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The Effects of Japanese Occupation in Sabah: During and After World War II (1941-1963)

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Abstract: The Japanese were the only colonial power that challenged British hegemony in Sabah, then known as "North Borneo". In 1941 they attacked and defeated the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) and assumed governance of the land for the remainder of the war. Although their presence was temporary, it was enough to fundamentally alter the course of the history of Sabah. This paper explores the effects of the Japanese occupation during the years 1942 to 1963, concentrating on economic, political, and social progress. This includes two distinctive periods: the invasion and occupation (1942-1945) and over the longer term, including both positive and negative effects for local peoples. This study is important to understand the reasons for the transition of Sabah from a British Protectorate to a Crown Colony, set against its role in the framework of the Japanese "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". Studies of the history of Sabah in general are lacking, particularly concerning the important years of British colonialism, the Japanese occupation, and the decolonization period. This study draws on archival and library resources to find that the Japanese occupation brought problems to certain parties and fields, alongside some tangible benefits for some groups. It is hoped that this study will open up historical understanding and investigation of the significance of Japanese influence in Sabah.

Keywords: Japanese occupation, British colonialism, Crown Colony, North Borneo, Sabah, Malaya, Malaysia

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Abstrak: Jepun merupakan satu-satunya kuasa yang mampu menyanyingi hegemoni kuasa British di Sabah (Borneo Utara). Pada tahun 1941, Jepun menyerang dan mengambil alih pemerintahan Sabah daripada Syarikat Berpiagam Borneo Utara (SBBU). Walaupun pemerintahan ini bersifat sementara, ia sudah cukup untuk mewarnai sejarah Sabah. Kajian ini melihat kesan penaklukan Jepun ke atas Sabah sekitar tahun 1942 sehingga 1963 dengan memberi tumpuan kepada perkembangan ekonomi, politik dan sosial. Kesan-kesan penaklukan ini merangkumi negatif dan positif yang berkisar semasa zaman pemerintahan Jepun itu sendiri (1942-1945) dan kesan yang berterusan, iaitu selepas Jepun menyerah kalah. Kajian ini penting untuk memahami proses peralihan status Sabah daripada Wilayah Naungan kepada Wilayah Jajahan British sebagai tindak balas ke atas pembentukan Kesemakmuran Asia Timur Raya yang cuba dibawa oleh Jepun. Secara umumnya, kajian yang berkaitan dengan sejarah Sabah adalah kurang, terutama yang berkaitan dengan era penjajahan British, penaklukan Jepun dan juga selepas penjajahan. Sumber maklumat daripada arkib dan perpustakaan digunakan untuk menyokong kesan-kesan penaklukan Jepun yang membawa keburukan dan kebaikan kepada pihak-pihak dan bidang-bidang tertentu di Sabah. Kajian ini diharapkan mampu membawa kepada pemahaman terhadap sejarah Sabah dan menggalakkan kepada kajian-kajian yang berkaitan dengan pengaruh Jepun di kawasan ini.

Kata Kunci: Penaklukan Jepun, penjajahan British, Wilayah Jajahan British, Borneo Utara, Sabah, Malaya, Malaysia

Introduction

Sabah is a land located at the northern tip of the island of Borneo, in the heart of Southeast Asia. Compared to other lands in Southeast Asia, Western colonialism appeared relatively late in Sabah, although there were some limited forays by Western interests. In 1665, Captain Cowley tentatively explored the region, and the East India Company surveyed it in 1773 (Evans, 1990: 1). In 1763, the British Admiral Sir William Dampier seized Manila from the Spanish and released the Sultan of Sulu, in exchange for ceding his territory in Sabah to the EIC, who duly raised their flag over Balambangan Island, and established settlements in 1773. However, due to persistent harassment from Sulu and Illanu "pirates", the EIC abandoned North Borneo in 1775 (Baker, 1965: 20; Evans, 1990: 1). Consequently, Sabah was essentially untouched until the formation of the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) in

1881, a throwback to the East India Company (which was dissolved in 1858). The BNBC ruled "North Borneo" as a private fiefdom under a British Protectorate, being characterized by feckless mismanagement and intermittent appeals to the British colonial administrations in India and Singapore for various forms of assistance (including sepoys from India), until it was overthrown by the Japanese in 1942. It was formally dissolved and replaced by a Crown Colony government in 1946.

