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## The Name of Sabah and the Sustaining of a New Identity in a New Nation<sup>2</sup>

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### **Introduction**

On 16 September 1963, the former state of North Borneo became part of Malaysia. Among the major changes in the new state was the change of name from North Borneo to Sabah (Fig. 1). The term “North Borneo” had been used since the setting up of the British North Borneo Company administration in 1879, when the Provisional Association of North Borneo Company was established. From that time, the newly constituted territory was known as North Borneo (Borneo Utara in Malay), designating the northern region of the state on the island of Borneo. Its people were called North Borneans; and a flag was designed along with a coat of arms. In 1963, this new name of Sabah, a new flag and a new coat of arms marked the beginning of an era when the state and its people assumed a new identity, and thus began a period of adjusting to the notion of being citizens of the new Federation of Malaysia as well as the new identity of being a Sabahan (vis-à-vis a North Bornean). Yet, the name of Sabah is not new; neither was the effort to foster a new identity of Sabahan. This paper will look at the provenance of the name “Sabah,” and how this old name was given a new interpretation and meaning at the time when the state was heading for independence. The paper will then turn its attention to the efforts to foster and sustain this Sabah identity after 1963; and its relation to the national identity of being a Malaysian.

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2. The author would like to thank the comments and suggestions by the reviewers which are now incorporated in the text.

### The Provenance of the Name “Sabah”

There have been several suggestions about the origins of the name “Sabah.” In one of the earliest historical documents signed between the rulers of the territories that would become North Borneo, the title of “Maharaja of Sabak” was conferred on Baron Gustave von Overbeck in 1877 by Sultan Abdul Mumin of Brunei. The term “Sabak” was found in the Jawi version of the appointment, whereas “Sabah” was used in the English translation of the appointment of Baron von Overbeck as Rajah of Gaya and Sandakan and Maharajah of Sabah on 29 November 1877. Baron von Overbeck was a former Austrian Consul in Shanghai who took over the original concession of the territory that constitutes most of present-day Sabah, and who attracted British interest through the trading house of the Dent Brothers (Alfred and Edward Dent) of London. It was the Dent Brothers who went on to obtain British endorsement for their establishment of a government in North Borneo, which came in the form of a royal charter and which eventually led to the establishment of the North Borneo Company rule over the territory.

The term “Sabah” was first used in a book entitled *The New Ceylon, Being a Sketch of British North Borneo, or Sabah* by Joseph Hatton,<sup>3</sup> the father of Frank Hatton, the pioneering scientist who worked for the North Borneo Company, and who later lost his life in a rifle accident in 1881.

Allen R. Maxwell argues that the term “Sabah” is to be found in one of the terms of a Brunei system of directional orientation.<sup>4</sup> However, he reckoned that the correct original name should be “Saba,” without “t” nor “h.” But somehow, the English spelling became “Sabah” has a final “h.”<sup>5</sup>

However, the term was never used on any map referring to present-day Sabah.<sup>6</sup>

There have been differing views on the actual meaning of the word “Saba” or “Sabah”. According to Lee Yong Leng,<sup>7</sup> the word is of Dusun origin referring to the most northerly part of Borneo. Jasni<sup>8</sup> argues that the word is of Brunei Malay origin, deriving from the term “*seberang*.” Jasni also suggests another possibility, again of Malay origin, “*sabak*,” which roughly translates

3. Joseph Hatton, *The New Ceylon, Being a Sketch of British North Borneo, or Sabah*, London: Chapman & Hall Ltd, 1881.

4. Allen R. Maxwell, The Origin of the Name “Sabah”, *Sabah Society Journal*, Vol. 7, Part 2, 1981/82, p.91.

5. *Ibid.*, p.93.

6. The most recent publication of maps pertaining to Malaya and Borneo, does not contain any map published before 1963 with the name of Sabah. See Frédéric Durand & Richard Curtis, *Maps of Malaya and Borneo: Discovery, Statehood and Progress. The Collections of H.R.H. Sultan Sharafudin Idris Shah and Dato’ Richard Curtis*, Kuala Lumpur: Jugra Publications & Editions Didier Millet, 2013.

7. Lee Yong Leng, *North Borneo (Sabah), a Study in Settlement Geography*, Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 1965.

8. R.M. Jasni, *Sejarah Sabah*, Penang: Saudara Sinaran Berhad, 1965.

as “the act or place of boiling down sugar palm juice or sap.”<sup>9</sup> But how it was linked to the territory is not explained. It is also clear that the act of boiling down sugar palm juice or sap was not confined to the natives in Sabah.

The next possibility also came from Jasni, who suggested that the word came from the Arabic word for “seven,” “*sab’at*” or “*sab’a*.” Jasni, however, did not explain how it is associated with the territory.<sup>10</sup> Finally, some speculated that the term came from the Arabic name of the Biblical country of Sheba, “*Sabā*” or “*Saba*.”<sup>11</sup> All these were mere suggestions by the respective authors, based on their personal observations but without concrete evidence. Thus, it is perhaps one word for which we will never find a plausible explanation.

