

## Unsung Heroes in Sabah's Historiography: The Indigenous Community in the Anti-Japanese Movement in North Borneo, 1942–1945

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**Abstract.** The Petagas War Memorial, erected in 1946, is the official symbol of Sabah's anti-Japanese resistance between 1942 to 1945. The memorial focuses on the predominantly Chinese Kinabalu Guerrilla Defence Force (KGDF), which managed to secure vital assistance and cooperation from Sabah's *peribumi* (indigenous) community. However, it does not adequately capture their contributions despite becoming the backbone of KGDF. Without them, the anti-Japanese movement would not have run smoothly nor achieved any form of success (albeit short-lived). On the 21st of January, the war memorial hosts an annual commemoration of KGDF against Japan. However, it tends to ignore the contributions of indigenous fighters. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the recognition that should have been given to Sabah's indigenous fighters against the Japanese occupation in Sabah, exploring the cooperation between Sabah's indigenous community and the KGDF in the anti-Japanese movement between 1942 and 1945. The aim is to place the role of former fighters in its proper context. This study is based on library research as well as interviews. The primary resources from the library research are derived from reports, files and newspapers found in the Sabah State Archives. Interviews are utilised to complement archival sources, especially in the absence of written records.

**Keywords and phrases:** indigenous fighters, North Borneo, anti-Japanese, KGDF, Petagas War Memorial

## Introduction

The British North Borneo Chartered Company (BNBCC) offered minimal resistance to the Japanese invasion of Sabah. Within a month, the Japanese occupied Labuan on 1st January 1942, Mampakul and Weston on 2nd January, Beaufort on 3rd January and Jesselton on 9th January. They controlled Sandakan by 19th January, Tawau by 24th January, Lahad Datu by 26th January and Kudat by 1st February. The Japanese governed Borneo Island through *Gunsei-bu* (Military Division Government), which was under the 37th Southern Expeditionary Army Forces. Japanese rule incorporated North Borneo, Brunei and Sarawak under *Kita Boruneo* (Northern Bornean territories) which was divided into five *shu* (regions), namely: Kuching-*shu*, Sibu-*shu*, Miri-*shu* (including Brunei), *Seikai-shu* (West Coast) (Labuan, Jesselton, Kudat, Kota Belud and Keningau) and *Tokai-shu* (East Coast) (Tawau, Sandakan, Lahad Datu and Beluran) (Chung 2005).

Initially, Japan had amicable relations with the local community due to its early implementation of Nipponisation policies. However, after 1943, as a result of continuous pressure from allied forces, Japan faced various challenges, including difficulty in procuring supplies (CSO 0279 1946). To address these issues, the Japanese administration in Southeast Asia, particularly in North Borneo, began to adopt a ruthless “Scorched Earth Policy”, which triggered resentment among the *peribumi* (indigenous) people of Sabah (CSO 2401 1946). Under this policy, the Japanese army began intimidating and confiscating property and food from the local people of Sabah. This policy led to growing resentment and dissatisfaction among the local population, prompting them to join the anti-Japanese movement in the state. Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese Wars in 1894 to 1895 and 1937 to 1945 contributed to widespread anti-Japanese sentiments among the Chinese community, especially in Southeast Asia. However, due to the limited availability of historical archival sources, historians have had little to say about the involvement of indigenous groups in the anti-Japanese resistance in North Borneo between 1942 and 1945. Therefore, an alternative approach is to explore other sources, such as oral history. The objective is to use these oral sources to enhance our understanding of the role that indigenous communities played in the anti-Japanese campaign in North Borneo.

## Historiography of the Anti-Japanese Movement in North Borneo

The collaboration of indigenous peoples with the Kinabalu Guerrilla Defence Force (KGDF) in the anti-Japanese campaign has not received significant attention. It is also recognised that while previous studies have extensively covered the anti-Japanese movement in North Borneo, they tend to overlook the role of indigenous

fighters. Therefore, this study focuses on a small but significant group in the history of the anti-Japanese movement in North Borneo, namely the anti-Japanese movement among indigenous groups in North Borneo. Additionally, it addresses the efforts that related parties, particularly the state government, should make to recognise these unsung heroes.

