us the possibility to look at Murut social structure, their economy, their political structure and more importantly, how their society is structured as a whole. Unfortunately, Braudel's *Annales* school is more in line with literate cultures such as in the Mediterranean where information governing every aspect of society is documented and stored in archives, libraries and churches. Among the Muruts, such material is non-existent. However, they do have oral narratives of the past. As such oral narratives will be used as a credible source of history on par with archival history (Thompson 1978). This paper hopes to utilise colonial writings (for they provide accounts of events, time and place and practices noted by the natives themselves of the particular era) and counter-checking them with oral narratives as narrated by Murut elders, to reconstruct a (different?) more accurate account of Murut history. This historical reconstruction will go transcend beyond the simplistic notions of a dominant singular discourse. Moving on from this, I will reanalyse the events that began with the Padas-Klias affair of 1888 and climaxed in the Rundum Rebellion of 1915. What colonial historians did was to portray these rebellions as isolated and sporadic, and the Rundum rebellion merely as no more than a final resistance against rapid change. As this paper will show, this is not the case. Their resistance had a history going back to the onset of British rule in Borneo. Various factors such as taxes, banning of certain cultural practices, and exploitation played a catalytic role in forging an embryonic nation as it provided them with a common history.

The emergence of a Murut nation was possible at least with the fulfilment of a few criteria such as one language, historical memories, territorial association, shared cultural attributes and most importantly, it was politicized

and staked out a claim for a Murut country. Other *Gesellschaft* features such as political centralization, social mobilization and control of violence further provided the Muruts with attributes of a nation (Smith 1986: 154-161). The use of Smith's idea of nation is relevant and clearly shows that nations can exist in pre-capitalist or tribal societies. This is certainly in opposition to Gellner who noted that this was strictly a modern concept and pre-modern societies did not have the capacity to generate an ideology for the forging of a nation (Smith 1986). Likewise, Anderson's view on the need of print culture to forge an imagined nation is accurate as far as the experience of many modern nations is concerned (Anderson 1990) but quite irrelevant in the context of the Muruts. The Muruts had no print culture, in fact had no written culture and were shifting cultivators engulfed in inter-tribal warfare - in every sense pre-modern and yet fulfilled the various people subjected to colonial rule aspired to nationhood and perhaps its time to go beyond Gellner and Anderson in the conception of nation, especially with regard to non-European nations.

#### BRITISH RULE IN NORTH BORNEO

The British secured North Borneo via a number of concessions from the Brunei and Sulu Sultanate. The interior region came under British rule in 1884 with the concession of the Padas-Klias peninsula, later known as Province Dent. This was followed by the Padas-Damit region, ceded in 1889. The justification of British intervention in North Borneo is 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 knows 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 accompanying civilisation to reach the interior races; and it is attracting European and Chinese capital to the country and opening market for British traders. (Treacher 1890: 112)

The company clearly had two distinct intentions. The first was profit. For instance, Governor Treacher persuaded the company directors to expand their control to the Padas-Damit on the assumption that it could yield 11,500 sterling a year in revenue. Expansion also was seen to benefit the company through a poll-tax collected from the natives (Black 1971). The profitability of North Borneo to the company was evident from the figures on the eve of colonial rule. 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.....(Treacher 1890: 64).

The emphasis on the increasing revenue was further enhanced with the full scale planting of tobacco. Under Acting Governor Crocker who arrived in Sabah in 1887, the introduction of commercial agriculture was made the top priority, and within 18 months, 500,000 acres were taken up for tobacco planting (Black 1971: 183). 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, but reaching \$1,040,674 in 1892, and peaking in 1896 with a total export of \$1,372,277. From being a small contributor to the North Borneo finances, tobacco became the major contributor with export values at times exceeding 60 per cent (of what?) (Johnson & Jackson 1973: 96).

The second was the civilising influence of colonial rule. The company had to justify its take-over of North Borneo along moralist lines to its London share holders. This meant that native practices not conforming to the righteous idealism of the British were to be stopped at all cost.

Among the Muruts, laws prohibiting head hunting, blood feuds and slavery were imposed. A poll-tax of \$1 for every adult was imposed right from the outset of British rule. Trade was also encouraged with the interior regions opened via railways and bridle paths. These changes brought about exploitation by traders for the Muruts and forced labour requirements on Murut men. In short, various measures by the British were in opposition to their continued existence. The Muruts saw the British as a threat to their society and culture. Thus, the early forms of protest, were to cope with the avalanche of changes befalling them.

The dissatisfaction and opposition to the company's government in the new territory mounted. The Assistant Resident, D.D. Daly's, usual remarks like "no disturbance" or "perfect tranquillity" to describe the area under his command painted an inaccurate picture of the true situation (Black 1971: 185). With the eruption of the Padas-Klias affair in the February 1888 uprising (1971: 185), followed by the Flint massacre (1890) and finally the Malingkote incident (1891) the tranquillity was shattered. These events encompassed the beginning of Murut dissent.