Alan Maxwell, however, was convinced that the word’s Brunei Malay origin is the most plausible explanation for the origin of the name of the state. He argued from the etymological aspect of the word “Sabah”. According to Alan Maxwell, the Brunei Malay term of “*saba*” refers to “down-stream” or “waterwards” or “seawards” in the Kedayan language.<sup>12</sup> The Kedayans, along with the Brunei Malays, are the largest ethnic group in Brunei.<sup>13</sup> The term “Saba” is semantically equivalent to the Kedayan term of “*lawt*” (sea). Thus, a directional reciprocal term to “*saba*” would be ‘upstream’ or “*uhu*.” According to Maxwell Hall,

Thus if we were to orientate ourselves at a point along the Brunei River, below the bend between Pulau Ambuk and Pulau Sibungur, where it curves sharply upstream to Bandar Seri Begawan, the direction ‘Saba’ would designate a more or less straight course to the Island of Muara Besar, across Brunei Bay, over the Klias Peninsula, and continuing on roughly parallel to the whole northwest coast of Sabah.<sup>14</sup>

In relation to this, Maxwell simply put “Sabah” as “north”—in this case, the northern part of Borneo.

All these suggestions, whether plausible or mere fanciful, seemed to indicate that “Sabah” is a very old local Malay name, one used by the natives—either indigenous or Brunei Malay—referring to the northwest coast of Borneo, north of Brunei, and northern Brunei. Thus, when the North Borneo Company took over, the local name of the territory was “Sabah”, at least for the western part.

However, it must be remembered that the term, as Maxwell argues, was more directional, referring to a territory lying north of Brunei, in other words,

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9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Cyril Alliston, *In the Shadow of Kinabalu*, London: The Adventure Club, 1961; Allen Maxwell, *The Origins of the Name “Sabah”*, p.93.

12. Kedayan is the name of a Muslim Dusun tribe who lived mainly on the southwest coast of Sabah and Brunei Bay. The Kedayan language borrows heavily from Brunei Malay.

13. Other than the census of 1960 in which they were listed separately, the Kedayans have been listed together with the Brunei Malays.

14. Maxwell, *The Origin of the Name “Sabah”*, pp.94–95.

with Brunei as the centre. That the territory was of a specific size or extent was yet another issue altogether as the territory was nominally under the Brunei sultan (and part of the northern portion was under the Sulu sultan).<sup>15</sup> It was only after the advent of the British North Borneo Company administration that the actual extent of the territory of “Sabah” was determined.

This argument is most plausible if one were to take the Royal Genealogy of the Rulers of Brunei (*Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunei*) and the *Syair Awang Simawn*. In the *Silsilah* edited by Amin P.L. Sweeney in 1968, the term Saba is mentioned at least six times, each time denoting the direction in opposite of Brunei proper. For instance, “*sepenampang arah ke Saba, dan pakerman besar dan pakeman damit dan hawang hawang bersembah sepenampang arah kekulu,*” “*Dan bermula hawang hawang tanah huku dan tanah Saba,*” “*seluroh tanah Bajau disebelah Saba,*” “*ra’yat Sultan Muhiuddin, orang disebelah pehak hulu; dan akan ra’yat Sultan Abdul Mubin, orang disebelah pehak Saba,*” “*kenegeri Kinarut disebelah Saba,*” “*Negeri disebelah Saba, iaitu negeri Kimanis.*”<sup>16</sup> While each of these six instances could denote different meanings, either as direction opposite to Brunei, or “downstream or seawards” from Brunei, or “down the Brunei River” and specific names found in present-day Sabah, the term generally refers to the territory that constitutes present-day Sabah. By drawing on this Brunei Malay evidence, Maxwell seemed to have managed to put the case to rest. Well, at least for a time. But it was the North Borneo Company and the subsequent rulers which eventually made the term synonymous with the territory or the new state of Sabah.

The notion of Sabah being referred to as direction is also alluded to by Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam of Brunei when he wrote to Farquhar in Singapore in July 1821:

[... ] *Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam negeri Brunei. Wabadahu daripada itu barang takrif kiranya sahabat beta maka adalah beta melayangkan warkat yang aziz yang dilayangkan angin nasim al-sabâh ini tiadalah dengan sempurnanya daripada akan jadi ganti beta bersambutan kalam al-ihsan dengan sahabat beta saja, serta menyatakan tulus dan ikhlas di dalam cermin kertas [...].*<sup>17</sup>

Logically, the expression *angin nasim al-sabâh* would refer to a specific wind, because in Arabic, *nasim* نسيم is “breeze, zephyr,” whereas *al-sabâh* is not a borrowing from the Arabic (the meaning of سباه is quite different). So the above expression would mean “breeze called sabah”, perhaps “breeze from downstream” or “sea breeze”. While these interpretations are pure guesses,

15. The etymology of the word “Sabah” in the Sulu language has never been established.

16. Amin P.L. Sweeney, *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunei*, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 41, Part 2, 1968, pp. 1–82, and *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunei*, errata and a short note, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 42, Part 2, 1969, pp.222–224.

17. Letter from Sultan Muhammad Kanzul Alam of Brunei to Farquhar, 8 July 1821. Wbrn 8:3. *Warkah Brunei* in Malay Concordance Project (mcp.anu.edu.au, accessed on 30 March 2015).

it nonetheless concurs with the idea that the term “Sabah” or “al-Sabah,” actually refers to a certain direction—and in this case, more likely to be heading toward northeast.

There are also instances where the name Sabak or Sabba, is found in the map of the state of Selangor, in the Malay Peninsula. The area referred to is in the northern part of the state, bordering the state of Perak. Today, it is known as Sabak Bernam, which in the local Malay language refers to “Sahabat Berenam” or six friends, who were the pioneering settlers who opened up land in the area. They were reputed to have originated from Sumatera in the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> It is difficult to ascertain this information collected from oral tradition. A map produced in 1882 by D.D. Daly clearly shows the name “Sabba” and “Ulu Bernam,” suggesting an earlier origin.<sup>19</sup>

There are also suggestions that the term “Sabah” could have a Filipino origin. While both Tagalog and Visayan languages have the word “Sabah” in their vocabulary, they however carry meanings that do not refer to a place name. Rather, the name “Saba” refers to a variety of banana in both Tagalog and Visayan, whereas the same word in Visayan refers to “noisy.”