In the annals of North Borneo's anti-Japanese campaign history, the valuable contributions of the indigenous community often find themselves unfairly overshadowed. This occurs primarily because of their relatively smaller numbers when juxtaposed with the formidable KGDF, led by the indomitable Albert Kwok Fen Nam (afterwards will be referred as "Albert Kwok"). The issue takes a more troubling turn when the connection between the indigenous community and the KGDF is misconstrued as one and the same movement. This misunderstanding becomes glaringly apparent during the annual government-organised ceremony, held on the 21st of January and steeped in tradition since 1949, meant to pay tribute to war victims. Regrettably, it is rare to see the families and representatives of the indigenous fighters in attendance at this solemn event. The contributions of these indigenous fighters, who played a significant role in resisting the Japanese occupation, have slowly faded into obscurity and are at risk of being entirely forgotten. This study aims to rectify this oversight by delving into the pivotal role played by the indigenous people, a significant minority, in the anti-Japanese campaign in North Borneo.

Hall (1968) conducted a study on KGDF in 1948. He included several surviving KGDF veterans, primarily former KGDF members such as Pang Tet Tsung (who had previously assisted his father, Pang Vui Chau, in treating injured KGDF members) (Tshung 1950), Sia Yuk Tet (Tet 1978), Liew Chi Nyen (a KGDF Tuaran member) (Nyen 1984) and Wong Yun Tshin (former KGDF treasurer). Other works feature Ken (2010) who explores the experiences of the Kinabalu guerrilla during the Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945, covering the period from the eve of the Japanese invasion to the reoccupation by the Allied forces.

Despite the extensive exploration of the anti-Japanese movement in North Borneo during World War II by scholars such as Hall (1968) and Ken (2019), it appears that these studies predominantly focused on the KGDF and the Chinese community, neglecting sufficient attention to the indigenous community. This oversight contributes to the common assumption that the indigenous movement is synonymous with Albert's movement. In 2019, Danny Wong Tze Ken, one of the prominent historians of North Borneo history, conducted a comprehensive study, offering fresh insights into the Jesselton Uprising of 1943. This involved a meticulous re-examination of existing works, shedding light on information and sources that

have surfaced over the past three decades. Ken's research drew on a variety of sources, including personal accounts—both published and unpublished—and interviews. Notably, the study was enriched by recently declassified documents pertaining to war crime trials and the activities of the Service Reconnaissance Department in Southeast Asia. The newly accessible North Borneo Secretariat files in the Sabah State Archives have played a pivotal role in providing information that was previously inaccessible. These files offer valuable insights into the aftermath of the Kinabalu Guerrillas and the broader war in North Borneo. Additionally, they shed light on the challenges faced by families of individuals who lost their lives due to their involvement in the uprising (Ken 2019).

Overall, these studies approach wartime events from the perspective of the Chinese community, highlighting the significance and success of KGDF. They provide insights into the roles of Albert Kwok, Lim Keng Fatt (a Jesselton Chinese trader) and Lee Khum Fah as the founders of the Chinese Defence Association in 1942. This subsequently led to the establishment of the KGDF. These studies also describe how KGDF garnered influence and support from other anti-Japanese movements in the Philippines, led by Imam Marajukim and Alejandro Suarez. On 9th October 1943, the KGDF launched a frontal assault on the Japanese and successfully secured several key areas, including Jesselton (Kota Kinabalu), Tuaran and Menggatal (Abu Bakar 1981/1982; Tregonning 1958).<sup>1</sup>

“Double Tenth Day” served as a symbolic resistance for mainland China's National Day, which falls on 10th October. Therefore, the resistance movement is also known as the “Double Tenth Movement”. This success was celebrated on 10th October 1943, with the hoisting of flags representing North Borneo, Britain, the United States and the People's Republic of China in Jesselton (Tregonning 1958). However, the uprising was short-lived, lasting only three days until the Japanese responded with brutal fashion on 13th October 1943. Most of the KGDF members were captured and sentenced to death on 21st January 1944 (Abu Bakar 1981/1982). Albert Kwok finally surrendered on the 19th December 1943, marking the end of the anti-Japanese movement in the state. In contrast to previous studies, Ken (2010) underscored the significance and role of the Inanam-Menggatal-Telipok Basel Church throughout the movement.