The Japanese blitzkrieg through Southeast Asia reached Kalimantan, Sarawak, and Brunei by December 17, 1941. On December 27, Vichy Radio announced that Berlin had declared that fresh Japanese landings had been made (*Daily Mercury*, December 29, 1941, 5), and their conquered Labuan in Sabah on January 1, 1942 (Evans, 1999, 106; Tregonning, 1965, 214-216), which they used as a launching pad to seize mainland Sabah. Actually, an earlier attempt to land in Sabah on December 8, 1941, had been repelled by British troops (mainly Punjabis of the Indian Army) (*Gisborne Herald*, December 10, 1941, 7; Woodburn Kirby, 1957). Based on reports from the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* (December 17, 1941, 1), Tokio Radio stated that the successful landing in North Borneo was made at dawn on December 16, but this was not confirmed by the British.

On January 6, the Japanese were able to secure their position in Kota Kinabalu (Jesselton), and on January 19, Sandakan (the capital city) was captured. General Tojo, the Japanese Prime Minister, said that the British began destroying the oil wells three months before the war and had taken away the equipment of 250 wells before the Japanese could get Sabah (*Evening Post*, December 29, 1941: 5; *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, December 29, 1941: 5). An oil boring engineer, Mr. E. J. Mailey of Melbourne, confirmed that the British scuppering of oil production in Sabah before withdrawing would hamper the Japanese war effort (*Daily Mercury*, January 1, 1942: 8). The Japanese occupied Sabah for about three years, and on September 9th, 1945, the Allied forces (mainly Australian and British troops) accepted the formal surrender of the Japanese forces in Sabah.

It should be noted that there were Japanese settlements and interests established in Sabah before the occupation, and the local Japanese residents had developed a stable economy under BNBC rule, with particular interests in plantations and trade, such as the fishing industry

(*The Northern Miner*, July 31, 1941: 4). However, the focus of this study is on the period 1941–1963, when these historical communities were dwindling and being absorbed into the emerging postcolonial order. This paper concentrates on the effects of the Japanese occupation in Sabah towards the British (i.e. BNBC), Sabahans, and Sabah. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese displayed skill in achieving similar levels of colonial governance and administration to the Western colonial powers, despite the limited time they ruled Sabah and the intense pressures of WWII. As with all forms of colonialism, imperialism, intervention, invasion, and occupation, there were some positive and negative effects, with the latter generally being more pertinent to the majority of indigenous people.

The Reasons for the Japanese Occupation

British Withdrawal

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the broader phenomena of the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia, but it is instructive to understand a brief overview of the reasons for the Japanese occupation in the broader historical context. Britain was the preeminent global power involved in Malaya, while the Dutch controlled the Dutch East Indies, and the US had significant influence in the Philippines. British defence strategy considered "British North Borneo" to include both British North Borneo (i.e. Sabah) itself, and Sarawak (under the rule of the Brooke dynasty). Brunei (whose Sultan was essentially viewed as a British ally) and Labuan Island (a Crown Colony) were grouped together in this theatre, under the Malaya Command.

The Royal Navy stopped patrolling North Borneo in 1940, and British strategy hinged on maintaining a foothold in Singapore – viewed as an impregnable fortress commanding the sea lanes – so that the Japanese could be dealt with at leisure, while the bulk of its forces were concentrated on fighting the Axis in North Africa and Europe. It was decided that no serious attempt would be made to defend North Borneo, with the exception of Kuching, whose airfield would be of strategic benefit to the Japanese. The Dutch had an airfield 60 km away at Singkawang II, which was only 350 miles from Singapore itself. Malaya Command adopted a "Denial Scheme", whereby important strategic resources (particularly oil fields) would be destroyed to prevent the Japanese benefitting from them. The Brookes of Sarawak

and the BNBC adopted this, which was mainly implemented by colonial troops (especially Indian troops from the Punjab). Robert Smith, the Governor of North Borneo, was told that the BNBC's police force and volunteers would be used as far as possible for internal security, but they were not to attempt to resist the Japanese (Woodburn Kirby, 1957). The result of British policy was that the British were unable to "protect" the Protectorate of North Borneo, and it was prepared to fall to the Japanese with as little valuable infrastructure intact as possible, and its people were doomed to Japanese domination. The situation was summarized in the official British military history of the operation by Major-General Woodburn Kirby (1957: 222):

> "Borneo occupies a position of great strategic importance in the south-west Pacific. It lies across the main sea routes from the north to Malaya and Sumatra on the one hand, and Celebes and Java on the other. Strongly held, it could have been one of the main bastions in the defence of the Malay barrier, but neither the Dutch nor the British had the necessary resources to defend it. The available forces had to be concentrated further south for the defence of Singapore and Java, and all that could be spared for Borneo and the outlying Dutch islands were small detachments at important points which it was hoped might prove a deterrent to attack".