Curiously, the Chinese, who had long been associated with the land did not have a very specific name referring to the territory that is known as “Sabah” today. They used the name of “Poni” (Po Ni) to refer either to the entire island or part of the island of Borneo. They also used the same name when referring to the city or Sultanate of Brunei. Even though there have been instances of speculations of Chinese presence on the east coast of Sabah (North Borneo), including the existence of place names such as “Kinabatangan” and “Kinabalu,” and archaeological traces, including Chinese ceramics shards. After the establishment of the British North Borneo Company administration, the Chinese adopted the British name of “British North Borneo” or “Ying Shu Bei Po Luo Zhou” 英属北婆罗州, as well as the more colloquial name of “Bei Mu Niang” 北慕娘 which is a phonetic name transliterated from “North Borneo.” The more colloquial nature of “Bei Mu Niang” is evident as many Chinese businesses in North Borneo actually registered their company names using “Bei Mu Niang” instead of “Bei Po Luo Zhou” 北婆罗州. Interestingly, one example of such usage occurred in 1943 when a Chinese made an offering to the Gedung Batu at Semarang, on Java Island, claiming to belong to Mu Niang 慕娘 or to Mu Niangzi 慕娘治子.<sup>20</sup> We are not sure regarding the origin of Mu Niang here but it could be referring to North Borneo or present day Sabah.

18. <http://www.selangor.gov.my/sabakbernam.php/pages/view/51> (Selangor State Government Sabak Bernam District Office website. Accessed on 10 March 2015).

19. Map No. 90, in Frédéric Durand and Richard Curtis, *Maps of Malaya and Borneo*, p.10.

20. Wolfgang Franke, Claudine Salmon & Anthony Siu (eds.), *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Indonesia*, III(1), Singapore: South Seas Society, 1988, p.326.

Thus far, discussion on the origins of the name “Sabah” have been focusing on two broad areas, namely, the way the state, especially the West Coast, being referred to, either as a direction, in this case, from Brunei, or as a wind direction. The second area refers to a similar name being found in other places, but essentially referring to something else. Yet, for the local people, the name “Sabah” was perhaps known only to those who were residing on the West Coast of the state, especially those linked to Brunei. Despite its unclear and contestable origin, the name began to gain ascendancy during the rule of the British North Borneo Company.

### The British North Borneo Company’s Sabah

When Overbeck and Alfred Dent set up the Association of North Borneo Company in 1879, the preferred term for the territory was the straight-forward English term of “North Borneo.” The term “Sabah” was not used. Even though Wright argues that “Sabah” was the name preferred by the British North Borneo Company for its territory,<sup>21</sup> the term was, however, never used officially. Neither was the term used in the publication by the chief apologist of the Company’s rule, Owen Rutter, nor in the two major publications of the Company – the *Handbook of British North Borneo* of 1929 and 1934.<sup>22</sup> However, during the early days of the Company rule, the name “Sabah” was used freely in the *North Borneo Herald*, which was the official journal of the Company.

The first issue of the *Herald* of 1 March 1883 included the name of the pioneering plantation company, China-Sabah Plantation Company. In the same issue, an official notice was issued:

#### GOVERNMENT NOTIFICATION

The following notification respecting Royalties in the Sabah West Coast District is published for general information.  
By the Governor's Command,

E. G. HILLIER,  
Private Secretary,  
Kudat, 26th February, 1883

(Source: *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 March 1883)

Officers like Hillier, who was in the centre of authority, chose to use the term “Sabah” over North Borneo. In the same way, the government was known as the “Sabah Government” during the initial period of the North

21. L.R. Wright, *The Origins of British Borneo*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1970.

22. Owen Rutter, *British North Borneo: An Account of Its History, Resources and Native Tribes*, London: Constable & Co. Ltd, 1922; and British North Borneo Company, *Handbook of British North Borneo* of 1929 and 1934.

Borneo Company rule, commonly known as Chartered Company rule, as popularised later by Professor K.G. Tregonning. The use of the term was especially common in various literary works submitted to the *British North Borneo Herald*. In a poem entitled, "Borneo's National Anthem," a reference was made to "The Lion of Sabah, the Bravo Union Jack."<sup>23</sup> The lion refers to the red lion on the side of the official flag of North Borneo, which had a British Union Jack in the upper left-hand corner, and a navy blue background with the red lion by the lower right-hand corner.

