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The Role and Contribution of the British Administration and the Capitalist in the North Borneo Fishing Industry, 1945-1963

ABSTRACT

Although the aims and roles played by the Crown Colony administration and the Chinese, Japanese and Hong Kong capitalists were different, the combination between the government and the capitalists was successful in redeveloping the North Borneo fishing industry after World War II (1939-1945). As for the capitalists, the Crown Colony administration's policies--which avoided direct intervention in the fishing industry, specifically in the fishing and selling activities--had given them ample opportunity to gain a huge amount of profit. Therefore, it can be said that the roles and contributions of the British government, as well as the local and foreign capitalists, were only successful in redeveloping the North Borneo fishing industry after World War II, but did not succeed in improving the lives of the local fishermen. The conflict of interest, which rose from the question of economical and social obligations, resulted in the British administration acting as merely a "purveyor" of technology and fishing equipment for the fishermen and not contributing much towards helping the fishermen to find the means of getting these items. This allowed the local and foreign capitalists to fill the gap and to control the fishing industry by bringing in better fishing technology, exploiting the local fishermen by providing a credit system for the procurement of the fishing equipment and eventually transforming the local fishermen as merely a source of manpower.

Key words: *Crown Colony administration, the capitalists, North Borneo fishing industry, and transforming the local fishermen.*

INTRODUCTION

On October 1945, the Allied Forces represented by the "Brigade of the Australian 9th Division", under the command of General Mac Arthur, succeeded in conquering North Borneo once again from the clutches of the Japanese army, empowered by the slogan of "I will return" (Tregonning, 1967:217). North Borneo was once again placed temporarily under the administration of the British army which was known as the British Military Administration

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(BMA).¹ The catastrophic damages suffered by North Borneo owing to the Japanese invasion and the incessant bombing by the Allied Forces resulted in the incapability of the British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) to re-develop North Borneo from the ruins. As a result of this, the BNBCC handed North Borneo over to the British government with the compensation of L 1,400,000.00 (Leong, 1982:187), through the implementation of an act known as the North Borneo Order in Council (Leong, 1982:33) on July 10, 1946. On July 5, 1946, North Borneo was made a "Crown Colony" and placed under the administration of the Colonial Office in London.

THE ROLES OF THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN NORTH BORNEO

The "selling" of North Borneo by the British North Borneo Chartered Company to the Crown Colony administration on July 15, 1946 replaced the existing "company" (Mohd. Arif, 1993:289) made of administration to one of "Civil Government".² Apart from that, this change in the style of administration also ended the role of Sandakan as the center of administration and the capital of North Borneo for 63 years, which expanded from the rule of the Sulu Sultanate, the BNBCC and the Japanese occupation. The Crown Colony administration chose Jesselton, now known as Kota Kinabalu, as its new center of administration and the new capital. This decision was made owing to the devastating damage suffered by Sandakan as mentioned previously and the ever growing development of the rubber industry along the Western residential coast of North Borneo. Although Sandakan is no longer the capital city, it remained as the "economic capital of the state" (Naker, 1965:20) for North Borneo, specifically as a port which handles activities pertaining to the export of timber and other agricultural products from the eastern coast of North Borneo.

In order to rebuild the facilities, the Crown Colony administration in London designed a new developmental plan to be implemented in North Borneo and this plan was known as the "Reconstruction and Development Plan for North Borneo: 1948-1955".³ In order to realize this plan, the Civil Government administration established several departments for example

¹On June 10, 1945, the Allied Forces under the command of General Mac Arthur landed in Labuan and marched on to Weston on June 19, 1945; Jesselton on September 28, 1945; and finally Sandakan on October 19, 1945. It was estimated that 21,000 Japanese soldiers were reported to be in North Borneo when the Allied Forces once again invaded it. For further information, refer to K.G. Tregonning (1967:221).

²In general, the Civil Government administration introduced by the British government was divided into the Executive Council and the Legislative Council. For further information, refer to Cecilia Leong (1982:198).