Japanese Imperialism in Sabah

The imperialist ideology that drove the Japanese conquest of Southeast Asia was the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which was premised on the concept of economic cooperation among the peoples of Asia, to throw off the yoke of Western domination. It was posited as an international order based upon common prosperity, and a device for the development of the Asian races, under Japanese suzerainty (Office of Strategic Services, 1945: 1). This was rooted in Japan's long march to avoid Western domination. After being forced to open its markets to the West in the Convention of Kanagawa (1854), Japan underwent a long period of intense material and cultural development to maintain its ancient civilization and avoid becoming a colonial vassal. They were rewarded for their cooperation with the West in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) and WWI with numerous trading concessions in China (including some German concessions following the latter), becoming a nascent colonial power in their own right, hiring Western experts to

train and develop their armed forces (Paine, 2017). Japanese strategy in WWII was primarily geared towards seeking access to resources, particularly oil, and this was the main source of their interest in Sabah, alongside its strategic value in the context of their broader campaign in Southeast Asia, as noted by Woodburn Kirby (1957: 222):

> "To gain control of the oilfields, to guard the flank of their advance on Malaya and to facilitate their eventual attack on Sumatra and western Java, the Japanese decided, as a subsidiary operation to their Malayan campaign, to seize British Borneo. This operation was launched by Southern Army eight days after the initial attack on Malaya".

When the Japanese launched their grand imperial strategy, they did so under the banner of liberation from European colonial domination, and they adopted the slogan of "Asia for the Asians" (Tregonning, 1965: 214-215). However, the conquest naturally upset pre-existing trading relations, as did WWII in general (following on from the Great Depression of the 1930s), and the successful Japanese trading community in Sabah resented the aggressive Japanese policies, according to Allied sources (*The Northern Miner*, July 31, 1941: 4). This is a notable feature in comparison to the situation of Japanese people in the US, who were interned in concentration camps *en masse* as suspected enemy agents. The profound economic, political, and social impacts of the Japanese regime were certainly felt by all inhabitants of Sabah, despite only ruling Sabah for three years. The Japanese had colonized parts of China and Korea for some time previously, but despite their longstanding animosity with the Chinese, whom they regarded as an inferior race, they treated the diverse communities of Sabah as Asian "natives" and European "non-natives", including the Hakka Chinese, who had lived peacefully with the culture, language, and lifestyles of indigenous Sabahans throughout history, including under the BNBC.

Immediate Effects of Japanese Occupation

Before the advent of the Japanese, Sabah never experienced serious fighting with the outsiders, unlike protracted geopolitical struggles as seen in Melaka with the Portuguese. The uprising of Mat Salleh against the BNBC was the most significant instance of resistance, but its material impacts were negligible. Once the Japanese started to spread their influence and power, they brought together armed

forces and weapons. The systematic military regime of the Japanese occupation went far beyond the token armed contingents of the BNBC, and ordinary people faced widespread cruelty and destruction, but the most severe retribution was meted out against prisoners of war. A warrant officer, W.H. Sticpewich, noted that only six of all British and Australian troops imprisoned by the Japanese in Sandakan and Ranau camps survived the war, with 80 per cent having been brutally murdered (*Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, December 21, 1946: 4). European "collaborators" were also targeted, such as the (Chinese) Headmaster of St. Michael's School in Sandakan, who was executed, while the other teachers were imprisoned.

Traditionally, the indigenous population were viewed as barbaric savages, notorious as head-hunters, an image the BNBC sought to promote to justify its lack of significant investment in local infrastructure and development. Their priority was solely to maximize their own profits, regardless of the impact on local peoples. The Japanese essentially reiterated these views, and their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was simply a continuation of the European "civilizing mission", with the Japanese replacing the Europeans as benign colonial masters. On the ground, the Japanese personnel viewed the local people as savages, and according to some sources they even practiced cannibalism upon the locals and the British (Evans, 1990: 48-49). This egregious example reflected the famine that ensued in Sabah with the war.