The frequent use of the term Sabah, including in the official realm, alarmed some in the state, especially in the upper echelons of the administration, who preferred the state to be known only by its official name of British North Borneo. In a letter to the editor of the *British North Borneo Herald* by someone who used the pen name of "Growler," "I noted some time ago that instructions were issued that this territory should be designated British North Borneo and not North Borneo or Sabah."<sup>24</sup> Despite Growler's assertion of the official name of British Borneo, the name of "Sabah" remained popular in the *Herald*. One could find many commercial companies with "Sabah" in their official names, including Sabah Mutual Supply Association, a company dealing mainly with provision and supplies of hardware and liquor;<sup>25</sup> and the Sabah Steamship Company.<sup>26</sup> Then in the news, one finds references to the "Large Pythons are found in Sabah," "Big Game Shooting in Sabah," "A discussion on coal seam on the Island of Labuan and in Sabah," "The Future Prosperity of Sabah," and "The Lion of Sabah," just to name a few.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the last official reference in the *North Borneo Herald* on Sabah was a notice issued in 1890 giving notice of Governor V. Creagh's decision to change the colour of the ensign (naval flag) for government vessels; the term "Sabah Red Ensign" was used.<sup>28</sup>

After 1900, the use of the name Sabah was somehow discontinued in the official documents or notices published in the *Herald*. In fact, it was also quite rare for the name to be found among those literary contributions. Perhaps the last mention was in a poem entitled "The Deuce," a reference to the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. The poem was written in response to the Italian aggression in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) which began in 1934. In the poem, Sabah was found in the verse, "Sabah's Might Unfurled upon Benito's Wretched Pate."<sup>29</sup> The contributor's obvious displeasure against Mussolini is evident. But that also signalled the last time the term was used in the *Herald*.

23. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 November 1884.

24. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 June 1885.

25. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 May 1883.

26. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 August 1900.

27. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 May 1883; 1 April 1885; 1 December 1885; 1 April 1890.

28. *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 November 1890.

29. *British North Borneo Herald*, 16 December 1935.

The name of “Sabah” however, still existed in the local shipping scene when the Sabah Steamship Company built a ship that was named, *S.S. Sabah*. The ship was built in 1903 by the company at its shipyard at Sandakan, and was considered one of the best-built ships at the time. It was fitted with electric lights and comfortable accommodation. The ship was originally operated by the South Philippines Trading Company, and later became the yacht for the Governor of Mindanao before the Sabah Steamship Company used it for local coastal run, plying between the ports and wharfs of North Borneo.<sup>30</sup> *S.S. Sabah* was in service until 1924 when it was replaced by *S.S. Kedah*, a slightly newer ship.<sup>31</sup> With *S.S. Sabah* decommissioned and laid up, the name Sabah also slowly faded with limited visibility, except through the Sabah Steamship Company.

Apart from that, there was a pony named “Sabah Jack” which was owned by E.P. Hills. It was active in the local pony races during the 1920s.<sup>32</sup>

In 1910, some Dusun (present-day Kadazandusun community) from Papar submitted a petition to Governor Sir John Anderson, who was also British Agent for British North Borneo, expressing their grievances about the loss of land to rubber companies and the railway. While the petition was written in Malay, it was translated into English. The original is no longer available. However, the original Malay version of subsequent petitions that were submitted in August 1912 survived. There were four separate petitions submitted by Dusun from Membakut, Bongawan, and Papar (two). Interestingly, the word “Sabah” was used in three of them to refer to the state, and used intermittently with the term “North Borneo”:

**Petition from Membakut:**

*Fasal ini perintah Sabah selalu mau bikin susa sama kami orang kampung*  
(Translation: Because this Sabah Government always creates trouble for us villagers)

*Saya orang negeri tida boleh tahan lagi di dalam ini negeri Membakut. Sebab ini perintah Sabah punya okom (Hukum) tida patut di dalam ini pulau British North Borneo*  
(Translation: We the people of this state can no longer bear it in the state of Membakut. Because the law of the Sabah Government is unjust in this island of British North Borneo)

**Petition from Bongawan:**

*Sahaya Batindam dan Yanggar dan Sogara Dusun Bongawan di dalam Pulau British North Borneo Compani Sabah*

(Translation: We, Batindam, Yanggar and Sogara, Dusun from Bongawan in the island of British North Borneo, Sabah Company)

*Ini perintah Sabah, dia ambil saya orang Dusun punya nenek moyang punya tanah, ...*

(Translation: This Sabah Government, took the land of the ancestors of us the Dusun)

30. *British North Borneo Herald*, 3 January 1910. See also 16 September 1924.

31. *British North Borneo Herald*, 16 August 1924.

32. See *British North Borneo Herald*, 1 March 1924 & 17 March 1924.



**Petition from Papar:**

*Sekarang ini tana di jual oleh Tuan perintah Sabah kepada Tuan Kabun gata*

(Translation: Now this land is being sold to the owner of the rubber estate by the Government of Sabah)

*Saya orang tida boleh tahan lagi ini sekarang, di dalam ini pigangan Compani Sabah, British North Borneo*

(Translation: We cannot stand it any more, in this land that's ruled (held) by the Sabah Company, British North Borneo)<sup>33</sup>

This is the only written evidence we have of the pre-war usage of the term “Sabah” by locals, which in this case refers to both the state of Sabah, as well as being associated with the name of the North Borneo Company, as in *Compani Sabah*. But apart from this fragmentary information, we have no further evidence to suggest that the term “Sabah” had been used.

When the Japanese occupied the state at the end of 1941, they re-named it *Kita Boruneo* or North Borneo.<sup>34</sup> There is no indication that they ever sought out the name of “Sabah” to use it as the name of the state or territory. Instead, the Japanese divided the state into two provinces, the West Coast and East Coast provinces. When the guerrilla troop was formed in June 1942, they chose the name of “Kinabalu,” after the name of Mount Kinabalu, the highest mountain in the state and also one of its symbols; hence, the Kinabalu Guerrillas, and not the “Sabah Guerrillas.”

With the name getting rare in the public sphere, it is a wonder that its existence was kept alive and sustained by the local population. There is no clear indication on how the name has survived through the days of the Chartered Company rule and the war. What is obvious is that the usage of the name had been discouraged in the official sphere, which also included the *North Borneo Herald*. But somehow, after the war the name was brought back into the public sphere almost effortlessly. And it was later accepted as the preferred name for the new state.