³Under this plan, the British government allocated an amount of L 6,051,939 to the Crown Colony administration in order to finance the reconstruction works (L 2,232,882) and new projects (L 3,819,057) in North Borneo. For further information, refer to E.W. Ellison (1956:65); and Cecilia Leong (1982:188).

the Medical and Health Department, the Labour Department, the Education Department, the Forestry Department, the Postal and Telecommunication Services, the Audit Department, the Civil Aviation Department, the Customs Department, the Geological Survey Department, the Judicial Department, the Land and Survey Department, the Marine Department, the Police Department, the Printing Department, the Prison Department, the Public Works Department and the Railways Department (Leong, 1982:199).

The historical shift in administration and government in North Borneo from the Sulu Sultanate (1750-1881) to the British North Borneo Chartered Company (1881-1941) then followed by the Japanese invasion (1942-1945) and finally the Crown Colony (1946-1963) has developed the North Borneo fishing industry well. Apart from that, the success of the Crown Colony administration in reconstructing North Borneo through the "Reconstruction and Development Plan: 1948-1955" had enabled the North Borneo economic sectors to further enhance their capabilities. The Crown Colony administration was also fully involved in the development of the North Borneo fishing industry. This is different from the policy used by the BNBC which left the sector to develop on its own and under the supervision of the Chinese capitalists group only.

This was proven when the Crown Colony administration established a Fisheries Department in Sandakan on April 1, 1948 (Leong, 1982:101). J.A. Tubb was one of the heads of this department and also played a significant role in the historical development of the fishing industry in North Borneo. As an initial step towards the development of the fishing industry, the Crown Colony devised the "Young Working Plan" through the "Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme" (Ellison, 1956:65). Through this plan, the British administration was given the responsibility to import basic materials required by the fishermen in order to produce fishing technology and to distribute these materials to the fishermen at a price lower than the one offered by the capitalist. As cited by E.W. Ellison as follows:

The present price of nets supplied to the fishermen through the local agents is three times the costs of similar net in pre-war days. They are also in short supply. The Fisheries Advisor has suggested that *rami fibre* from Hong Kong is more suitable for local fishing nets, being stronger and cheaper than cotton and having a longer endurance. In the Colonial Development and Welfare Scheme, it is proposed as a rehabilitation measure to purchase a quantity of these *fibres* for free distribution to fishing Kampongs where it will be woven into nets. It is advisable that the productions of such nets should be carefully coasted so that the result can be compared with the ruling price of cotton nets (Ellison, 1956:65).

Among the basic materials imported by the Fisheries Department in order to produce fishing technology in North Borneo are sails, polyethylene nylon strings, monofilament nylon thread, stainless steel wires, various sizes of hooks, *rami* and plastic floats. At the initial stages of its administration, the Crown Colony administration was still utilizing coarse thread, a practice

inherited from the BNCC in order to produce nets. Nevertheless, this practice gradually changed during the 1950s when the fishermen began using *rami fibre* as a material to produce nets to replace the increasingly expensive coarse thread. In addition, the price of *rami fibre* brought in from Hong Kong was much cheaper and had a longer endurance than the coarse thread used by fishermen before.

Table 1:
The Import of Fishing Equipment in North Borneo, 1947-1950

| Equipment | Year | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | 1947 | 1948 | 1949 | 1950 |
| Nets: | | | | |
| Thread | 55.66 | 79.25 | 78.60 | 32.94 |
| Rami | n.a. | 3.15 | 14.34 | 0.06 |
| | | | | |
| Thread: | | | | |
| Thread | 11.22 | 39.33 | 94.01 | 126.15 |
| Rami, Hem etc | 18.54 | 62.56 | n.a. | 111.20 |
| Unexplained | 35.12 | 120.92 | 179.60 | n.a. |
| Jut and nylon | 6.28 | n.a. | 1.01 | 3.44 |
| | | | | |
| Total | 126.82 | 305.21 | 366.56 | 273.79 |
| | | | | |
| Various Items (Unit): | | | | |
| Imitation baits | n.a. | n.a. | 2 | n.a. |
| Unexplained | n.a. | 1 | n.a. | n.a. |
| Hooks | 414,600.00 | 1,061,620.00 | 798,735.00 | 1,347,000.00 |
| | | | | |
| Value declared | 20,243.00 | 30,567.00 | 43,033.00 | 30,329.00 |

Source: J.A. Tubb (1952:18).

