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Memory and Remembrance of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising of 1943 in Sabah, Malaysia

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Introduction

The Kinabalu Guerrillas' uprising against the Japanese Army in Jesselton, British North Borneo (present day Sabah), on 9 October 1943 was a momentous event in the memory of the people of Sabah. The uprising achieved very little in terms of strategic and tactical sense, as it only managed to capture the town for a night before the Japanese Army returned few days later and forced the guerrillas to be on the run (and on the defensive). What was followed was a series of skirmishes and Japanese mopping up campaign. Even though the uprising only lasted a night, the entire venture lasted more than a month. At the end of it, the Japanese Army managed to destroy the guerrillas and a series of brutal reprisals were carried out including severe tortures and massacres in the prisons and many locations, culminating with the execution of 176 guerrillas at Petagas and several hundred others being sent for imprisonment elsewhere. The end of the war in 1945 brought about a series of effort to commemorate the people who were involved in the uprising or implicated by the event. These came in the form of establishment of monuments, memorials, common graves and the publication of books. This paper will examine these efforts including exploring the official and non-official initiatives, especially in the establishment of monuments and memorials. The paper argues that ethnicity also played a part in shaping the manner the event is being remembered or commemorated.

Literature

Studies on war and remembrance in Malaysia are confined mainly to the efforts of the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) that was led by the Malayan Communist Party. The fact that it was communist-led, and that it was the same MPAJA that eventually launched the post-war armed insurrection against the British and later, the Malayan and Malaysian Government, meant that their role in anti-Japanese war were sidelined if not marginalized. Cheah Boon Kheng dwell on the MPAJA's wartime

role as the main credible local resistance that fought against the Japanese Army¹, yet in the two weeks immediately after the Japanese surrender and while the Allied forces have yet to return, the MPAJA went on a rampage against suspected collaborators. As many of the alleged collaborators were from the Malay community whereas most of the MPAJA members were Chinese further compounded the manner the anti-Japanese war being remembered, and commemorated.² The need to champion for the existence of a Malay-led anti-Japanese campaign saw the hastily-put together Malay chapter of the Force 136 at the closing stage of the Japanese war³ which allowed the Malay community to stake a claim of having fought against the Japanese, and not ‘willing collaborators’ of the Japanese under the framework of Greater East Asian Sphere of Prosperity. Yet, Force 136 was originally a Chinese organization that could trace its origin to the Kuomintang.

The ideological differences and the historical experience of the Emergency years (1948-1960), and renewed armed insurgency by the MCP against the Malaysian government in the 1960s and beyond, saw the issue of commemoration and establishment of memorial became a contested issue, which dragged on until more recent days. In the immediate post-war years, the MCP and comrades of the disbanded MPAJA, erected a memorial to commemorate the deaths of the bulk of the MCP Politburo who were betrayed to the Japanese when they gathered to meet on 1 September 1942. But the memorial was destroyed by the government at the start of the Emergency in June 1948. Since then, and especially after the end of the MCP armed struggle in 1989, the ex-comrades association of the MPAJA strove to erect a memorial to commemorate the sacrifices made by members of the MPAJA during the Japanese occupation. The efforts took on new lease of life with some ethnic Chinese politicians who came out to champion for such memorial claiming that the MPAJA were the true anti-imperialist heroes of Malaysia, having fought against the Japanese and later, the British Government. In contrast, it denied the role of the then ruling party of UMNO (United Malay National Organisation) which claimed primacy in the independence movement, as the true heroes of Malaysia. This resulted in a series of legal tussles.⁴

¹ Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star Over Malaya*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983.

² Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War and Memory and the Making of Modern Malaya and Singapore*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, pp. 56-135.

³ Wan Hashim Wan Teh, *Perang Dunia Kedua: Peranan Gerila Melayu Force 136*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa & Pustaka, 1993.

⁴ Danny Wong Tze Ken, *Discourse in History in Malaysian Public Sphere*, Kuala Lumpur: Inaugural Lecture, University of Malaya, 2016, pp. 12-15.