The Padas-Klias Affair of 1888 began with the killing of a Dayak trader, Raden Salleh and his assistant. Later, another Dayak corporal and three of his constables sent to investigate, were also ambushed and murdered. The ringleaders of this incident were Banessah and Dato Stia Bakti (a Muslim Murut).

The company was further informed that the Muruts of Marak and the nearby villages were on a rampage. The company reacted by getting reinforcements from Gaya and the auxiliaries under Nakoda Unsang, a Dayak outlaw from Sarawak with a large following from the district of Tuaran. Governor Leys (Labuan) lent rifles and despatched a gunboat with a complement of marines to Mempakul. The company's strength was about 120, of which 30 were company police. At about this time, on February 6<sup>th</sup> 1888, the Muruts attacked and burnt down the Batu-Batu station. The Murut force numbered around 300. They also threatened to attack Mempakul and other police stations (Davies to Governor, 28/3/88, CO874/245, Black 1971: 213).

The Muruts were subdued, but not without a heavy cost to human lives with 57 Muruts killed, including women and children. Another 26 Muruts were taken prisoners in various skirmishes and a further 415 surrendered to the government. Among the surrendered, 22 'ringleaders' were identified and later tried at Mempakul, some sentenced to be hanged and others imprisoned. The remainder of the prisoners (including women and children) were shipped off to Gaya, Kudat and Sandakan to live in exile as labourers (Davies to the Governor, 28/3/88, CO874/245; Black 1971: 188-189).

According to the British, Dato Stia Bakti was a troublesome native to the company. He was warned on numerous occasions to stop trading in gunpowder and failed in the eyes of the colonials to be transformed into an honest trader. He took company buffaloes, resulting in conflict with the company. As far as the company was concerned, he was a handful, but it decided not to take any action against him. On the other hand, Banessah, the other ringleader, had reacted against the banning of headhunting. In 1885, the company burnt the village of Naga Palawan for their headhunting activities and the people were let off with a warning. It was to this that Banessah had reacted too and he refused to give up the practice. However, Resident Davies did not arrest him for his fierce words after being persuaded by his brother that Banessah's comments were the result of alcohol intoxication (Davies to Governor, 28/3/88, CO874/245).

The disturbance broke out in February 1888, at around the time the Muruts begin headhunting. Stia Bakti and Banessah stirred the people by rekindling the old story that the Padas river had been given back to the Sultan of Brunei and the people could return to their old customs. Davies further attributed the Murut action to company leniency in the past against transgressions committed by them (C.O.874/245 Davies to Governor p.457). The assumption made by Davies does not in anyway account for the reasons behind the armed rebellion. Firstly, Dato Stia Bakti was probably a prominent local leader displaced politically and economically as a result of company rule. This might explain the Murut support for him. Banessah, on the other hand refused to conform to the company's banning of head-hunting. Thus, Banessah was able to gain support among his people who also shared the common belief. Another point is that company retaliatory method of burning villages for head-hunting could easily have

resulted in a new feud between the Murut and the British. This is based on the fact that about 300 Murut warriors attacked the station at Batu-Batu. This would have required the combined strength of a few villages brought together by kinship relations. A further point that needs to be stressed is that the actions of Pengiran Subudin, a Bajau chief and accompanying Dayaks, who looted and burned the villages of the Murut, would surely have instigated blood feud with the Muruts. As agents of the Company, these blood feuds could easily have extended to the British.

Murut-British relations suffered another blow with the murder of Charles Walter Flint and the Murut massacre of 1890 was one of the worst massacres in the history of British North Borneo. His brother, C. Raffles Flint, a company officer, not satisfied with the reasons and discrepancies in the various reports, went on an expedition in search of what really happened. C.W.Flint had married the daughter of a prominent local chief, Semporna Numpal according to local custom, and had paid a sum of \$125 in bride wealth. Numpal, heavily indebted to Flint for the various loans he had taken, tried to avoid paying his debt and left Kuamut with his daughter. Flint went in search of Numpal and was later murdered. Meanwhile, Raffles Flint later discovered that his brother was indeed murdered by Numpal. The reason for the murder according to Tenggara Chiefs was Numpal's anger over the marriage of Flint to his daughter. In search of Numpal, the expedition arrived at Pigau, a tributary of the Kalabakang. Upon arrival, Jabang and Lance Corporal Maling volunteered to go down river to find the long house of Numpal and his followers. They later discovered the long house at the Pigau river, crammed with people dancing and having a festival. To their surprise the number of natives gathered was large. The expedition of Raffles Flint and G. Hewitt totaling 30 persons arrived at the site of Numpal's house and launched a full scale attack resulting in 130 Tenggaras being killed (G.Hewitt to Beaufort, 4/11/90 and Raffles Flint to Chairman, 10/11/90, CO874/250).