Table 1 shows the importation of basic materials used to produce fishing technology in North Borneo from 1947 to 1950. In 1952, the Fisheries Department introduced *Kuralon* (scientifically known as synthetic *fibre*), a synthetic float made of rubber and nylon strings to the fishermen in Semporna and Tuaran to enable them to produce nets (Mohd. Arif, 1993:336). This is because nets made from synthetic *fibre* has more endurance in sea water, does not require much care to ensure its endurance and is more able to trap more fish as its colour camouflages the sea water which confuses the fish. As cited by North Borneo Government as follows:

Advice was given to fishermen in Sandakan on buying synthetic twines and nets and foam rubber and foam plastic floats. Use of synthetic nets among Sandakan fishermen sharply increased. Owing to excellent results, it would not be surprising if the whole fishing industry in the Sandakan area changed to synthetic within the next few years (North Borneo Government, 1960:48).

Prior to the introduction of synthetic nets, the fishermen in North Borneo used various tree barks for the purpose of preserving the endurance of the net threads for example the "Ubah Pulot" or *Glochidion Sp.*, "Oba Suluk" or *Shorea Paucisglora*, "Burut" or *Micuna Digantes*, and "Bakau" or *Rhizophora Condelaria* (Mohd. Arif, 1993:336). The development of the North Borneo fishing industry during the Crown Colony administration was not only the sole responsibility of the Fisheries Department but was also the responsibility of the Forestry Department and the Marine Department, specifically in matters of granting fishing licenses to the fishermen. For example, the granting of licenses for obtaining forest resources for the production of fishing technology was placed under the Jurisdiction of the Forestry Department. On the other hand, the licenses for boats used by the fishermen is placed under the Marine Department and the "Harbour Master" through "The Boats and Fishery Ordinance No.10 of 1914" which was created and implemented during the times of the BNCC. According to J.A. Tubb as follows:

A very large proportion of the materials used for fish catching are available locally, particularly such items as bamboo and rattan, mangrove poles and stems of climbing fern used in the constructions of both permanent and moveable fish traps. These items are obtainable under license issued by the Forestry Department and in the majorities of cases, the fish trap operator and his assistant themselves collect and prepared the materials (Tubb, 1952:17).

Under this ordinance, the Marine Department and the Harbour Master have the power to register and issue the licenses for boats, fishing equipment as well as determine the royalty that has to be paid for pearl manufacturing and turtle-egg collecting. The "Boats and Fishery Ordinance Section 16" (North Borneo Government, 1959) underlined in detail all the regulations connected to the licensing of boats and fishing equipment in North Borneo. According to this ordinance, boats are defined as all boats with or without sail or oars and other smaller boats not registered under the Shipping Ordinance. Apart from that, the ordinance also bequeaths to the Marine Department and the Harbour Master to issue a fine of \$ 50.00 to boat owners who operate illegally. If the boat owners did not renew their licenses by April 30 of each year, the Harbour Master would issue a fine twice the original amount if the boat owner did not produce a legitimate excuse.

In order to protect the local fishermen, the Fishery Department also implemented a regulation which allowed only boats belonging to local fishermen or settlers to fish or collect sea resources unless the foreign boats were able to obtain permission from the Harbour Master as allocated in the "Certificate of Exemption Under Section 9A (1) of the Boats and Fisheries Ordinance 1914". As cited by North Borneo Government as follows:

Whereas Section 9A (1) of the Boats and Fisheries Ordinance 1914, prohibits any boat or other vessel, except a boat or vessel owned or manned solely by natives, within the meaning of the Poll Tax Ordinance 1902, from being used to catch fish or to collect sea produce in the territorial waters or to convey within territorial waters fish or sea produce caught or

collected in waters adjacent to the state except under a license from the harbour Master issued to the owner of such boat or vessel (North Borneo Government, 1960:38).