The effort to erect a memorial for the MPAJA was seen as an effort to reintegrate their “Heroes” into National commemoration.⁵(Blackburn and Hack, 2012) The effort was not confined to the ex-MPAJA members, but was taken up by the Chinese Assembly Halls of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. The effort resulted in the erection of a new September 1 Martyrs Memorial in 2003 at Nilai Memorial which is a privately-run cemetery. This was followed later by the erection of a Peace Memorial in 2007. The new memorial, names, “Monument in Memory of Malayan Heroes in the Resistant Movement against Japanese Invasion”, was the Chinese’ attempt to get their heroes recognized by the state and the public at large (including non-Chinese). But the effort fell far short of the desired goals as the commemoration services were conducted solely in Chinese and in the process, alienated people of other ethnic group. More importantly the memorials were rejected by the majority of the Malays including the dominating UMNO party as well as the ex-servicemen associations who felt inappropriate for the communists to be commemorated officially. Thus the commemoration of the anti-Japanese resistance movements remained an ethnic Chinese affair.

Instead of being a unifying factor, the question of commemorating the war and the memories of the war, continue to pull the nation apart. The notion of whose ‘heroic past’ became compounded with ethnicity being a primary consideration.⁶ The present paper however, will provide a different perspective to this idea of commemorating the war and the manner it was being preserved. The case of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and their uprising against the Japanese in October 1943, is officially commemorated. The next section will examine the origins and the process of erecting memorials for the war effort.

Background

The story of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and its uprising against the Japanese Army in Jesselton, British North Borneo was a unique event on many counts. First, it was established by a group of young men who had no external assistance nor involvement from retreating or stay-behind parties of Allied forces. Secondly, the guerrillas were of mixed ethnicity. Though the guerrillas were initially started mainly by some Chinese youths, there were inter-ethnic team who were recruited from all ethnic groups, thus

⁵ Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack, *War and Memory and the Making of Modern Malaya and Singapore*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012, pp. 276-285.

⁶ This is the very premise of Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack’s argument for Chapter 9 in, *War and Memory and the Making of Modern Malaya and Singapore*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2012; see also Danny Wong Tze Ken, *Discourse in History in Malaysian Public Sphere*, Kuala Lumpur: Inaugural Lecture, University of Malaya, 2016, pp. 12-15.

making the Kinabalu Guerrillas unique as it was multi-ethnic and quite unlike most of the anti-Japanese movements found in the rest of Malaysia, which were organized mainly on communal basis.

The Kinabalu Guerrillas was started by a group of young Chinese men in Jesselton in mid-1942, several months after the Japanese Army occupied the country.⁷ The leader was a young man called Albert Kwok. The guerrilla's main objective was to overthrow the Japanese and to get rid of Japanese collaborators. In their build up, the Guerrillas enlisted the help from all quarters. This including local community leaders such as Li Tet Phui and Jules Stephens, who were lieutenant and sergeant respectively in the North Borneo Volunteer Force. Lim Keng Fatt, a partner in Ban Guan company, one of the largest business establishments in town; and Charles Peter, the Chief Police Office of Jesselton, were also involved. Kwok also managed to recruit the Bajau-Suluk islanders who lived on islands offshore of Jesselton. Kwok also tried to obtain arms and supplies from the remnants of the United States Forces in southern Philippines, but was not very successful, having only managed to purchase several pistols and some grenades.

The guerrillas finally launched its uprising on 9th October. On that night, around 48 Japanese were killed. They consisted of Japanese military personnel as well as civilians (including some Taiwanese migrants who were working in Japanese plantations). The uprising infuriated the Japanese who retaliated severely by launching a series of punitive expeditions against the guerrillas. Even though the guerrillas were brave men, they could not do much against the well trained and better equipped Japanese army. The Japanese used aircrafts to reconnoitre and to bombard the guerrilla positions. As a result the guerrillas were forced to disperse in small groups after their