Other studies by Japanese scholars include those by Yamazaki Aen, Teruo Kamihigashi and Hara Fujio. Aen Yamazaki (who was a Sino-Dusun) wrote her memoirs as the wife of Kenji Yamazaki (Keningau governor during the Japanese occupation). However, the memoirs did not examine the role of the anti-Japanese campaign among the indigenous people of Sabah (North Borneo) (cited from Ken 2010). Similar research was undertaken by Hara Fujio, who investigated the

causes of the KGDF's uprising. Fujio drew on Japanese sources identical to Teruo Kamihigashi, who also wrote about KGDF's struggle (cited from Fujio 2002). However, it is important to reiterate that the main emphasis of this study does not delve into the discussion of the anti-Japanese movement within North Borneo's indigenous community.

Previous studies extensively addressed the KGDF resistance. Almost all researchers who explored the Japanese occupation of North Borneo mentioned the KGDF (see for example, Evans 1990; Gin 2011; Leong 1982; Whelan 1968; 1970; Reece 1990). Most of them briefly mentioned the involvement of fighters among the indigenous people without delving into their specific roles. The primary focus usually revolved around KGDF's broad function as an anti-Japanese movement. This is noteworthy because the KGDF would not have achieved its success in 1943 without their support. Undoubtedly, they were not organised and lacked adequate weapons or military training. Therefore, despite the continued oppressive policies of the Japanese government in North Borneo, the indigenous people's desire to launch an open attack against the Japanese army was not realised due to their disorganised and unstructured organisation (Whelan 1968).

This further indicates the cooperation between the indigenous people and KGDF since it became the most appealing option for those who could no longer tolerate Japanese oppression. With a total of 300 members, considering North Borneo's vast geographical size of 29,000 square miles, it was challenging for the KGDF to mount any attack on the Japanese. Albert Kwok, the supreme leader of KGDF, sought assistance from the indigenous people and they responded.

Previous researchers also attempted to portray the organisation of the indigenous people as similar to that of KGDF, when in reality, they were different. Resistance in the southwestern part of North Borneo was led by a host of local leaders, such as Pak Musah from Papar, Kimanis, Membakut, Bongawan, Kuala Penyu, Beaufort and Sipitang, Panglima Alli from Sulug, Saruddin from Dinawan, Jamalul from Mantanani and Arshad from Kg. Oudar, Menggatal. These individuals were influential, highly respected and had their own followers. Pak Musah, for instance, was a vocal opponent of the BNBBCC. His ability to gather historical information made him prominent, respected and popular among the locals. Pak Musah's bravery and intelligence were a source of pride for the Membakut community, to the extent that many residents believe he is still alive and in hiding (Hall 1968; Saat Awang Damit, *pers. comm.*, 2nd August 2012). To achieve their goal, these indigenous leaders agreed to assist and cooperate with the KGDF to ensure an effective anti-Japanese movement in this area.

## **Role of Indigenous Communities in the Anti-Japanese Movement**

Although the KGDF played a significant role in resisting the Japanese in North Borneo, its success would not have been possible without the assistance and support of other ethnicities such as Brunei, Bajau, Suluk and other indigenous communities. One of the key figures was Pak Musah, who fought the Japanese in the interior division. Pak Musah, from Membakut located on the southern West Coast, wholeheartedly supported the KGDF. He was a great leader and warrior among the local population (Hall 1968). Prior to World War II, Pak Musah was also involved in a movement against the British in North Borneo. In 1931, his bravery and influence led the British to exile him to Membakut (Bassu Assan, *pers. comm.*, 2nd August 2012). However, during his exile, he succeeded as a trader who greatly assisted the local population facing difficulties. His kindness eventually earned him recognition as a main leader in Membakut. His leadership was not only well-received by the people of Membakut but also by those in the surrounding areas. This raised concerns for BNBCC as well as the Japanese forces later on.