Sabah is a fertile land amenable to various types of agriculture and animal husbandry, but the occupation increased the demand for food and it far outstripped the available supplies. The subsistence agriculture of the local people was based on meeting their own needs and small-scale trading activities in *tamu* (traditional markets), beneath the notice of the BNBC, whose activities were based on the timber, rubber, copra, tobacco, and manila hemp industries (Baker, 1965: 90-116, Tregonnig, 1965: 83-93); consequently, they were unable to feed the rapacious appetites of the occupying power (*The Northern Miner*, July 31, 1941: 4). Naturally the Japanese commandeered whatever food the locals could not hide from them, and the Sabahans, Europeans, and other non-Japanese residents starved. For example, in the largest city of Sabah, Kota Kinabalu, the pre-war population of 20,000 dwindled to 3,000 by the time of liberation, with 12% recorded as having died directly from starvation (*The Argus*, October 3, 1945: 5). W.H. Sticpewich (a

former prisoner of war) told the War Crimes Tribunal "the Japanese did not bother to do that [kill]. They just left them to die without food and water" (*New Castle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, December 21, 1946: 4; *The West Australian*, December 21, 1946: 16). There were official Japanese policies allowing troops to resort to cannibalism if they could not obtain food, provided they did not eat Japanese subjects – which was a capital offence (Evans, 1999: 49-50).

The Japanese closed all schools viewed as hostile to their interests, including St. Michael's School in Sandakan (as mentioned previously), Chung Hwa Chinese School in Kota Kinabalu, and Ming Sing Chinese School in Sandakan (UNESCO, 1948: 28). St. Francis' Covent School in Kota Kinabalu was converted into an internment camp by the Japanese, and the Sisters were imprisoned in Kuching internment camp. The Japanese issued instructions to the remaining teachers regarding what they were to teach, which mainly concerned indoctrination on the necessity of the Japanese occupation, and understanding their responsibilities to unite all nationalities under the leadership of Japan. The Japanese were able to understand how significant education was to make the people follow them, and Japanese language was introduced as a medium of communication, alongside training the pupils on how to keep themselves healthy – presumably with a view to conscription in the long term (UNESCO, 1948: 56).

Post-Japanese Occupation Long-Term Effects

Negative Effects

Before discussing the negative effects of the Japanese occupation in the ensuring years, it should be remembered from the outset that the deliberate British scuppering of oil wells in 1941 (as described previously) caused lasting damage to the Sabahan economy. *The Wilmington Morning Star* (January 8, 1942: 4) and the *Evening Post* (December 29, 1941: 5) mentioned that oil wells and installations in Sarawak and Sabah were destroyed by the British before they passed under Japanese control, and in the case of Sabah this was evidently enacted three months before the Japanese actually invaded. However, the subsequent occupation by the Japanese undoubtedly saw more profound deterioration in the material situation, with starvation and absolute poverty by 1945, due to a mixture of deliberate Japanese policies and the general havoc wrought by WWII. It is likely that the destruction of the oil wells encouraged Japanese

neglect of Sabah due to its sudden loss of strategic and economic importance for the Japanese. As noted by E.J. Mailey (*Daily Mercury*, January 1, 1942: 8), "even if they [the Japanese] had four of five clear months, they could not produce more than a fraction of what was being produced before the wells were put out of action".

The destruction of the oil fields by the British would have entailed a lengthy and capital-intensive commitment by the Japanese to restore production. The astonishing success of the Japanese in the Battle of the Java Sea in February 1942 meant that they conquered the Dutch East Indies, thus receiving the windfall of the fourth-largest oil reserves in the world at the time, rendering Sabah obsolete in Japanese imperial strategy (as they could get oil more cheaply and efficiently from the former Dutch East Indies). Consequently, Sabah was left to languish in privation and starvation (Tregonning, 1965: 223), and by the end of the war it was more acutely devastated than other parts of the British Commonwealth (UNESCO, 1948: 12; *Otago Daily Times*, October 14, 1947: 5). Sandakan and Labuan Island were totally destroyed, while Kota Kinabula was heavily damaged (Baker, 1965: 31). According to T.J.H. Speedy, Director of Survey in Sabah, the estimated cost to re-construct Sabah would be about £2,250,000 (*Northern Advocate*, July 5, 1948: 6).