⁷ Since the end of the War, several works are devoted to the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising. The earliest would be Maxwell Hall's pioneering work, published barely three years after the end of the war. See Maxwell J. Hall, *The Kinabalu Guerrillas*, Kuching: Borneo Literature Bureau, 1949; this was followed by a Chinese version in 1978 by Chia Yuk Tet. See Chia Yuk Tet, *The Anti-Japanese Kinabalu Guerrillas*, Tawau: Tawau Daily, 1978. Both Hall and Chia offers different perspectives with Hall focusing on a multi-ethnic efforts led by the Chinese and government servants whereas Chia offers an almost exclusively Chinese perspective. Robert Evans' book on Japanese occupation however, provided some views from the interior during the war with much of the information on the Kinabalu Guerrillas provided by Hall's work, see Stephen Robert Evans, *Sabah Under the Rising Sun Government*, Kota Kinabalu: 1990. A more recent study by this author appeared in 2019, see Danny Wong Tze Ken, *One Crowded Moment of Glory: The Kinabalu Guerrillas and the 1943 Jesselton Uprising*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2019.

position near the hills at Tuaran-Tamparuli area was attacked. Unaccustomed to life in jungle, the guerrillas were soon became easy targets for the Japanese. Many were arrested while trying to find food near the villages, others, exhausted and starving, surrendered to the Japanese.

In all, the Japanese managed to arrest more than 500 who were either directly involved in the uprising or were closely associated with the guerrillas. The Japanese also arrested several hundred others who were suspected of abetting the guerrillas or were simply sympathizers of the movement. Many of those who were arrested were first questioned and interrogated at the Kempeitai office at Tuaran, the headquarters of the punitive expeditions. They were then brought down to the Kempeitai office at the Jesselton Sports Club by the side of the town padang (playing field) for further interrogation. While the Japanese would release those whom they believed to be innocent, the majority of those arrested were detained. They were sent to the police barracks and gaol at Batu Tiga. There, the prisoners were further interrogated and tortured. As a result, a great number actually died in the prison.

On 20 January 1944, the prisoners were gathered in front of the prison court yard. A Japanese officer, who was probably a judge had a list of names read out. Those whose name were called were marked for execution at mile five Petagas. A total of 176 names were called. They were those who were directly involved in the uprising. Among them were the leaders, Albert Kwok, Kong Tze Phui. On 21st January, the group was brought to Mile Five Petagas onboard a train. There, awaiting them were two large newly dug holes. The men were asked to jump into them and were machine gunned. The mulling of the prisoners was followed by the decapitation of five guerrilla leaders, Albert Kwok, Li Tet Phui, Charlie Peter, Kong Tze Phui and Tsen Chau Kong.

The remaining prisoners were given prison sentence that ranged from one to 15 years. Around 130 of them were being sent to Labuan. Out of these, only seven survived the war. The rest were victims of various illness including severe cases of diarrhoea. It is the question of commemoration

End of the War and Collective Memory

This part looks at the manner in which the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising were perceived after the war, including the cost of the uprising and its effects on the local people – both directly affected and the population at large – and how they tried to pick up the pieces after the traumatic events. This part will also assesses the position the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising occupied in the collective

memory of the people, and how it was treated by the state during the 18 years of colonial rule (1946-1963) and in an independent state of Sabah in Malaysia.

During the closing stages of the war there were reports of cannibalism by the Japanese army at their headquarters at Sapong, in the interior of Sabah, allegedly because their food rations were running out. It was said the Japanese ate the flesh of the native and Indian police, but there were no instances of Chinese being put into Japanese cooking pots. Apparently the Japanese found Chinese flesh left too bitter a taste in their mouths after the Kinabalu Guerrillas' uprising. Hall was told by one Chinese that the indigestion in the Japanese stomach caused by consuming Chinese flesh was proof of the success of the uprising and that this alone made it worthwhile.⁸

The above anecdote is, of course, poor evidence to support the proposition that the Kinabalu Guerrillas' uprising was a worthwhile effort. Perhaps some tangible results are more convincing. If the revolt was aimed at preventing the rumoured Japanese conscription of 3,000 Chinese youths, then it met its objective. While there was indeed a Japanese programme introduced in November 1943 (shortly after the uprising), it did not involve the Chinese. The Kyodotai programme was not a military force; instead, its sole aim was to provide skills and leadership training for the non-Chinese locals in the hope of instilling a sense of loyalty to the Japanese authorities.