In the conclusion of his report, Raffles noted that "the attack was entirely unpremeditated on our part as it was our intention to have captured Numpal and the principal murderers and it was solely on account by the hostile attributes of the Tengaras on our arrival" (Raffles to Chairman, 10/11/1888, CO874/250).

The massacre at Pigau was in every aspect an act of revenge by Raffles Flint. For one, there is a distinct difference between the report made by Hewitt and Flint, further questioning the historical accuracy of these reports. It was Flint who initiated the assault on Numpal. Even when Numpal's men were in disarray, fearing to leave their long house, Flint continued the assault. Before the natives could act, Flint ordered a charge into the house from both ends of the long house which resulted in a massacre in a true sense. The killing of women and children and of other warriors in a hopelessly lost situation was an act of revenge and barbarism. Even though the British had a Tengaras speaking Dayak,

no attempt was made to demand the surrender of Numpal. The consequence of this event resulted in the near total decimation of a tribe. Surely this massacre would not be forgotten by other Muruts, surviving clansmen who are morally obligated to begin and continue a blood feud with the British. Under the extreme social conditions facing the Muruts, a religious movement called the Malingkote of 1891 broke out with such ferocity that it left the British in a daze worrying about the sheer proportion of damage it would inflict.

The Malingkote incident began in Sapulote country in the interior regions of British North Borneo, led by a Murut warrior, Tahang who dreamt during a serious illness that if certain ceremonies needed by angels were to be fulfilled he and his followers would be empowered to see angels and become invulnerable. They would also be capable of rising from the dead and would have wings to fly. As a result, the Sepulote Muruts went all out in converting other Muruts to their new belief that they too may be similarly empowered (Wise 1894). Wise further noted that other Muruts were threatened with death by thunderbolts and with their houses destroyed if they did not follow the new faith. As a result, Tahang was able to create a large scale movement in the interior region, along the Padas gorge up to Pegalan through the Keningau plains. It also spread northwards to Ulu Papar and Putatan. The results were the neglect of crops, destruction of their animals and giving away of property, excessive drinking and murder at will (Black 1983: 99-101; Wise 1894: 201; Acting Governor Beaufort to Chairman, 23/6/1891 and Magistrate Wheatley to A. Governor Beaufort, 11/6/1891, CO874/251).

The Malingkote resulted in the murder of tax-paying outsiders. A total of 21 men comprising Dusun, Brunei, Dayak, Chinese and Murut were killed in various villages in the interior. The British considered the murder of tax-paying subjects as a blatant challenge to company rule. They needed to act by bringing the area under the company's immediate control with the stationing of British officers to enforce company laws. The consequence of the Malingkote incident in terms of lives lost is unknown. However crop damage and the killing of life stock was extensive with probable mass starvation as a result. Black (1983) offers an explanation of the Malingkote as a response towards the vast disruptions brought about by colonial rule such as new laws, influx of traders and the banning of headhunting. So the Malingkote is in sum merely a cultural-magico response to rapid change via excessive cultural disruptions. My disagreement with Black's analysis is on the basis of the Muruts' inability to change. I do agree that change had been rapid in the course of a decade but the Malingkote was a large scale movement transcending cultural and linguistic barriers suggesting an elaborate belief system towards freedom and refusal to be caught up in the colonial economy and its laws. There are some questions that remain a mystery such as how did Tahang mobilise scores of villages to his cause? What made his religious beliefs so interesting as to receive such support? Or was this to rebuild society with religious beliefs as its core? The

possibilities are numerous. Colonial officers and traditional historians would rather see this as irrational Murut actions – driven by ridiculous magic beliefs and superstitions. Perhaps on a higher note, the Malingkote was to the Muruts what resurrection is to white Christian administrators and historians!

The nature of British-Murut relations with regard to the three initial violent events can be attributed to a number of causes. The British believed they were civilising the Muruts by banning head hunting, blood feuds and slavery. Similarly, trade was regarded as crucial in modernising the region and was introduced vigorously. Little attempt was made to understand or to comprehend the impact on the Muruts. These changes were to the British essential in transforming the Muruts and bringing them into a life of civility.

As a result colonial historiography only accounted for British perceptions. It failed to understand the significance of blood feuds as an act to avenge a dead kinsman or head hunting as act to regain inter tribal equilibrium as far as head counts go and to regain tribal honour for the loss of a kinsman. The whole process of checks and balances existing in Murut society was disregarded on account of the prejudices of white superiority. Likewise the introduction of trade was positive to the British because it contributed to the finances needed for the administration of North Borneo. Dominated by a singular notion of righteousness, they acted to reject shifting cultivation because it was destructive to harvesting timber as a commodity. Little attention was given to the impact of trade on the Muruts and the resulting exploitation that plagued them for decades.