Table 2 shows also the types of boats registered by the Marine Department from 1947 to 1951, as follows:

Table 2:
List of Registered Boats in North Borneo, 1947-1950

| Origin | Type | Year | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | | 1947 | 1948 | 1949 | 1950 |
| Native | <i>Bagang</i> | 68 | 147 | 413 | 499 |
| | <i>Bidar</i> | 487 | 636 | 1087 | 1182 |
| | <i>Gobang</i> | 1277 | 1819 | 2725 | 2087 |
| | <i>Jongkong</i> | 302 | 411 | 520 | 168 |
| | <i>Kumpit</i> | 1 | 1 | 9 | 13 |
| | <i>Lipa-Lipa</i> | 1149 | 1183 | 1365 | 1478 |
| | <i>Pakarangan</i> | 79 | 267 | 204 | 270 |
| | <i>Pemukatan</i> | 42 | 50 | 75 | 80 |
| | <i>Perahu</i> | 5 | n.a. | 217 | 171 |
| | <i>Sampir</i> | 4 | 2 | 11 | 6 |
| | <i>Sapit</i> | 34 | 57 | 51 | 85 |
| Philippines | <i>Dapang</i> | 8 | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Chinese | <i>Junk</i> | 100 | 108 | 77 | 66 |
| | <i>Sampan</i> | 136 | 95 | 168 | 191 |
| | <i>Tongkang</i> | 39 | 35 | 163 | 35 |
| Others | Motorboat | 12 | 32 | 115 | 172 |
| | Sail boats | n.a. | n.a. | n.a. | 1 |
| | Lighter | 1 | 8 | 6 | 5 |
| | Scow | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| | Not Explained | 1 | 983 | 1 | 1477 |
| | Total | 4182 | 6230 | 7763 | 8584 |

Source: J.A. Tubb (1952:72).

The effort taken by the Crown Colony administration in order to develop the North Borneo fishing industry are not only in terms of the import of basic materials for the production of fishing equipment, issuing of licenses and establishing regulations but they also include introducing and encouraging local fishermen to use motorboats and coastal fishing boats. The reason for this is to enable the fishermen to operate in deeper and further waters, which would inevitably lead to an increase in their income. To serve this purpose, the Fishery Department sent several of its officers and staff to attend course in fishing technology in the United Kingdom and also oceanography and fishery courses at the Amoy University in China. In 1949, the Fishery Department introduced a coastal fishing boat called the *M.F.V. Bulan Purnama* for the purpose of deep-sea fishing research and providing training and exposure for the fishermen (Tubb, 1952:17).

In August 1952, the Fishery Department brought in another boat to Sandakan called the "M.P.V. Myrtle Burgess" which was 52 feet long and running on an engine of 30 H.P. Ailsa Craig Diesel Engine to serve similar purposes as the first boat. The obsession of the Crown Colony to exploit the sea produce in the North Borneo waters resulted in the introduction of another boat by the Fishery Department known as *Harapan* (Hopefully). As cited by North Borneo Government as follows:

The Fisheries Branch first coastal fishing boat, named "HARAPAN", which was build to the design of Mister Gurther, FAO Naval Architect to India, was launched in October at Sandakan. She is 30 feet long, 9 feet beam and 2 feet 9 inches draft is powered by a Perkins model P3/144 M marine diesel engine and is fitted with a winch driven by the power take off from the main engine and a "Ferrograph" echo-sounder. She fishes with a forty two feet (ground rope) otter trawl net. This boat will be used for demonstration of trawl fishing and will be chartered to selected groups of fishermen. Two trained Fisheries Assistants will stay on board to teach the fishermen (North Borneo Government, 1960:38).