Another related Japanese action which might be attributed to the uprising was the import of labourers from Java. Prior to the uprising in 1943 the Japanese had forced the population of Jesselton and its vicinity into manual labour on the construction of the Jesselton aerodrome at Tanjung Aru, which exerted a heavy toll on the health of many elderly men, including some towkays. It was during those work sessions that Kwok's men had tried to contact the Allied POWs who were also involved in the work. After the uprising, the Japanese stopped their practice of forced manual labour for the locals, and instead, brought in several thousand Javanese labourers for construction work.

A post-war report on war damage in Jesselton written immediately after the Japanese surrender commented that, "The Double Ten left many Chinese and native families without breadwinners. Many of these will need relief and the number is roughly estimated at 1,000." That figure, however, did not reflect the actual number of people who lost their lives during and after the uprising as the after-effects were felt not only in Jesselton but also throughout the west coast region and even in interior towns such as Tambunan and Keningau. Richard Evans, the pre-war Resident of West Coast

⁸ Maxwell Hall, *The Kinabalu Guerrillas*, Kuching: Borneo Literature Bureau, 1949, p. 46.

who returned in early October 1945, made an estimate of 2000–3000 people killed in the Jesselton–Kota Belud area as a result of Japanese atrocities following the uprising. Colonel Tasker, who made the first estimate of casualties, also said the impoverishment of Jesselton and West Coast District was directly traceable to the failure of the uprising.

Brigadier C.F.C. Macaskie, an old Sabah hand who returned as Head of the British Borneo Civilian Affairs Unit (BBCAU), arrived in Jesselton on 13 October 1945 to start relief work. He was clearly upset by what he saw in Jesselton. In a letter to the chairman of the Chartered Company, Sir Neill Malcolm, Macaskie remarked:

The town was practically deserted but people were slowly coming in through the Japs line. We established ourselves in the old governor house which is not much damaged. The walls of Govt. cottage have been blown out The constabulary houses can also be repaired I address all the people in the town, about 300, but only one of the old towkays remains, Chow Ah Quee. The rest are mostly dead. Many having been executed after the revolt on 10 Oct 1943.⁹

Upon his return to Jesselton, Richard Evans found that,

Most English speaking Chinese were shot or beheaded July-Sept. Even Claudius and Menjaji disappeared. Lau Lai and nearly all the leading Chinese have died – many of them after terrible torture. Mantanani and its inhabitants of P. Sulok have been wiped out except for a few women and children. It is easier to enquire who remains as so many have been killed. We have every reason to be proud of the loyalty and behaviour of the people and police.¹⁰

Hall devoted an entire chapter of his book to discussing if the venture had been a worthwhile effort.

Liu Yong Zi, writing in 1956, proposed that what the Kinabalu Guerrillas did was a victory in defeat. For Liu, although Albert Kwok and his men were executed, they had “helped the tens of thousand Chinese to win back some pride in defeat”.¹¹ Liu’s notion of ‘pride in defeat’ is difficult to measure. Perhaps it reflected the manner in which Sabah was occupied by the Japanese without firing a single shot, perhaps it was

⁹ Danny Wong Tze Ken, *One Crowded Moment of Glory*, p.175.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Liu Yong Zi, *Tieh Ti Sia de Huei Yi, (Memories of Life under the Iron Sole: The Blood and Tears History of Sabah and Sarawak under Japanese Occupation)*, Hong Kong: Shanghai Publisher, 1969 (first printed 1956), p. 69.

even the reflection of a Chinese on the loss of Nanjing, the capital of the Chinese Republic, in December 1937. All this humiliation was deemed to have been atoned by the guerrillas pitching themselves against the might of the Japanese Army – and pride redeemed. If pride was redeemed by the uprising, then a very heavy price was paid.