The BNBC did not have such resources even if had been interested to sink such vast capital into Sabah, and on June 26, 1946, an agreement was signed between the Crown and BNBC whereby the Crown provided an initial payment £860,600 to enable the BNBC to redeem its outstanding 5% debentures stock, and on July 15, 1946, Sabah became a Crown Colony (Baker, 1965: 33; Tregonning, 1965: 222). Consequently, Sabah was no longer a Protectorate but a Crown Colony from that day until 1963, directly ruled from the Colonial Office in the UK, and the BNBC was dissolved.

When Australian troops arrived in Sandakan at the end of the war it was 90% destroyed, having previously been the hub of BNBC activities (and thus Sabah's international trade). An educational survey by UNESCO on March 11-23, 1948, found that there had been no town plan and the existing settlement consisted mainly of wooden structures (UNESCO, 1948: 29). Given this devastation, the absolute lack of development in the rest of Sabah can be imagined. Kota Kinabalu

(Jesselton) was chosen to replace Sandakan because of its natural harbour and hinterland (*Otago Daily Times*, October 14, 1947: 5; UNESCO, 1948: 11).

The two most important facilities for national development are education and health. In terms of educational facilities, there were Government and Mission schools built in the mainland and Labuan Island. There were 32 Government schools (28 on the mainland and four in Labuan), of which 15 were totally destroyed and 17 were damaged (UNESCO, 1948: 12). UNESCO (1948: 12) also stated that of the Mission schools, 30 were destroyed and 17 were damaged. After the war there were no secondary schools, and there was a great shortage of equipment such as textbooks as well as of teachers. In Sacred Heart School, Kota Kinabalu, the teaching was noted to be of an incredibly low standard, especially in English, which was taught from an old Chinese-English book with many inaccuracies (UNESCO, 1948: 25). Furthermore, many types of diseases continued to be endemic, and the population was more susceptible to them following the starvation and deprivations of the occupation, including malaria, dengue fever, dysentery, blackwater fever, ulcers, and skin complaints (*Bay of Plenty Times*, August 16, 1945: 2; Baker, 1965: 31-32).

Positive Effects

While the negative effects of the Japanese occupation are clear and tangible, there were many positive effects that are less obvious, but no less real. One of these was that the British government managed to salvage something of its reputation by finally attempting to honour its claimed responsibilities to Sabah in the process of re-development. The Protectorate had been based on rapacious and indifferent exploitation of native peoples and resources, while the Crown Colony undertook some substantive efforts to improve conditions for locals. This was marked by a more sympathetic conceptualization of locals, no longer stigmatized as backward head-hunters as they had been under the BNBC. For example, in February 1946, Harry G. Keith, the Conservator of Forests and Director of Agriculture, returned to Sabah, despite suffering from extreme depletion (from four years of semi-starvation), because he believed his knowledge could help to produce food (Keith, 2008: 13). According to his wife, Agnes N. Keith (2008: 14), she decided to go to him in Sabah because she wanted to say "thank you" to those who put

their lives at risk, such as Arusap, by smuggling food for herself and her son during the occupation.

In al-Quran (*Surah: al-Hujarat*, 13), Allah mentioned that He created us in different tribes in order to know each other. The Japanese occupation may look negative for many colonized nations, but there were instances of kindness and compassion. According to J.R. Baxter, Estate Manager in Sapong, Tanom mentioned that the Japanese officers and soldiers behaved well, and Major Suga, the Commandant of the Japanese Prisoner of War Camp, was not a bad man, but had to act under orders (Evans, 1990: 89-90). Apologists for Japanese imperialism have noted that this Asian colonial power had limited land and population, and its people used discipline and commitment to achieve startling military success. The fact that they starved prisoners of war to death (*The West Australian*, December 21, 1946: 16) is even excused by some on the grounds that the Japanese themselves were starving, resorting to cannibalism (Evans, 1990: 48-50).

Through the Japanese occupation, the Sabahans, especially the natives, had their first contact with a non-European major power. Some native chiefs preferred dealing with the Japanese to the Malays, and there was widespread antipathy to the inclusion of Sabah in the Federation of Malaya. The last Governor of Sabah, William Goode, recalled that one native Dusun chief told him that if the British did not want to remain in Sabah, it would be better to have the Japanese rather than Malays taking over (Stockwell, 1995: lxxii-lxxiii). This kind of sentiment clearly indicates some kind of regard and sympathy for the Japanese based on their activities in Sabah, regardless of the implicit hyperbole reflecting Sabahans' ambivalence about the "Malay" and "Islamic" character of the Malayan project. However, this study views that "contact" with the Japanese engendered some kind of genuine appreciation among Sabahans for the Japanese and their remarkable achievement in conquering most of Southeast Asia. Aside from the contingencies of the war, contact opened the eyes of natives towards what kind of people the Japanese were.