As a result of this, British actions no matter how violent were justified as necessary. After all Raffles Flint was complimented by the company for his huge success in dealing with the Tengaras. Concerning the first three conflicts, the inadequacy of British records is clearly revealed as they are highly one-sided in the representation of social realities. What they do is to represent British realities. Cohn's (1996) criticism of this is particularly useful and without any attempt to move toward Braudel's 'total history', Murut history will continue to be dominated by British interpretations of Murut history and reality defined by the colonial gaze.

After a string of violent events, the British turned over the administration of the interior region to the Dayaks. The Dayaks have so far been a crucial factor in the pacification of the Muruts. They administered the region, collected taxes, policed the region and were the most active traders. Their role is extremely significant in the expansion of Company dominance in North Borneo in general.

Infrastructure was constructed to make the interior more accessible to traders in an attempt to make North Borneo more profitable. In 1905, the railways reached Tenom and brought large numbers of traders and jungle produce collectors, who now took hours instead of days to travel from the coast to the interior. Likewise the construction of the bridle path began in 1901 with the same intention. By 1905, over 85 miles of bridle paths were successfully

constructed, reaching into interior places such as Tomani, Tenom, Melalap, Keningau and Tambunan. These paths were later extended into Rundum, Pensiangan and Sapulote by 1907. In fact by 1929, the Governor of the British North Borneo Chartered Company informed the Chairman in London that "550 miles were traced and constructed at a moderate cost by the North Borneo civil service. These paths were a valuable element in the development and pacification of the country" (SGA File 834).

At least a few points need to be stressed here. Firstly, the moderate cost was a result of Muruts being used as a source of free labour. Each Murut man was required to build 22 metres of bridle path a year. The path had a width of approximately 1.5 metres. More importantly, the construction was difficult as it had to go through virgin forest. In fact what the colonials proudly noted as 6-8 days of free labour went as long as three months, which in turn threatened the survival of the Muruts by limiting the time they had for agricultural production (Fernandez n.d.). The bridle path in itself was of little use to the Murut as they had their own jungle tracks for travel. In 1914, on a strange notion of fairness, the Muruts were paid a meagre 3 cents per day for a period of eight days a year, a sum hardly enough to sustain them or to meet payment of taxes (Fernandez n.d.).

Another problem to strike the interior region was the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic in 1905. According to the British, the official number of deaths totalled 2773 persons in Jesselton (present day Kota kinabalu), Papar, Putatan, Tuaran and Beaufort. However the actual numbers could be much higher as those in the interior region would go into the jungle to die (SGA File 1061). Probably many Murut were infected with the disease and died from it. More importantly, the Muruts no longer had the option of barring the entry of sick individuals into their territory as was done in the time of their fore fathers. Among the Muruts' sickness is related to evil spirits and the coming of foreigners brought a lot of evil into Murut country, contributing further to their contempt of foreigners (Black 1983). A.J Moysey noted abuses in tax collection when he travelled to the Sook, Bongawan and Talangkai rivers. A Murut chief told Fraser of various forms of exploitation by the Dayaks;

...taking and selling of slaves, fining people at their own will, divorcing and fining their wives or relations without a proper enquiry according to Murut customs before the chiefs, and inciting others to raid, and at times accompanying raiders. (Black 1981: 13)

This coupled with forced labour for the bridle paths threatened the livelihood of the Muruts. The smallpox epidemic in 1905 perhaps further strengthened their belief that the opening up of Murut country was a threat to their existence. Though the region was in relative calm for over two decades, after a sequence of violent events in the late 1880s and early 1890s, the various intrusion of colonial policy created further discontentment over colonial rule and was to resurface yet again.

The appointment of District Officer W.C.M. Weeden, first in Tomani and in mid 1908 in Rundum brought about a more systematic and orderly running of the region as well as a curtailment of the powers of the Dayaks. It was a period of rapid change with the introduction of railways, telegraphs and bridle paths. More importantly it paved the way for the growth of a capitalist economy and clearer administrative ties with the centre, Jesselton.

By 1910, a bridle path was constructed from Tenom to Rundum and finally to Pensiangan. The building of the bridle path was intended to increase the control over natives and the collection of taxes. Furthermore the bridle path was seen as a prerequisite for the development of agriculture mainly tobacco in the region. As mentioned earlier, the construction of the bridle path depended solely on Murut labour for the most part without wages. In fact the Muruts had great difficulty working as labourers and that was one of the main reasons for the largest rebellion to ever erupt in Murut country.

In 1913, two new laws were imposed on the native populace. The first imposed taxation on land use and comprised three main administrative regulations. Firstly, the demarcation and titling of permanently cultivated indigenous land-holdings was introduced, which saw the introduction of land deeds in North Borneo. A sum of 50 cents a year was charged as tax for agricultural producers. However this law had little impact on the Murut populace. The next aspect of the law was the restraint on shifting cultivation. Under the new law, shifting cultivators were required to have permits to open new land. The new law prohibited the felling of virgin forest for this purpose (SGA File 284). Non-compliance of the new law resulted in the enforcement of a heavy fine of \$25 per acre of forest felled. This law was meant to slow down and eventually put an end to shifting cultivation. It seems clear that the laws were made for the benefit of the colonials with the intention of increasing permanent agriculture via British plantations and the extraction of timber. However the law sparked fear among the Muruts as it threatened their natural economy.