The Patagas Memorial

When peace returned to Sabah, one of the first things considered by the Chinese community in Jesselton was the need to care for the war deaths and their families. A committee was set up on 20th October 1945 following a public meeting held at the Keng Chew Association at Beach Street. The committee's official name was 'War Victims Caring Committee', or simply known as Caring Committee. The chairman was Chong Khiam, and Tsen En Fook as vice chairman. Lee Thau Sang as English secretary, Sia Yuk Tet as Chinese Secretary, and Wong Yun Tshin as treasurer. The committee was later known as the West Coast Residency Memorial Fund Committee.¹²

This committee was responsible for organising the first memorial service for the war heroes. At 9 a.m. on 21 January 1946, the second anniversary of the execution at Petagas, the committee held the first gathering in memory of the war dead at the town *padang* (playing field or Green). More than 500 people, mostly family members and relatives of those killed at Petagas and others connected to the uprising, attended the event. The committee pledged to care for the children of those who had been killed. The meeting at the *padang* ended at 11 a.m., following which the committee led the war victims' families to the execution site at Petagas to conduct funeral rites. The site was marked with flowers and an arch made of coconut palm leaves. A banner at the site in Chinese lettering read 'British North Borneo Api (Jesselton), Mass Funeral Site of the Chinese Resistance Fighters of October 1943'. The families wept as religious rites were conducted. The event ended at 1.30 p.m.¹³

In an effort to make the memorial service a permanent event, the Memorial Committee proposed that the colonial government declare 21 January Memorial Service Day. The committee also proposed a plaque be placed to mark the event, which the colonial government agreed to in 1948.

¹² Chia Yuk Tet, *The Anti-Japanese Kinabalu Guerrillas*, Tawau: Tawau Daily, 1978, p. 92.

¹³ Lee Shui Ching et al., *The Heroes of Kinabalu*, Kota Kinabalu: Souvenir Compilation Committee for the Commemoration of the Kinabalu Guerrillas. (in Chinese), 1993.

The story of the Petagas War Memorial did not end in 1946. In 1948, the West Coast Memorial Fund Committee decided to bring the remains of those guerrillas and supporters who had died at Labuan back to Petagas for interment with their comrades who had been executed there. The committee sought permission from the Resident of Labuan and Interior to exhume the bodies of 124 West Coast political prisoners who died in Labuan prison during the occupation. The prisoners had been buried near the old Naval Cemetery. The committee sent Chia Yuk Tet and Liew Chi Nyen, one of the survivors from Labuan, to carry out the task. In Labuan, the two were assisted by the local Department of Medical Services and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, and a team of workers were employed to dig up the remains of those buried. After two weeks' work, the remains of more than 90 men had been found. The remains, mainly skeletons, bones and skulls, were cleaned and interred in six large burial jars.

The six jars were taken to the Labuan wharf where a public memorial service was held. The jars, draped in the British and Chinese national flags, were then taken to Jesselton on 24 April 1949. A public memorial service was held the following day. Led by the Resident of West Coast and Chong Khiam, a crowd gathered at the wharf to receive the burial jars which were placed at the Chinese Chamber of Commerce building for the public to pay their respects.

On 28 April 1949 a public procession was held in the town. Flags were flown at half-mast and around 500 people accompanied the six burial jars on a circuit of the town before stopping at the railway station near the town *padang*. From there, the burial jars were taken by train to Petagas, where a memorial service was held. Priests and clergy of various religions conducted the service. This was followed by the placing of wreaths by community leaders and the playing of the 'Last Post' and 'Rouse' by buglers from the police band.¹⁴

With the interment of the six burial jars from Labuan, the tasks of the committee were completed. Since then the task of maintaining the Petagas War Memorial has been the responsibility of the local government. However, it took a while before the colonial government could formalise the arrangement. First, the government took steps to have the massacre site gazetted. In October 1947, the Resident for West Coast, Richard Evans, recommended that the whole area be gazetted a burial reserve, and this was agreed by the Surveyor-General. Governor Twining also "directed that Government must pay for the upkeep, and that some sort of motorable road or track should be constructed". It was also decided that the site, though gazetted as a burial reserve, would

¹⁴ Chia Yuk Tet, *The Anti-Japanese Kinabalu Guerrillas*, p. 92.

have no new graves added to it, and that it should be a sanctuary or memorial garden that relatives could visit. The three-acre plot of land was gazetted on 15 November 1947.