There is also another more fundamental question—was the general public actually conscious of the name “Sabah,” or was its usage confined to a certain region, in this case, the west coast of the state? Then was it also the efforts of merely a few individuals who had kept the idea alive and who took the trouble to promote it as the new name of the state? If that is so, what then were the motives behind such a move?

33. Petitions from Membakut, Bongawan and Papar to Sir John Anderson, High Commissioner in Singapore over Loss of Land, 5<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> August 1912, CO531/4/34569 (National Archives, London). For a study on this incident, see Danny Wong Tze Ken, *The Papar Land Case, 1910–1911*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 3, October 2012, pp.422–440.

34. In fact *Kita Boruneo* refers not merely to the state of North Borneo, but to the entire British territories on Borneo island – North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak.

### The Colonial Era and the Name of Sabah

When the war ended in 1945, North Borneo underwent a transition from the rule of a Chartered Company (The North Borneo Company) to the Colonial Office. The declaration made on 15 July 1946 named the territory of North Borneo a Crown Colony. Even though the name “Sabah” was not used officially as the name of the state, it was during this period that it began to gain ascendancy and, perhaps, acceptance. The effort, however, came from various, somehow uncoordinated, initiatives.

The first major establishment that used the name of “Sabah” was the Radio Sabah. This was an off-shoot of the Information Office set up by Ronald Brooks, a former Chartered Company officer who returned to serve in North Borneo after the war.<sup>35</sup> The idea of establishing the Information Office was to echo the calls made by the Colonial Office,

urging Colonial Government to establish Public relations or Information Offices for the purpose of disseminating the British Government’s views and attitudes in the complex attitude of growing world opinion towards Colonial territories and their governments.

Out of the need to reach out to a wider spectrum of people, Brooks decided to use radio broadcasting. Thus Radio Sabah was born in 1952. The initial broadcasts were very crude and actually a wire-recorder, replaying news from the British Broadcasting Corporation and some local news bulletins and comments. Later, as Radio Sabah got its own building and its own programmes, more programmes were introduced including news and programmes in the vernacular languages and various Chinese dialects. For the first time, the identity of “Sabah” referring to the state was broadcasted to the general population. It must have caught the imagination of the public as there was no objection to the name. Through the efforts of the Information Office, the cooperation of the Royal Air Force, and support from the Colonial Development and Welfare scheme, heavy transmitters were ferried and distributed to the interior and hard-to-reach places,<sup>36</sup> reaching out to many who otherwise would not have the opportunity to get news – and through the process, the name of “Sabah” surely caught on, and was popularized.

In 1953, a local newspaper named *Sabah Times* was established by Donald Stephens who later became the first Chief Minister of the state. At that time he was a budding reporter eager to establish himself. Donald Stephens who would later become leader of the Kadazan people, was of mixed parentage. His grandfather was a New Zealander who married a local Dusun woman.

<sup>35</sup>. Like many who served during the Chartered Company days, Brooks was interned by the Japanese Army at the Batu Lintang Prisoner-of-war Camp in Kuching. After the war, he chose to return to serve in North Borneo.

<sup>36</sup>. Ronald J. Brooks, *Under Five Flags, the Story of Sabah, East Malaysia*, Durham: The Pentland Press Ltd., pp. 191–197.

Donald Stephens was brought up locally and had developed a strong sense of pride for the state. He later became a member of the State Legislative Council before becoming the leader of his state.<sup>37</sup> The newspaper, the first English paper on the west coast, became an immediate success with his readers, who represented the educated and urbanised section of the population. Until the establishment of *Sabah Times*, the main English newspaper in the state was the *North Borneo News* published in Sandakan, reaching out to a very small readership. But with the establishment of the *Sabah Times* on the West Coast, the number of English-speaking readers was much larger, and with it, the name of “Sabah” as the identity of the state or territory became much more acceptable. In 1954, Donald Stephens, with the help of some friends, including Yeh Pao Tzu, bought over *North Borneo News*.<sup>38</sup> They decided to merge the two newspapers of *North Borneo News* and *Sabah Times* to become *North Borneo News and Sabah Times*.<sup>39</sup> The name of “Sabah” could now reach out to even wider areas, and along with it, readers from Sandakan.

It must be said that together, these two institutions were instrumental in bringing back the name of “Sabah” to the general public. Perhaps the issue here is less of “bringing back” or “revive,” and more of introducing the name of “Sabah” to a public who was used to the name of British North Borneo or North Borneo.

If the *North Borneo News and Sabah Times* was reaching out to the adult readers, there was another effort actually reaching out to the young people of North Borneo. In 1956, it fell upon Ronald Brooks, the Chief Information Officer, to start a newspaper or newsmagazine called *Anak Sabah*, with the target group being young people of North Borneo. According to Brooks,

In May [1956] the first number of *Anak Sabah*, a monthly newspaper in English designed to interest adolescents, particularly those still at school, was produced. It aimed at helping young readers to improve their English, to take an interest in their country and the activities of their fellows, and at encouraging young people to write, particularly about Borneo. A circulation of about 1,000 was originally anticipated, but the paper was received with enthusiasm, particularly in schools, and the circulation rose rapidly to 2,500 and has been maintained at that level.<sup>40</sup>

*Anak Sabah* was produced from 1956 to 1966. During this ten-year period many young people were unconsciously being exposed to the name of “Sabah,” and began to associate North Borneo with Sabah. This was an

37. For a biography of Donald Stephens, see P. J. Granville-Edge & Rajen Devadason, *The Sabahan: the Life and Death of Tun Fuad Stephens*, Kuala Lumpur: The Writers’ Publishing House, 1999.