The native liquor tax was imposed in 1913 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 for *tapai* making was taxed two cents, one cent for three kilograms of tapioca, 25 cents for each coconut tree used for making *bahr* (SGA File 1178). What the British failed to realise was the social significance of drinking. It was essential in all types of ceremonies such as birth, death, the harvest festival, weddings, house building, settling feuds, honouring guest etc. (Black 1981). For this reason, the native liquor tax can be seen as an infringement of Murut social life. In fact the British discovered that in many places from the coastal areas of North Borneo to the interior region, the natives opposed this tax (see Native liquor taxation, SGA File 1178).

In conclusion, various policies further aggravated British-Murut relations. The enforcement of more taxes and the infringement of local customs and ritual was seen as a threat to the Murut way of life. Likewise the construction of the bridle path was one of their main complaints, the dissatisfaction of a proud nation reduced to being labourers (a comment from a Tagol elder, fieldwork 1996). Certainly, these common experiences provided a sense of solidarity and a consciousness of shared identity in the emergence of a Murut nation in 1915.

### TOWARDS THE RUNDUM REBELLION OF 1915

In June 1914, a Murut headman, Blayong was causing unrest in the Rundum district. Blayong's dissatisfaction was attributed to the building of the bridle path through solid rock. The British reacted by sending a police force to capture Blayong and suppress his protest. Though the British failed to apprehend him, there was certainly enough aggression on the part of the British who burnt down long houses which provided Blayong shelter. After a long cat and mouse game, Blayong sent in his government rifle to Bunbury and pledged allegiance to the company. (Bunbury to the Governor, 17/6/1914, 1/7/1914 and 14/7/1914, CO874/835).

The British believed that the Muruts had learned their lesson through the punishment of out of line natives. Bunbury was confident that the troubles in the Tagol were settled, "I feel confident that the district is now quiet and I do not anticipate any disturbances". Bunbury further noted that "...that there was a prevailing rumour among the Muruts that by attacking Blayong, the British were on a rampage intended to wipe out all of the Ulu Tagol and perhaps other rivers" (Bunbury to the Governor, 1/7/1914, CO874/835).

It was clear that the use of force may have been construed by the British as an assertion of power against indiscipline but to the Muruts, it would have surely been viewed as continued aggression against them. In February 1915, a large-scale rebellion erupted. A Dayak *mandur* (supervisor) was missing and presumed dead at the site of the bridle path construction at Silui. A further attack was launched on the 10<sup>th</sup> against the Rundum Police Station. Later the Pensiangan station was attacked and destroyed and telegraph lines cut.

Babaneau, in disbelief, noted a force of not less than 60 hostile villages against the British. He continued; "nor do we have a single friendly native in the district whom we can rely as a guide or informant" (C.O 874/835, N.B. Babaneau to Resident Bunbury 27/2/1915). A force led by Pearson and 15 Indian Police combined with the forces under Babaneau at Rundum where they found themselves facing a full scale assault by 600-700 Murut warriors. They managed to defeat the Muruts and the Muruts retreated after having had 12 warriors killed and another 20-30 wounded.

This attack prompted Bunbury to send a second force into the troubled region. He also sent Dayak scouts and loyal natives to gather more information, who later reported of Murut forts of considerable size and strength under the leadership of Onteros, Chief of Silangit.

Bunbury led a force which included three other British officers, Babaneau, Pearson and Tabateau, a 100 strong police squad and 300 porters, which met up with the rebel forces under Onteros at Silangit. After three days of battle, the Muruts were finally defeated. Bunbury later sent his interpreters to negotiate with the rebels and they secured \$800 in cash, goods and two rifles. They also asked for the surrender of Onteros. Finally Onteros and his right hand men, Kalur and Angsukul, came out and were cuffed. Onteros informed the resident that "he had a dream in which he was directed to dig the ground and had therefore done so, but denied he had any intention of building a fort or fighting against government." After the enquiry, Bunbury sentenced Onteros to death and had him shot immediately. Bunbury said; "they should not escape and in addition he could ill afford a guard to look after them" (Bunbury to Government Secretary 24/04/1915, CO874/835).