All seemed well until 1950 when the Acting Chief Secretary asked the Resident of West Coast about the mechanism and funding for the upkeep of the cemetery “in a proper state”. The reply from the Resident explained that in order to carry out the orders made by the Governor in 1947, the West Coast Memorial Committee in December 1948 decided that the Jesselton District Officer was to be responsible for the general upkeep and was authorised to spend not more than \$360 per annum for the purpose. However, there was no letter of authorisation from the earlier Chief Secretary in 1947 and, therefore, the Governor’s decision of 1947 was not properly implemented. The Resident of West Coast requested a letter of authorisation to carry out the orders and also informed the Chief Secretary that the committee would upkeep the cemetery for five years from January 1949. In addition, he requested that the government take over when money allotted for this purpose was exhausted, and this was agreed by the Chief Secretary. From then on, the upkeep of the Memorial was placed in the hands of the Jesselton local government.

In 1950, the Director of Medical Services of North Borneo received a request from the West Coast Memorial Fund to exhume certain bodies buried in the common grave at Petagas, “so that they may be reburied in containers in the same place”, to ensure that they were not in contact with the ground so as to preserve the remains. As the Director of Medical Services had no objection to the application, it was approved by the Chief Secretary who also recommended that, given the special circumstances of the case, the fees for the exhumation licence be waived. However, it is unclear if the exhumation was ever carried out.

The involvement of the government, both British and later, Malaysian, in continuing the remembrance service at the Petagas War Memorial is important as it has helped to reinforce the memory of those executed at Petagas as well as all connected to the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton uprising. The memorial service, with the presence of top government officials, including the Governor during the colonial era, and since 1963, the Chief Minister, has helped to preserve the deeds of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the uprising as heroic efforts by the people of Sabah in their fight against tyranny. Through the annual memorial service and ceremonies, the Kinabalu Guerrillas have been elevated to the status of heroes, and the Petagas War Memorial has become a form of pantheon for these heroes.

This image was important for the colonial administration as it tried to re-exert British rule in Sabah. It was crucial that the government identify with the people. Efforts to commemorate the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising offered a perfect opportunity for the government to do so. With this consideration in mind, the application from the Chinese-based War Victims Caring Committee to the government to declare 21 January as Remembrance Day for the Kinabalu Guerrillas was readily accepted in 1948. The move was special as the memorial service at Petagas was in addition to the British observance of Remembrance Day (Armistice Day) on 11 November. In Sabah, Remembrance Day had been observed since the end of World War I, with a ceremony held in the centre of town since 1923, after the building of the obelisk-shaped memorial. The original plaques on the obelisk commemorated the Glorious Dead of the 1914–18 Great War, and another carried the names of those from North Borneo who lost their lives in the War in Europe. After World War II, the years 1939–1945 were added to the plaque.¹⁵

After Sabah became a state of Malaysia in 1963, the Remembrance Day service was no longer observed. In its place is Hari Pahlawan (Warriors' Day), celebrated annually in July. However, the Sabahans' continued observance of 21 January to commemorate the Kinabalu Guerrillas was not affected. The memorial service and wreath-laying ceremony was further institutionalised when the state government included the day as an official function to be attended by the Head of State and the Chief Minister. While the ceremony keeps much of the old form, it has taken on a new meaning.

As a newly independent state, it was important for Sabah to have a set of heroes whose struggles would be emulated by the people, and who would inspire the people to stand up for their rights and beliefs. There was also the consideration of national unity with people of different races working together for a common goal.

The epitaph on the memorial reads:

In perpetual memory of those gallant men of all races who, loyal to the cause of freedom were murdered and buried at this place on 21 January 1944 and also those who met their death in the same cause at Labuan and were later buried here.¹⁶

¹⁵ Danny Wong Tze Ken, *One Crowded Moment of Glory*, pp. 182-183.

¹⁶ Maxwell Hall, *The Kinabalu Guerrillas*, p. 96.

The deeds of the Kinabalu Guerrillas stand out in this regard as they epitomised the spirit of freedom and heroic efforts in facing a much stronger foe. Most importantly, the words 'men of all races' which signified the multi-ethnic nature of the names on the Petagas Memorial augur well for the spirit of unity. This is especially interesting as the guerrillas were predominantly Chinese, with participation from people from other ethnic groups. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the common suffering inflicted by the Japanese in the aftermath of the uprising on people from all ethnic backgrounds has become the strong uniting factor that the state leaders are hoping for when they attend the memorial service and ceremony at Petagas.