38. Yeh Pao Tzu was a native of Sarawak. Trained in journalism at Fudan University, he came to North Borneo after the war with some money to buy over the only Chinese newspaper in Jesselton at that time, the *Hua Chiao Jit Pau* (*Overseas Chinese Daily News*), established in 1936.

39. P.J. Granville-Edge & Rajen Devadason, *The Sabahan*, p.85.

40. Brooks, *Under Five Flags*, p.198.

important development considering that *Anak Sabah* was a government publication. More importantly, the publication helped to reinforce the use of the name “Sabah” amongst the younger generation of North Bornean as “Anak Sabah” means “Children of Sabah.” This was yet another strong endorsement from a colonial administration that was increasingly conscious of the changing atmosphere of Britain heading towards decolonization.

Brooks seemed to be a most tireless person. In an effort to improve the broadcasting services of Radio Sabah, he hoped to get the programmes of Radio Sabah published. This was when he decided to publish a weekly *Radio Sabah Calling*, after the fashion of the popular BBC *London Calling* that had been published since 1939. It was yet another very successful story.<sup>41</sup> *Radio Sabah Calling* contained not only radio programmes, but also many other forums including a penpal column, interviews of local celebrities or even star students, and also pictorial stories. More importantly, the use of the name “Sabah” once again helped to strengthen the locals’ sense of identification with “Sabah” as the other name of the state, and that the people were known as “Sabahan.”

It was clear that the three initiatives of Radio Sabah, *Anak Sabah* and *Radio Sabah Calling* did much to cultivate the name of “Sabah” amongst the people of North Borneo during that time. It was also an indication of the beginning of the forging of a new identity for the people of North Borneo. Instead of calling themselves North Bornean, they were encouraged to use the new name of “Sabahan.”

In December 1959, Donald Stephens took it upon himself to propose a change of name of the state from “North Borneo” to “Sabah”. Stephens, who was then a member of the Executive Council, submitted a memorandum to the State Executive Council dated 12 November 1959. Governor Roland E. Turnbull, in his capacity as President of the Council, allowed for the debate but advised Stephens to withdraw the motion before it was put to a vote in the December 1959 meeting. He was hoping for the matter to be referred back to the State Executive Council for consideration in detail.<sup>42</sup> According to a biography of Donald Stephens he felt that

the name of North Borneo was ‘not only cumbersome but gave the impression that it was a promontory or lighthouse and of use only to the mariners. Being a West Coast boy, he was enamoured of the old accepted name for west coast, Sabah.’<sup>43</sup>

Now, where did Donald Stephens conjure up the idea that the name “Sabah” was an old accepted name for “west coast?” Perhaps it was true that the name

41. Ibid., pp.198–199.

42. Minutes of the North Borneo Executive Council, 25 November 1959, CO648/46.

43. Edge-Granville, *The Sabahan*, p.105.

could have lingered on in the minds of many on the west coast, but was not popularly used. The only printed evidence would be the petitions of the Dusun from Membakut, Bongawan and Papar back in 1912, as mentioned earlier. But perhaps it could also be that the name was only stuck in the imagination of some individuals. However, it was these individuals who were able to make a difference and had their views expressed and heard. Certainly, Donald Stephens was one such person.

The efforts by Stephens to champion for the change of name was frowned upon by Governor Turnbull and other officials who wanted to reduce its significance or usage—giving reason of usage—targeting Government officials who decided otherwise. But Stephens' opportunity came when the Malaysia idea was floated and when North Borneo was destined to be part of this new federation. Once again, Donald Stephens put forward the suggestion.

P.J. Rivers relates how Donald Stephens came to put the name forward. Apparently, it was at the suggestion of K.G. Tregonning, who later became the Raffles Professor of History at the University of Malaya at Singapore. Tregonning was in correspondence with Donald Stephens at a time when

there was a tendency to foster a local identity and not only among the locals. Indeed, when North Borneo was nearer to merger with Malaya, Professor Tregonning wrote to Donald Stephens, who by then was already a leading voice of the people, and suggested the elimination of colonial non-indigenous names for those towns named by the (North Borneo) Company, and indeed for the state itself. "Sabah was a suggestion of mine," he said.<sup>44</sup>

But Tregonning's assertion perhaps neglects the fact that Donald Stephens started to champion for the name of Sabah several years before the idea of Malaysia was even floated. Furthermore, his *Sabah Times* also started during the early 1950s.

Following the announcement of the Malaysia proposal by Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Prime Minister of Malaya, in May 1961, there was an urgency in North Borneo for the formation of political parties. It is interesting to note that in this regard the use of "Sabah" in the name of the political parties was accepted. For instance, the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO).

Following the negotiations that took place in the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC), the name of the state of North Borneo was finally accepted as "Sabah", and in the report of the IGC, this became one of the Twenty Points—the name of the state was "Sabah." The Twenty Points were items agreed to safeguard the interests of the locals agreed upon in the pre-independence Inter-Governmental Committee negotiations. In the Malaysia Agreement signed in July 1963, the name of the state of North Borneo is given as "Sabah", and a separate State Constitution for Sabah was also agreed upon. Thus with the

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44. P.J. Rivers, The Origins of Sabah and a Reappraisal of Overbeck as Maharajah, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 77, No. 1, 2004, p.1.

name firmly inscribed in the two utmost important documents that define the nature and rights of the states, the name became the permanent feature of the state that is now known as Sabah.