Bunbury then decided to withdraw his forces as he did not have sufficient ammunition to continue the blockade. As for the Muruts, who realised that their own leader was executed after surrendering, they refused to surrender themselves and pledged to fight to the death defending the fort. The cost to human life is estimated at 350-400 Murut warriors. The fort itself must have held about 900 people. Bunbury was amazed at the design of the fort and the ingenuity of the natives. He noted;

the fort consist of seven under ground houses, closely connected with each other. The hills were guided with udang and sula (long and short sharpened bamboo stakes) thickly planted, a fence and innumerable loopholes... estimated the size of the fort at 80 ft by 30 ft. (Bunbury to the Government Secretary 24/4/1915, 874/835)

After the victory at Silangit, Bunbury was confident that there would not be any further rebellions in the region. Governor Pearson, commenting on the success of Bunbury noted, "he (Bunbury) was wise in letting 300 to escape as they will carry the tales to their friends" (Governor to the Chairman, 5/5/1915, CO874/835). However in reality, the pacification of the Muruts did not come so fast. Late in April, eight telegraph linesmen were murdered by the people of the Mesopo, who also threatened to attack the company station in Keningau. It was not until September 1915 that first surrenders occurred (Black 1981).

## THE RUNDUM REBELLION ACCORDING TO COLONIAL SOURCES

As for the causes of the rebellion, British records do not seem coherent as there is an unresolved debate on the actual cause of the revolt. The first document is based on accounts by H.L. Bunbury in 1915. Here Bunbury analysed three reasons that could have sparked a rebellion. Among them:

1. Taxes on native liquor – implemented in 1913
2. Restrictions on the felling of jungle – implemented in 1913
3. Bridle path and other works for government

Bunbury concluded that taxation on native liquor was not implemented in the Rundum area. Similarly, the restrictions on jungle felling through taxation was not enforced in Rundum. He concluded that the Muruts have been called to work on the bridle path but it must be remembered that the Rundum district and elsewhere throughout the territory, natives on pledging allegiance to the government, had undertaken the liability of such work. It must be noted that no wages were paid for the work on the bridle path until 1914, when Governor Parr introduced wages for work done. Bunbury further noted that there could be other lesser reasons such as the spill over effect from disturbances in Dutch Borneo and Sarawak into North Borneo and the dissatisfaction among Muruts with the British for ending head hunting and blood feuds (Parr to Chairman British North Borneo, 11/4/1915, CO874/835).

The second document, “Memorandum on the Unrest in North Borneo” (C.O. 874/835 W.J.Worth to Governor Pearson, 29/7/1915) too focussed on the three main reasons for the rebellion such as the bridle path and other government works, the taxes on native liquor and the restriction on felling of jungle.

Worth noted that the cause for Blayong’s uprising in 1914 was due to the fact that bridle path he was constructing had to cut through solid rock. He further stressed that this dissatisfaction was also rampant among other Muruts. Many Muruts had attributed five months drought to the construction of new bridle paths through virgin jungle. He further noted that many Muruts may have left their homes to avoid working on the bridle paths.

The Muruts were further aggravated by the introduction of new taxes. Like Bunbury earlier, Worth too noted that these taxes were not imposed in the turbulent region. He pointed out that the Ladang Ordinance 1913 seemed to be an irritation to the Muruts as it prohibited felling of forest for shifting cultivation. Natives were required to obtain permits to fell jungle in the sum of 50 cents per acre. Native Chiefs allowing breaches could be fined not exceeding \$25.

Worth’s report goes one step further as it includes native accounts of the

causes of the rebellion. One of Bunbury's Dayak scouts having a discussion with Lantangan, a native chief of Ullang at the fort noted the rebellion occurred as a result of bridle paths and other government works, the taxes on liquor and the restriction on felling of jungle. This information is further corroborated by Leong, the native chief of Keningau. In May 1915, three chiefs from the Rundum district said that their "main grievences were the taxes on tapai and the ladang tax for felling of jungle". A point to remember is that W.J Worth's main reason for the revolt was the building of the bridle path and other government works. According to the British, since the taxes were not enforced in the region, the report in the end discarded native reasons for the rebellion.

The final report by F.W. Fraser noted a different set of reasons that triggered the mass rebellion. The Muruts at the time were suffering from a string of droughts and were unable to obtain enough to eat from the forest. Fraser concluded that they must have discussed their misfortunes and blamed it on the arrival of the British. After all, the British did play a pivotal role in bringing to an end the practice of head hunting and also constructed telephone lines and bridle paths across virgin forest. On top of that, a man like Antanum professed to having magical powers and promised to oust the British from their land. Therefore to Fraser, this rebellion was about Murut dissatisfaction and the desire to oust the British from Murut country and was in many ways similar to Mat Salleh's movement (F.W Fraser to the Chairman North Borneo Company, 22/9/1915, CO874/835).

From the above points, it would seem that Fraser saw the natural circumstances which threatened Murut survival and Antanum's opportunism as the main causes of the rebellion. As for the other causes discussed by Bunbury and Worth, Fraser said that all three reasons were insufficient to cause a rebellion. For instance, the building of bridle path took only six to eight days to complete and each man was required to work on 22 metres per year for which wages were paid. As for taxes on liquor, the sum collected was too small, aimed at curbing excessive drinking. Finally the Ladang tax, though imposed, only caused a little to the native i.e. 50 cents a year as each native only used an acre a year for planting his subsistence crops. Interestingly, unlike Worth and Bunbury, Fraser totally rejected any fault on the part of British policy as the cause of the rebellion.