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND FOREIGN CAPITALISTS

In general, the local Chinese, Japanese and Hong Kong fishing capitalists played a significant role in the history of the development of the North Borneo fishing industry. This is because these groups of capitalists have been active contributors to the fishing industry prior to World War II. For example, the Chinese capitalists have been directly involved in the fishing industry since the days of the Sulu Sultanate and succeeded in monopolizing the industry during the BNBCC administration in North Borneo. The major reason for this is that the BNBCC was only focusing on the on-shore developments and left the maritime developments fully in the hands of the local Chinese capitalists. In other words, the BNBCC administration policy had given the opportunity to the Chinese capitalists to exploit the North Borneo maritime products as a major source of protein for the local population specifically for the logging and agricultural labourers. According to J.A. Tubb as follows:

The fishing industry is almost entirely controlled by Chinese *Towkays*. The greater part of the profits finds its way into the pockets of this people. Under this system, the *Towkays* financed the fishermen, both Chinese and native and get control of the whole catch. The fishermen are bound to the *towkays* by debt and as a result any desire they may have to experiment with new equipment or new technique tends to be frustrated by lack of means. Needless to say, any move in this direction is looked upon with considerable apprehension by the dealers, whose profits are alleged to range 50% to 250% according to the quantity and the quality of the fish sold (Tubb, 1952:6).

During the early and middle stages of the British Administration, the fishing industry was still putting emphasis on the salted and dried fish commodities in order to cater for the demands of the ever increasing local population, specifically those working in plantation and timber camps situated in the Interior and the western coast of North Borneo. Table 3 illustrates the import

of coarse salt by the Chinese *Towkays* in 1947 to 1950, according to the major towns which produce dried fish in North Borneo.

Table 3:
The Import of Coarse Salt in North Borneo (1947-1950)

| Residency | Year | | | |
|--------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | 1947 | 1948 | 1949 | 1950 |
| Sandakan | 10,599.57 | 7,758.50 | 9,343.66 | 838.20 |
| Jesselton | 1,381.90 | 2,401.97 | 3,583.91 | 3,706.03 |
| Tawau | 1,955.54 | 2,896.20 | 3,729.64 | 2,952.16 |
| Kudat | 30.00 | 370.50 | 1,981.08 | 1,243.53 |
| Labuan | 436.91 | 992.41 | 866.21 | 766.49 |
| Lahad Datu | 4,660.00 | 24.00 | n.a. | 67.00 |
| Semporna | 263.00 | 262.05 | 913.00 | n.a. |
| Total | 19,326.92 | 14,714.63 | 20,417.50 | 17,123.47 |

Source: J.A. Tubb (1952:33).

According to the Colony of North Borneo in *Annual Report 1948*, as cited also as follows:

The great bulk of the dried fish consumed in the Colony is supplied by the East Coast and an average of 20 tons per month is shipped from Sandakan to other ports in the Colony. In addition to this quantity record in Customs return there is a considerable movement of fish from point to point along the coast in the course of normal trading barter between villages but no assessment of the quantities handled under this circumstances asset been possible (Colony of North Borneo, 1948:32).

Meanwhile, the fishing industry at the final stages of the British administration era saw a great involvement by the Honk Kong *Towkays* to exploit the prawn commodity around the coasts of Kudat, Sandakan and up to Pulau Tambisan. For example, in 1951 the British administration granted permission to the Hong Kong based Chun-Li Company to operate prawn fishing using the drag-net tow method in the North Borneo waters (North Borneo Government, 1960-1963). In 1960, a Japanese fishing company known as the "Taito Fishing Company" carried out a research around the coast of North Borneo and found that the coast of Marudu Bay and the Darval Bay have a high population of tuna which has the potential of being developed commercially for instance the skipjack (*katsuwonus pelamis*) and the yellow-fine tuna (*neothunnus macropterus*). As reported by the North Borneo Government in *Agriculture Annual Report*, as follows:

Tuna fishing by a Japanese company continued in the waters off Si Amil Island where shore installation were improved to handle fifteen tons of fresh fish daily. Most of the catch was processed and exported as dried bonito (which is exported mainly to Ceylon); Offal was cooked, dried and exported to Hong Kong as raw material for fish meal. A small proportion was ground for local sale as fish meal (North Borneo Government, 1962:10).