### **Embracing the New Identity in the New Nation**

The previous section tries to explain how the name of Sabah was reintroduced as the new name of the new state, replacing the colonial name of North Borneo. This section will look at how this term was being embraced by the very people for whom it was decided upon by those who were in the position of authority. However, for the next fifty years, from 1963 until 2013, reaction has been mixed. On one hand, the people of Sabah have no issue with being known as ‘Sabahan’; in fact they are extremely proud of it. Some probably have no qualms in introducing themselves first as Sabahan and then as Malaysian. For many, it is the second part which created perceptions which continue to divide opinions and positions.

When Sabah was granted self-government by Britain on 31 August 1963, there was a small article in the *Sabah Times* entitled “Sabah Athletes Bag 6 Golds,” highlighting the Sabah athletes’ achievements in the first triangular international in Singapore.

Sabah stars competing with “Sabah” emblazoned across their chests and with new *National Flag* [italic mine] fluttering among the Malayan and Singapore national colours under a bright sky at the Farrer Park Stadium put up an excellent show.<sup>45</sup>

The emphasis here was the new name of the state, Sabah, and that it was a new state with its own national colours! Such coverage in the news would definitely have had some bearing on the way the people in this new state were looking at themselves—an independent state with its own national colours, at least during that sixteen days leading up to 16 September 1963.

When the State Anthem was played and sung for the first time, the lyrics again are reflective of a mood that provided much room for imagination:

*Sabah Tanah Air-Ku  
Negeri Kita Yang Tercinta  
Pemuda-Pemudi,  
Semua Marilah  
Bangunlah Bersatu Semua  
Marilah Bersama serta Maju Jaya  
Merdeka Sepanjang Masa  
Bersatu Sekarang Bangsa Sentosa  
Sabah Negeri Merdeka*

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45. *Sabah Times*, 3 September 1963.

**Translation:**

Sabah, My Homeland  
 Our Beloved State  
 Young Men and Women, Come  
 Arise All Together  
 Join Together and be Successful  
 Independent Forever  
 Unite All, and the Nation Prospers and Peaceful  
 Sabah, the Independent State

The reiteration of the word “Negeri Merdeka” (Independent State) probably provided ideas and notions that North Borneo was granted independence before joining Malaysia. Indeed, this has been a point of contention for many who felt that Sabah formed one of the four components in the new federation—Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak and Sabah. Whereas, the Malaysia Agreement actually spells out the states of the Federation as:

The States of Malaya, namely, Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Malacca, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Penang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Trengganu; and  
 The Borneo States, namely, Sabah and Sarawak; and  
 The State of Singapore<sup>46</sup>

In many ways, the identity of the state of Sabah and its people depended much on how they perceived their relationship with the federation or within the federation. The idea of being a “Sabahan” vis-à-vis of “Malaysian” has been in existence for as long as the new federation. Many continue to question the perceived loss of state rights or erosion of them as a result of the actions of the federal government. Much attention has been given to the Twenty Points. Questions have been raised as to why some of the points have been surrendered or abolished.

Others raise questions about how Sabahans were wrongly perceived. For instance, statements and questions uttered by West Malaysians to Sabahans, such as “Do you live on trees?,” “Welcome to Malaysia,” “All Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak,” “Your money is bigger than ours?” etc. All these, coupled with those state rights issues raised by political parties, form part of the grievances that cloud the federal—state relations—and in the process, add a burden to the notion of being a Sabahan or being a Malaysian.

Various mechanisms and efforts have been used to try to address such perceived divides. The recruitment of Sabahans into the Malaysian civil service, the Royal Malaysian Police Force, and the Malaysian Armed Forces, the setting up of the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, which receives a sizeable number of West Malaysian students. Likewise, many Sabah students

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46. *Malaysia: Agreement Concluded between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Federation of Malaya, North Borneo, Sarawak and Singapore*, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, Cmnd. 2094, July 1963, p.2.

studying in universities in West Malaysia, have probably helped to reduce the misconceptions about one another while, at the same time, improving personal ties. Many marriages have also taken place between Sabahans and West Malaysians (and Sarawakians). There have also been efforts from the commercial sector, including the Ferry Malaysia, launched in 1986, which was a cruise ship named “Cruise Muhibbah” (Friendship Cruise), plying the major ports of Sabah, Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia. The national carrier, Malaysia Airlines, has been in operation since 1963 (earlier known as Malayan Airways Limited from 1947–1972) and has, in some ways, helped to foster relationships between the two sides of the divide. More recently, the introduction of the budget airline AirAsia in 1996 has changed the human-to-human ties between Sabah and West Malaysia quite dramatically. Its publicity slogan of “Everyone Can Fly” and its no-frills competitive fares have certainly allowed more people from both sides to move between the two regions and, therefore, get to know each other better.