His knowledge of the world of magic and fighting skills made Pak Musah famous among the Brunei Malay community and respected by the Chinese community (CSO 1197 1944). This close relationship with the Chinese prompted Albert Kwok to invite him to assist the KGDF (CSO 1994 1946). However, despite being one of the key figures in the struggle against Japan, little is known about Pak Musah. This is due to the restricted availability of historical records regarding his efforts. One of the interviewees, Ahmad Harun, who possesses substantial knowledge about Pak Musa's battle, pointed out that Pak Musa was an ethnic Tombonuo from the Pitas district. He was in his mid-seventies when the Japanese invaded North Borneo. Even though he was considered old at the time, his leadership, mastery of the art of warfare and inner wisdom earned him the respect of the local population. Simultaneously, Pak Musah also succeeded in aiding the development of the economy of Sungei, Dusun, Brunei and Bisaya communities in Membakut and Beaufort. The acceptance of his leadership by the community caused Pak Musah to be deemed as a threat to the Japanese military administration in North Borneo (Ahmad Harun, *pers. comm.*, 2nd August 2012).

Meanwhile, Kiki Sinjan, a respondent from Beaufort who was nine years old during the Japanese occupation, acknowledged the importance of Pak Musah as a key figure who opposed the Japanese on the southwestern coast of North Borneo. Kiki Sinjan stated that Pak Musah was very wise in his struggle, using his economic power to influence the local population to join him in opposing Japanese atrocities. In this context, the Japanese army was apprehensive that Pak

Musah, utilising his business as a cover, might be influencing people to harbour resentment and resistance against the Japanese administration in North Borneo, making him a marked target. Engaging in the resistance against the Japanese, Pak Musah strategically utilised Paitan, Beluran and Membakut as bases for his opposition (Kiki Sinjan, *pers. comm.*, 3rd August 2012). However, the movement led by Pak Musah barely endured a month before being exposed by the Japanese. Consequently, he was apprehended and confined for three months at Batu 3, Jalan Putatan, Jesselton. Tragically, Pak Musah succumbed two months after enduring the hardships of imprisonment.

Additionally, the KGDF successfully garnered crucial support from the indigenous communities residing along the coast and on the islands surrounding Jesselton. The indigenous communities, such as the Bajau and Suluk, were well known for their bravery, courage and determination. The coastal community, especially the fishing folk, were so oppressed by Japanese military policies that many of them readily took part in the resistance movement (Hall 1968; Mohammad Raduan 2000).<sup>2</sup> Among the indigenous fighters from the Suluk community was Panglima Alli bin Imam Abbas Sani from Sulug Island (632/47 Pre-War No. 02680 1936; 1619/47 War Damage Policy 1946; Gin 2011; Leong 1982; Whelan 1970; Reece 1990; Eng n.d.). Panglima Alli, approximately 58 years old during the Japanese occupation era and hailing from Pulau Sulug, remains a relatively obscure figure, much like Pak Musah. Despite his substantial contributions to the resistance against the Japanese occupation in North Borneo, he remains less known among today's generation, with only a limited number of primary sources available about his role and actions (*Berita Harian* 2007). Panglima Alli was born in 1884. He was the third child of 12 siblings. He opened a settlement on Sulug Island in 1904 after moving from Dinawan Island and Mengalum Island off the coast of Jesselton. He was rational, charismatic and a loving person in accordance with his role as imam and head of the village in Sulug Island. His rational nature endowed him with wisdom, particularly in addressing issues within the local community. His innate leadership qualities garnered respect from both allies and adversaries alike, solidifying his reputation as a discerning and influential figure.

According to oral sources shared by a respondent from Kota Belud, named Mengga Tiding, Panglima Alli was said to be a person of noble character and highly respected by the people of Pulau Sulug. Because of his leadership qualities, he was appointed as Village Chief and Imam of Pulau Sulug. Panglima Alli became a successful fruit farmer on Pulau Manukan and Pulau Sulug. He always brought his produce to be sold at the business markets in Jesselton. The political circumstances during the Japanese occupation had a significant impact on the economy of North Borneo, especially for Panglima Alli. The Japanese currency notes, worthless

“banana money”, had negatively impacted Panglima Alli’s business. He saw the inadequacies of the Japanese administration and its brutal government policies, which led to his anti-Japanese sentiments. As a prominent figure within the community of Pulau Sulug and its surrounding islands, Panglima Alli’s actions were closely monitored by the Japanese army. Despite their scrutiny, the Japanese military failed to gather concrete evidence to justify punitive measures against Panglima Alli for any alleged criminal offences (Mengga Tiding, *pers. comm.*, 2nd November 2010).