Tuan Haji Zainal Awang Damit, a clerk attached to the District Office of Labuan under a Japanese officer, recalled his experience on September 16, 1942, to welcome the arrival of General Maidato, Commander-in-Chief in British Borneo. The people had waited for him

for hours until the Japanese officer gave orders to the people to take shelter for a while and re-assemble again later (Evans, 1990: 93). The Japanese learned to respect the Dusuns as a martial race, as mentioned by Tumanggong Bin Kandawau:

> "The Japanese would not trust Tumanggong, so he measured off a stick the same length as the Dusun sword, and gave it to Tumanggong to fight with. The Japanese used his own sword, a samurai, in the test of fighting skills. Tumanggong rapped the Japanese officer twice over the head smartly, before the Japanese realized whom he was up against. Tumanggong was never hit with the flat side of the Japanese sword. The Dusuns have their own kind of "Ken-Do" unknown to the Japanese. This game did much to engender a respect for the Dusuns" (Evans, 1900: 47-48).

According to Baker (1965: 29), the Japanese did not interfere with the natives or ill-treat them to any great extent, and freedom of religion remained except for Christianity. Fuad Stephens, one of the influential Sabahans, and his brother Benedict Stephens had experienced the kindness of the Japanese through Takehana, a Japanese businessman. Fuad Stephens (who himself had Japanese ancestry) worked for Takehana and got a green light to barter salt for rice and meat from the Dusun farmers (Granville-Edge, 1990: 60). Thus, it is not surprising when there were people in Sabah who had an attachment with the Japanese.

The advent of the Japanese in Sabah was more problematic for the Chinese minority rather than the indigenous peoples, for whom the Japanese were little different from the British, and some sporadic anti-British activities had emerged during the war, such as natives attacking Allied troops with poisoned blow-pipe darts (*Bay of Plenty Times*, August 16, 1945: 2). Conversely, the Chinese were deliberately targeted by the Japanese, who were already notorious for their brutal rule in Manchuria and China, thus the Chinese were predisposed to support the British, and they played a major role in the anti-Japanese Kinaballu Guerrilla insurgency. This increased hatred towards the Chinese, but did not really impinge on relations with native tribes, who had no substantive involvement in anti-Japanese activities. However, some Chinese fugitives from Kota Kinabalu escaped to hills to seek protection from the Dusuns (*The Argus*, October 3, 1945: 5). The *Otago*

Daily Times (October 14, 1947: 5) reported that "to-day, the Dusuns, Muruts, and Sulus live at peace with the Chinese and the British". The protection that was given by the natives affected their relationship with the Chinese subsequently.

The division between the Chinese minority and indigenous people was most clear in the educational system. Native schools were crowded with over-aged pupils. For example, the Government Vernacular School in Papar had 163 pupils, of whom some were 20 years old; the Seventh Day Adventist Primary School in Tamparuli had 43 students, aged 8-20 years old (UNESCO, 1948: 23-27). The BNBC had provided locals with primary schools and to develop and improvise their practical skills, especially in agriculture, and the locals were keen to pursue this for their own food security. Arusap felt lucky to attend school to learn agriculture and rice cultivation (Keith, 2008: 297). It is believed one of the things that had been learned by the British through this was that food such as rice must be put into main products for agriculture. If the supply of that kind of product was crucial, all would be affected.

The transition from Protectorate to Crown Colony certainly benefitted Sabah and the Sabahans over the long term. Under the Crown Colony, the Sabahans had more freedom. Many had said that Sabah was a land without the existence of politics, but under the Crown Colony they were encouraged to develop democratic institutions. In 1960, the first political party was established, the United National Kadazan Organization (UNKO). The British also sought to appoint capable Sabahans in administrative roles, and they encouraged the formation of a local press to spread political ideas, such as the *Sabah Times* and the *Jesselton Commercial Press*. The BNBC had been uninterested if not hostile to such activities, while the Crown Colony administration was racing to foment a sufficient level of political, social, and economic development to disengage from Sabah as soon as decently possible. The interests of the Sabahans and the British aligned perfectly during the Crown Colony period, and there were no uprisings. Furthermore, when the Sabahans were given the option to gain independence, they preferred the rule of the British Government.