The institutionalisation of the Petagas War Memorial after 1963 was mainly due to the efforts of first Chief Minister, Tun Fuad (Donald) Stephens and the Head of State, Tun Datu Mustapha bin Datu Harun. Donald Stephens was the son of Jules Stephens, the health inspector and a former sergeant in the Volunteer Force, who was trainer to the Kinabalu Guerrillas and among those executed at Petagas.¹⁷ Many of those killed at Petagas were his friends; some he had befriended briefly when he was arrested by the Japanese and imprisoned at the Batu Tiga Prison. Thus it became important for Donald Stephens to ensure that people like his late father and his friends were justly commemorated. Tun Mustapha, Sabah's first Head of State and later a long-serving chief minister, had been a guerrilla leader during the war in the Kudat area. As leader of a team organised under the Service Reconnaissance Detachment in early 1945, Mustapha recognised a common affinity with the Kinabalu Guerrillas.

Subsequent state administrations even expanded the significance of the Kinabalu Guerrillas as a bridge in external relations. When the Sabah state government under Chief Minister Yong Teck Lee was actively promoting the BIMP-EAGA growth triangle involving Sabah, Brunei, the southern Philippines and Kalimantan in Indonesia, the occasion of the visit of Governor Nur Misuari of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao to the Petagas War Memorial was used to cement bilateral relations.¹⁸ In their speeches, both leaders highlighted the unity factor of the two people in fighting a common enemy, and exhorted leaders to work together as their forefathers had done during the war. Highlighted were the roles played by people like Imam Marjukin and the Filipino guerrillas who extended their help to the Kinabalu Guerrillas.

¹⁷ P.J. Granville-Edge, *The Sabahan: The Life and Death of Tun Fuad Stephens*, Kuala Lumpur: Writers' Publishing House, 1999, p. 49.

¹⁸ *New Straits Times*, 27 October 1997.

The Petagas site has been renovated several times to beautify the area. Apart from a few years in the 1970s when the site was neglected, it has been upgraded and maintained by the Kota Kinabalu Municipal Council (now Kota Kinabalu City Hall). A major renovation costing \$190,000 was carried out in 1979 by the newly instituted council. During the renovation, workers dug up the six large earthenware jars containing the remains of those who perished in Labuan. However, at that time there was no proper information about the jars, and it was some time before everyone agreed that they were the jars containing the remains of those who had perished in Labuan. The renovation also involved replacing the wooden memorial with a seven-foot marble memorial stone bearing a plaque with the names of the 389 fallen heroes, including those who had died at Petagas and Labuan as well as others associated with the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising, whose names were later added to the memorial.¹⁹

For many years there had been grouses among the survivors of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the family members of those killed at Petagas and Labuan that no Japanese official representatives had attended the annual memorial service at Petagas.²⁰ This changed in 1998 when the Japanese Consul based in Kota Kinabalu began to attend the service and lay a wreath on the memorial. Perhaps such gestures would placate the spirits of those who were killed and at the same time heal the wounds. However, by 1998 many of the direct descendants of those who died at Petagas and Labuan were no longer attending the memorial service as they had moved away from Kota Kinabalu. Thus, in some ways, the gesture came too late.

Other Memorials

In 1998 the Kota Kinabalu Junior Chamber, which belongs to Jaycees Community International, initiated a project called 'Bronze Commemorative Plaque Project' aimed at reminding the people of Sabah of their war heroes. Featured prominently were the Petagas War Memorial and the story of the Kinabalu Guerrillas. Several articles were written by the project committee members, but they were inevitably based mainly on the works of Hall and Evans²¹ and offered few new perspectives or sources.

¹⁹ *Kinabalu Sabah Times*, 24 March 1979; 26 March 1979; and 10 April 1979.

²⁰ Chong Kui Fah, Chong Kui Fah, Xuanxe Shijian Lijie Hueiyi Lu [Memoir of the Experience of the Double-Tenth Incident], Kota Kinabalu, 1996 (unpublished), p. 63.

²¹ Stephens Robert Evans, *Sabah Under the Rising Sun*, p. 45.

One positive outcome of the project was the effort to locate and interview war heroes and others who lived through the war. Among members of the Kinabalu Guerrillas interviewed were Chong Kin Siong and Liew Shu Kong, whose accounts offer fresh information on the Kinabalu Guerrillas.