It is clear that the name “Sabah” was no longer an issue after 1963. The name is widely received and deemed to be most suitable, replacing the colonial name of North Borneo, which could be a mouthful. In fact, all traces of the name North Borneo have disappeared, except perhaps in history textbooks, historical publications, or on old stamps among the philatelic societies. It is the name of Sabah, which entered the memories and imagination of the post-1963 generations, and that is the only name known to them as the official name of the state. The post-1963 issue then was no longer the use of the name, but rather the defence of the new identity and the perceived rights and positions that came with the idea of being a Sabahan vis-à-vis West Malaysia. The year 2013 marked 50 years of the founding of the Federation of Malaysia, and 50 years of Sabah as part of Malaysia. Yet, the idea of Sabah being different, being one of the four entities that formed Malaysia, continues to have its proponents. In fact, as recently as 2014, a columnist in the popular English newspaper *The Star* raised the question of this continuing issue, calling it “A Historical Blackhole for Sabah.” The columnist, Philip Golingai, began with the statement, “There is still debate about whether North Borneo was a country, a state or a self-government in transition during the first couple of weeks of independence [...]”<sup>47</sup> Golingai went on to deal with the subject of self-government by quoting from old newspaper clippings on the status of Sabah during that two weeks of self-government leading up to the formation of Malaysia. Philip Golingai’s article highlights the confusions that Sabahans and Malaysians alike are experiencing over the actual status of Sabah and Sarawak in 1963. But what is clear is that the terms “Sabah” and “Sabahans” became the source of pride for those who came from the state.

47. Philip Golingai, A Historical Black Hole for Sabah, in One Man’s Meat Column, *The Star*, 6 September 2014.



### **Concluding Remarks**

This paper sets out to look at the origins of the name of Sabah and how this name was sustained over different eras to become the name of the new state of Sabah within the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. The idea of having an original name referring to the territory that became Sabah was championed by certain quarters during the colonial era to the point that the name eventually became the official name of the state. The last part of this paper looks into the way Sabahans looked at their state identity vis-à-vis their brethren from the Malay Peninsula and Sarawak. This paper concludes that even though the identity of being a Sabahan was readily embraced by the people in Sabah after 1963, there are definitely different notions about how and what it should be. In a way, this exercise of trying to trace the origins of the name of Sabah and how it is being adapted in the larger sense of the Malaysian nation is yet another way of embracing or understanding the notion of being a Sabahan.

It is interesting to see how the name of Sabah, which originated as the name of a place that was based on the manner the Bruneians pointed their directions during earlier times, became the name of a modern state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This transformation was partly made possible by the manner some locals remembered the existence of the name behind the facades of the colonial name of North Borneo. Later, it was also partly due to the efforts of some colonial officials, especially in the face of decolonization, that the name Sabah was reintroduced to the mainstream of public life, especially through the establishment of Radio Sabah, and the two publications of *Anak Sabah* and *Radio Sabah Calling*. This late colonial intervention helped to foster this new sense of identity that had not been experienced before, especially when the name Sabah was almost being obviated from public domain during the North Borneo Company administration era. Then came Donald Stephens and his *Sabah Times*, and also his calls for the renaming of the state from North Borneo to Sabah. Since then, the name struck as the name of the state and the new identity of being a Sabahan became the rallying identity of a people who probably had very little notion of the meaning behind the name of “Sabah,” yet passionately proud of this identity.

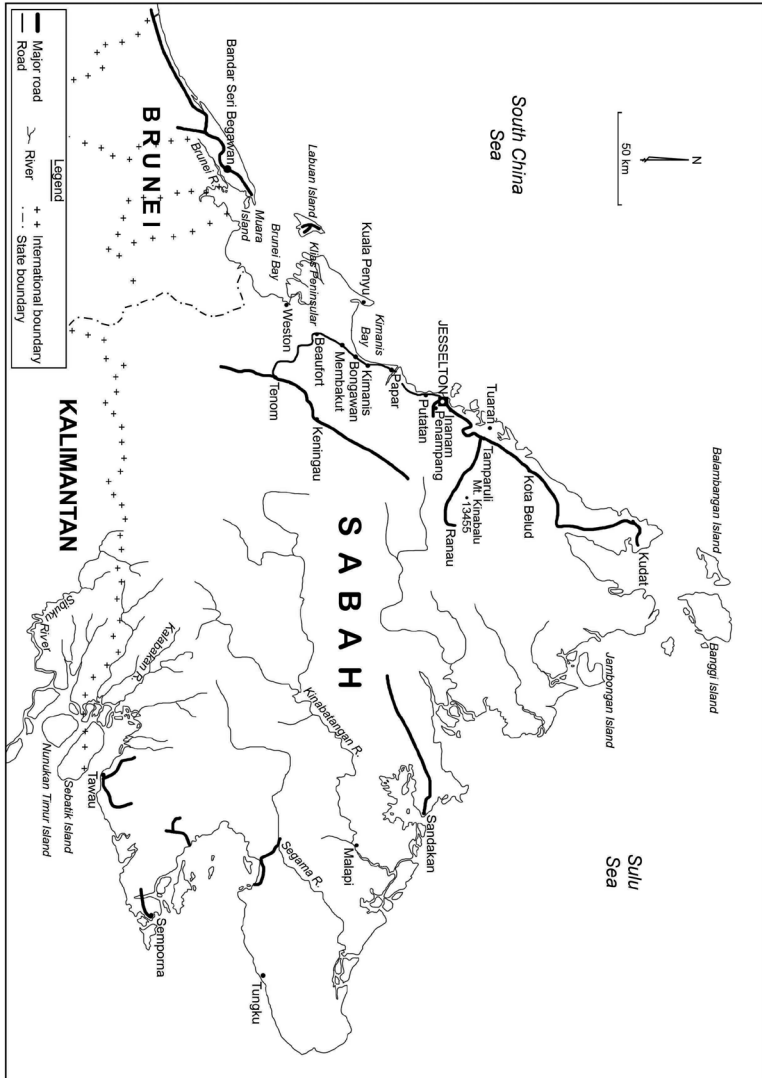


Fig. 1 – Map of Sabah