### FORGING OF A MURUT NATION

Colonial versions of the rebellion are defensive of their policies and based on the view of the Muruts as savages and incapable of reason. Under these impressions, any contest to colonial rule must be illogical and emotionally driven. The notion of planned and co-ordinated assault with modern notions of nation is unthinkable. The rebellion according to the British had nothing to do with unfair

British laws or demands (such as building the bridle path) but rather emotionally driven and led by an opportunistic leader for primitive self-rule and the return to their uncivilised ways.

In contrast to this condescending view, the Muruts have a different version of history. According to native narratives, there were three main reasons for the rebellion. The first was the imposition of poll-tax which they found exploitative. It was Onteros who told them (the Muruts) that as free people in their own country, they should not pay taxes. The second reason was the imposition of the Ladang Ordinance 1913, which threatened their very existence as it prohibited them from freely practicing shifting cultivation. Lastly, work on the bridle paths was a point of protest, as they were forced to work as labourers, an act disrespectful of the Muruts who were warriors (Fernandez 1996). However there is more to the rebellion. If it was just about a few irritating policies, there would be no need to differentiate it from any other anti-colonial rebellion in pre-independent Third world nations. In this respect, the Rundum rebellion is different for it is highly complex, with a far reaching vision and objectives

#### THE UNIFYING OF WARRING TRIBES

Every village along one river was at war with villages along other rivers. In fact the Muruts of the Tagol river have been in blood feud with the Muruts of the Telekoston river for generations. Head hunting between the different riverine villages was frequent. The most important feature of a rebellion was the leadership. Onteros was the greatest head hunter in Murut oral narratives. He led the Tagols against other villages with great success. His successful raid had resulted in the Tagols becoming the most feared head hunting tribe towards the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After years of success in head hunting, the villages of the other rivers decided to combine to form a large force in order to strike at the Tagols and to take Onteros' head. The marauding warriors finally arrived at the house of Onteros and stormed in, only to find it empty. They found themselves surrounded by the forces of Onteros. Onteros demanded that they negotiate or die. The leaders of the warring tribes finally decided to talk. They accepted Onteros as supreme warlord and Chief of all the Muruts. Onteros, in line with Murut culture of head hunting, was the most powerful warrior, feared and honoured by the Muruts and rightfully took his place as leader. He brought to an end all inter-river head-hunting (circa 1910) and focussed their attention on a common enemy slowly infringing on Murut country (*Negeri Murut*). In fact it was in 1910 that the Rundum station was opened and this was the first sign of the British exercising control in the interior region (based on native narratives, 1996).

### THE CONTROL OF VIOLENCE

By unifying the various head hunting riverine villages, Onteros was able to bring to an end, inter-village warfare and blood-feuds and to create a mutual enemy in the British. The interesting feature of Onteros government is that it was able to dictate policy on who their enemies were. These included outsiders, i.e. non-Muruts, the Dayaks and the British. Perhaps most interesting is that the new order was able to bring Muruts from different rivers to fight as one force. The size of the Murut forces numbered between 700-900 warriors throughout the rebellion. However, the actual mechanism used by Onteros to end blood feuds is unknown, but from native narratives, it is most likely the threat of force coupled with the fear of other Muruts towards Onteros who was said to be a powerful magician.

### CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC HOMOGENEITY

This is based on the fact that the Murut nation of 1915 comprised Highland Muruts of the southern Idahan Murut grouping (Prentice 1976). They shared a few common characteristics such as isolation, the practice of slash and burn agriculture, and were head-hunters and warriors involved in continuous inter-village warfare. They were also the last group to be forced into pacification by the colonials via the construction of the bridle path, the opening of the interior region through railways, the proliferation of trading activities and the creation of tobacco and rubber plantations. However, the rebel forces did not include other Murut groups from the Padas/Tomani river systems and Padas/Pegalan/Sook systems who are today known as the Timugon Muruts. In fact they practised permanent or settled agriculture and were non-head hunters (Fernandez 1996).

### INSTITUTION BUILDING

At least a few points are relevant. Firstly, the hierarchy of authority Onteros, the supreme leader, was also backed by his number two and three. He established a hierarchy of leadership, with Angsukul and Kalur as his next in line. Other chiefs were also noted to have played a prominent role such as Ingkun, Chief of Silangit, Singadu, Chief of the Telekoson, Mulang of Talankai and Antak. Perhaps what is interesting is that, influential chiefs of other rivers also played a dominant part in the rebellion. The extent of Murut unity and an elaborate hierarchy is evident even after the death of Onteros and his right hand men, Angsukul and Kalur. The remainder of warriors in the fort refused to surrender and pledged to fight to the death to hold the fort. More importantly, the interior region continued to be plagued by violence even after the defeat at Silangit.