Two streets in Kota Kinabalu still bear the names of men associated with the Kinabalu Guerrillas. In the Sedco commercial area, a street is named after Albert Kwok. Li Tet Phui, the advisor of the guerrillas, who was also executed at Petagas with Kwok, is commemorated with a street next to All Saints' Cathedral. However, Li was already a well-known personality in pre-war Jesselton, so it is not known if he was remembered for his involvement with the guerrillas.

Apart from the memorial at Petagas, at least three other smaller memorials were erected to commemorate those killed on account of their involvement with the Kinabalu Guerrillas. The memorials were erected by the respective Chinese organisations in the form of communal tombstones at the Guangfu Yishan (Public Cemetery for Chinese of Guangdong and Fujian Origins) at Kilometre 3.2, Tuaran Road. The first was erected in 1947 by the Da Shen Association in memory of 14 people from Longyan county, Fujian who were killed due to the Jesselton uprising. Among those commemorated were Tan Kim Hin (who was appointed deputy commander of the guerrillas after the resignation of Kong Sze Phui), Ng Mu Kim and Liau Nyuk Ching. Of these 14, at least three were executed at Petagas while two others died in Labuan.

The other two memorials were not specifically dedicated to those involved with the Kinabalu Guerrillas, but to people who lost their lives during the war, thus including the guerrillas. The first was erected in 1953 by the Teochew (Chaozhou) and Swatow (Shantou) people in memory of their kinsmen who had lost their lives during the war. It was erected by Kee Mei Shen, who originated from Shantou (Swatow). The second memorial was erected in 1957 by the Tong An Kinsmen Association and the Transport Association of Jesselton to commemorate those of Pu-Tian county in Fujian origins who were killed during the war.²²

All these memorials are important reminders of the sacrifices made by the people of Sabah. To the Chinese, these memorials, especially the Petagas War Memorial, speak

²² Wolfgang Franke & Chen Tieh Fan, *Chinese Epigraphical Materials in Malaysia, Vol. 3*, Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press, 1987, pp. 1190-1191.

for the sacrifices of the community in defence of their adopted homeland. They also helped the community to assert their right to have a say in the future of the state.

To the larger Sabah society, the diversity of the names on the Petagas Memorial also testifies to the inter-ethnic co-operation that existed even during the most trying times. Even though the Kinabalu Guerrillas were very much Chinese-based, the involvement of other ethnic groups turned the venture from a purely Chinese initiative into a classic example of inter-ethnic co-operation. It has also been re-studied to see how people of such diverse backgrounds could have come together to form and execute plans aimed at liberating the state from the Japanese army. This has made the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising an acceptable case of inter-ethnic unity even at the national level.

Concluding Remarks

This paper began as a way of trying to examine how a momentous event was being remembered, either by the people who were implicated, in this case those who were involved in the uprising and their descendants, as well as the general public at large. It is also an effort to look at the involvement of the state in helping to nurture a sense of remembrance on collective heroic deeds which could foster certain sense of cohesiveness and stronger sense of belonging. In this case, the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the Jesselton Uprising fell very much in this framework.

It is the manner in which the event is being commemorated through official channel which made the effort of remember being institutionalized, and therefore sustained throughout the postwar years. This is so unlike other memorials found in the country which then to commemorate only movements that were led by a single ethnic group and whose efforts to commemorate did not receive official endorsement.

The multi-ethnic nature of the uprising is probably its most important lasting legacy and for this reason the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the uprising were remembered and commemorated by the returning British colonial administration. This was sustained after independence; the Petagas War Memorial with the annual remembrance ceremony on 21 January is the only war memorial in Malaysia that has been continuously commemorated with a ceremony since the war. While the uprising was initiated by ordinary folk, the event was embraced by the state. The memorial is also maintained by the state. The multi-ethnic nature of the uprising is celebrated in official school history textbooks, making it one of the rare events to enjoy such a status. Even though the event, like many others, is no longer included in the national history textbooks, its earlier

inclusion was an important endorsement of this multi-ethnic theme. It is paramount that this neglect of the event in the national historical narrative be redressed in future history textbooks.

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