In 1961, the Japanese capitalists merged with the Chinese *Towkays* and established a company known as the “Borneo Fishing Company” and was later renamed the “North Borneo Fishing Company” whose major commodities consist of fresh and frozen prawns. The North Borneo Fishing Company brought in own drag-nets (Mohd. Arif, 1993:340). The Sandakan-based company was also equipped with an ice factory and two prawn processing factories. The existence of the ice factory indirectly helped in the development of the fishing industry in North Borneo especially for the purpose of maintaining the freshness of the fish brought in from the sea. The high demand for frozen and fresh prawns in the international market has led the Sandakan Chinese *Towkays* to bring in another 40-foot long drag-net trawl from Hong Kong in 1962.

Table 4 points out the export of fishing products in North Borneo from 1947 to 1963, as follows:

Table 4:
The Export of Fishing Products in North Borneo, 1947-1963

| Year | Quantity (ton) | Value (\$) |
|------|----------------|--------------|
| 1947 | 819.00 | 582,649.02 |
| 1948 | 1450.00 | 717,365.95 |
| 1949 | 1163.00 | 871,851.85 |
| 1950 | 1215.00 | 971,628.75 |
| 1951 | 1003.00 | 1,032,331.24 |
| 1952 | n.a. | n.a. |
| 1953 | n.a. | n.a. |
| 1954 | n.a. | n.a. |
| 1955 | 1245.92 | 1,297,264.00 |
| 1956 | 1403.67 | 1,808,673.00 |
| 1957 | 1213.03 | 1,224,596.00 |
| 1958 | 1224.94 | 1,222,296.00 |
| 1959 | 1816.12 | 1,495,238.00 |
| 1960 | 1702.72 | 1,822,013.00 |
| 1961 | 2220.03 | 3,331,674.00 |
| 1962 | 2140.75 | 2,887,208.00 |
| 1963 | 1666.81 | 2,511,877.00 |

Source: Data is adapted from the North Borneo Government (1963).

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, although the aims and roles played by the Crown Colony administration and the Chinese, Japanese and Hong Kong capitalists were different, the combination between the government and the capitalists was successful in redeveloping the North Borneo fishing industry after World War II (1939-1945). Although the developmental policies implemented by the Crown Colony administration, for example the ones outlined in the “Reconstruction and Development Plan for North Borneo: 1948-1955”, focused more on matters of administration and social obligations for instance the execution of the maritime laws, the basic facilities and the introduction of new fishing

technology to the fishermen, the reality was that the British government was still very dependent on the local and foreign capitalists for the development of the North Borneo fishing industry.

At the same time, the policies also brought a large amount of indirect revenue for the British government through taxes, export and import duties, licenses and others. As for the capitalists, the Crown Colony administration's policies, which avoided direct intervention in the fishing industry, specifically in the fishing and selling activities, had given them ample opportunity to gain a huge amount of profit. Therefore, it can be said that the roles and contributions of the British government as well as the local and foreign capitalists were only successful in redeveloping the North Borneo fishing industry after World War II, but did not succeed in improving the lives of the local fishermen.

The conflict of interest, which rose from the question of economical and social obligations, resulted in the British administration acting as merely a "purveyor" of technology and fishing equipment for the fishermen and not contributing much towards helping the fishermen to find the means of getting these items. This allowed the local and foreign capitalists to fill the gap and to control the fishing industry by bringing in better fishing technology, exploiting the local fishermen by providing a credit system for the procurement of the fishing equipment and eventually transforming the local fishermen as merely a source of manpower.

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