Conclusion

The Japanese occupation in Southeast Asia can be divided into two phases: acceptance and rejection. In the early phase, the Japanese were

accepted and celebrated by many because they gave people in the region a new hope and a thing that they had never imagined before. In their mind-set, the Europeans were always superior and impossible to beat, but through the Japanese occupation, nothing was impossible. Later on, most subject peoples felt that the Japanese were cruel and worse than the Europeans. This was manifest in more egregious forms such as murder and forced conscription into prostitution, and more mundane humiliations such as the Japanese monopoly on rice consumption (locals were restricted to eating tapioca, or simply left to starve, as occurred in Sabah). The early period hopes of a better future changed to suffering. However, in the case of Sabah, the process was particular in some respects, which can be understood through the effects and perspectives of the people.

The Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia was always linked to the development of the spirit of nationalism. The Japanese were able to motivate the people in that region to support them by presenting themselves as liberators, and harbingers of a new Asian independence from colonialism. However, in Sabah the general dearth of education and a functioning administrative or bureaucratic system (largely attributable to the lack of development under the BNBC) made this vision untenable, and there was no realistic prospect of self-governance. Agnes N. Keith (2008: 79) wrote that the natives at that time had no national concept, much less a world concept, and the Chinese community in Sabah learnt in a Chinese ideological and cultural space, with limited attachment to Sabah as a national concept. This illustrates how proper knowledge is vital to lead and guide the people of a nation to follow a national project.

The indigenous Sabahans were less affected by the ideological and political aspects of the Japanese occupation, partly because most of them residing outside major towns were not directly affected by the occupation *per se*, in their remote and impenetrable jungles, which had formerly eluded the control of the BNBC over many decades. Sabah was rich with natural resources, but difficult to exploit due to the logistical barriers of its mountains, jungles, and rivers. The trading activities of the BNBC and others, including the pre-war Japanese traders, were established in peripheral coastal areas (e.g. the Japanese were centred in Tawau). Tribal peoples living in the jungles were doubtless affected by the famine that blighted the whole of the island, but they were largely isolated from the direct destruction and cruelty of the

war, such as happened in Sandakan and Kota Kinabalu. Additionally, their subsistence lifestyle based on hunting, fishing, and small-scale farming gave them some degree of immunity from the food shortages of the town-dwellers. The personal possessions of the inland peoples comprised dogs, pigs, buffalo, blowpipes, weapons, brass, and wives (Keith, 2008: 81).

For these natives, the BNBC, Allied troops, and Japanese armed forces simply came and went, with minimal impacts on their lives. This was reported by the *Bay of Plenty Times* (August 16, 1945: 2) concerning the situation that faced by Australian troops, who had to face natural challenges, the Japanese, and the natives, who were not predisposed to cooperate with the Allied forces because they were not greatly affected by the occupation. Even among the town-dwellers who were more engaged in the colonial economy, the British had abandoned them to their fate, and even destroyed the main source of prosperity for the region as a Japanese province, by destroying the oil wells (*Townsville Daily Bulletin*, December 29, 1941: 5). The Sabahan-Chinese lost all prospects of their former position, and were identified as obvious enemies by the Japanese. Indeed, their fate was particularly poignant, as they (e.g. the Hakkas) were identified as enemy Chinese by the Japanese, while the Chinese government viewed them as rebellious troublemakers.

It cannot be denied that the Japanese occupation resulted in some of the most appalling desolation seen in all of Southeast Asia, with starvation and the total destruction of its former economic activities. The victims who suffered the greatest severity were Allied prisoners of war, and the Chinese minority, both of whom were based around the most developed areas that became the hubs of Japanese activity. Sandakan, the capital city, was predominantly a city of British and Chinese inhabitants, who controlled the most profitable economic activities in Sabah, in the timber, rubber, and oil industries. However, the people with the least to lose – who had consistently been excluded from most of the BNBC's economic interests and dispossessed in their ancestral homelands – suffered along with the rest in the local manifestation of a war among great powers, and it is a mark of their long neglect that they were subsequently so grateful to the British Crown Colony government. Sabah was uniquely fortunate to have outstanding representatives such as Fuad Stephens to protect the interests of its people when it acceded

to the Federation of Malaya in 1963, and the modern state of Malaysia should seek to foster development and peace in Sabah to fulfil the historical responsibilities of all of the stakeholders who lived together and died together seeking to improve life in Southeast Asia.

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