The second point of importance is the building of the fort, which took two years. How could such an elaborate fort be built in such secrecy. The fact that for two years, Muruts from various rivers provided labour for the construction of an elaborate underground fort capable of housing 700-900 natives, coupled with elaborate defences, is a marvel in itself. A point of importance is that Onteros was able to mobilise labour efficiently. Muruts from faraway villages came and assisted in the construction of the fort. In Worth's report, he noted that certain villages were empty and he attributed that to their escaping their duties in building the bridle path. Could it also be the case of the Muruts moving to the Silangit river to assist in the building of the fort?

The next point is the advanced planning involved in launching a full-scale war. The warfare against the colonials took new forms, such as a marauding army of 700 Murut warriors which is to an extent unknown in head-hunting. According to Babaneau, the Muruts in a wink of an eye moved from being 'friendly' natives to marauding warriors against colonial rule. In short, this was really an advanced system of dissemination of information in launching a full scale assault on the British in the whole of the interior region in one go, perhaps very much like the surprise landing in Normandy in World War II. These attacks with large forces needs to be viewed with some degree of amazement as no such force has ever been assembled to overthrow colonial rule in Malaysian history.

#### THE MURUT TERRITORY

This rebellion differs from other unrest in Murut country in a number of aspects. The demarcation of territory is distinctive, covering an extremely large area the Dalit river in the north, encompassing the Telekosan and Rundum watersheds in the west and centre and the Selalir river in the south, incidentally part of Dutch Borneo. It was estimated that over 60 villages were hostile towards colonial rule and united in fight for the freedom of Murut country. It was villages in these rivers that made up the imagined Murut nation. In fact the Muruts called this Negeri Murut.

The main objective of the Onteros regime, was to free the Muruts. This was to be done by booting out the British from Murut country. Onteros said that he envisioned a Negeri Murut where they would be free from working as labourers, pay no exploitative taxes and would live by Murut culture with no external infringement on their way of life. To do this, he combined the Muruts of various rivers to form a large force of warriors to dislodge the British by force.

Finally, the Rundum rebellion of 1915 was not only about resisting change in Negeri Murut but also included notions of nation and statehood to a certain extent. Hierarchy of leadership, control of violence, definitive boundaries, and some forms of division of labour were clearly evident in the Negeri Murut. It had at its core, cultural and linguistic similarity, clearly defining outsider/insider categories. In many instances, this rebellion marked the climax of resistance

against colonial rule but with a difference. It was well planned, had a clear organisation and clear objectives of independence.

## CONCLUSION

Firstly, the British accounts had reinvented the Murut in accordance with colonial discourse. Here the native is no more than a vile and savage being needing the civilising guidance of their British masters. From that perspective, Murut rebellions were essentially about passion and emotion, devoid of any rule of reason. On the other hand, the Muruts have a culture as old as the Europeans with a complex social system. As with all colonialisised nations, the Muruts lost their right to practice their culture as it contradicted with the ideal of the colonialists. Under these circumstances, the Muruts were surely the losers as they by virtue of being ruled had to forsake their ancestral practices and accept British hegemony. Rebellions, protest and acts of violence are active forms of resistance to alien impositions on the order natural order of things. It is rational and planned with a distinct need to be free as freedom is a universal human need. Murut rebellion on the onset of colonial rule was about that and in 1915 it matured to be something more through the emergence of a Murut nation.

This paper is about looking at the events of the Muruts' past, particularly their resistance, in a new light. History can no longer be caught up within the limitations of colonial accounts. Historical reconstruction must include a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of Murut society. History cannot be limited to a single perspective or a single narrative; it must be taken in a more holistic manner. Braudel provided a methodology for looking at history as a totality of events. Without written records, Murut oral narratives fill that void and provide a clearer and more detailed picture of the past. In this light, the Rundum Rebellion of 1915 was anything but simple. It clearly showed the complexity of the Murut nation of intent, and by its elaborate planning and institutional building that the Muruts were capable of rational thinking and practice. They fought bravely and lost and were reduced to the periphery of history in the past, however today their past exists in the centre, the invaded epistemological space has been regained and history rewritten.

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Manggas b. Mantau (72 years) from Pensiangan  
Kurios b. Labu (72 years)  
Gambir b. Kapang (70 years)  
Malinau b. Kapang (80 years)  
Andul b. Ekup (45 years)  
Rikin b. Antipoh (67 years) from Tomani  
Olok b. Embak (67 years) from Pensiangan  
Ampakat b. Anam (68 tahun) from Kg. Sumangalu  
Eukuoi b. Asie (66 years) from Kg. Tagol  
Lawrence b. Ampok (42 years) from Tenom  
Andayul b. Ampuli (55 years) from Tomani

The above-listed Tagols provided oral narratives of the Rundum rebellion of 1915, native perception of colonial rule and cultural practices dominant at the time of their parents or grandparents. These narratives were collected in groups of a few Tagols sharing their experiences at a time.

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