Panglima Alli initiated his resistance on the 9th October 1943, when he and his 33 followers set ablaze the rubber warehouse at Jesselton port. This attack angered the Japanese since the destruction of the warehouse would affect their influence in North Borneo (CSO 1994 1946; Hall 1968; Suhaili Jawak, *pers. comm.*, 18th November 2010; Damiah Panglima Alli, *pers. comm.*, 23rd November 2010). Moreover, he received moral support from his religious peers such as Yaakub, Imam Sailillah (a Bajau Ubian Head Village of Mantanani Island, Kota Belud), Buldani, Damiah, Jawak, Saman Mawalli, Maamun, Toron, Ulah Sabbi, Saludin, Jaulan, Da Maanah, Inggal, Barahim, Nawu, Makatabang, Aling, Akmad and Malul. Panglima Alli, assisted by Kasil, Sandolan and other loyal followers, launched a guerrilla war attack against the Japanese. He was particularly influential among the Bajaus and Suluks around Mantanani Island, Kota Belud, Banggi Island, Kudat, Gaya Island, Mangalum Island and Api-Api waters. On the mainland, the people of Likas, Putatan, Petagas, Inanam, Menggatal, Tanjung Aru and Sepanggar were among Panglima Alli’s loyal followers (Hall 1968; CSO 28/47 Pt. 1 1945; CSO 28/47 Pt. 2 1946). At that time, Panglima Alli only used *barung* (machetes) and spears to fight against the Japanese who used firearms (Hall 1968).

However, the battle did not last long since Panglima Alli did not have as many weapons as the Japanese. Finally, Panglima Alli and several followers were caught in mid-October 1943. Sinin Lemin (*pers. comm.*, 13th November 2010) recounts the tragedy of Panglima Alli and his followers, who were captured and tortured by the Japanese army. According to Lemin, Panglima Alli, Kasil and Sandolan were dragged one kilometre to the Pulau Sulug jetty to be sent to Kinarut prison. In prison, all three of them were subjected to inhumane interrogation methods and were forced to confess that they were the masterminds behind the rubber warehouse fire in Jesselton. However, the Japanese authorities demanded certain confessions which they never confessed to, despite severe torture such as being forced to drink soapy water, punched in the stomach and beaten with the butt of a rifle. After Panglima Alli and his followers refused to confess, the Japanese authorities arrested and tortured 33 people from Pulau Sulug who were known to be his followers. The Japanese army also continued to harass the people of Pulau



Sulug to weaken Panglima Alli's influence on the island. However, none of these actions weakened the fighting spirit of the native fighters. Sadly, the struggle of Panglima Alli and his followers came to an end when they were taken to Petagas on 21st January 1944 and beheaded along with Albert Kwok and other members of the KGDF (Sinin Lemin, *pers. comm.*, 13th November 2010).

According to another oral source by Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah, the act of attacking and capturing Panglima Alli and his followers was carried out without any prior inquiry. According to Ahmad Ibrahim, the actions of the Japanese were only based on an accusation. Whether or not Panglima Alli and his supporters were responsible for the warehouse fire in Jesselton remains a matter of contention. However, when the Japanese army began attacking Pulau Sulug, Panglima Alli and his followers had no choice but to defend themselves, their families and the residents of Pulau Sulug and the surrounding islands. Unfortunately, due to the lack of military equipment, their efforts to defend the people of Pulau Sulug from the Japanese attack failed (Ahmad Ibrahim Abdullah, *pers. comm.*, 16th August 2012). After Pak Alli and his followers were captured by the Japanese, their family faced death threats by the Japanese and Sulug Island was burned down. Sulug Island was destroyed and a total of 54 local residents were killed, while approximately 60 others survived (Hall 1968). Around 30 children were moved to Bongawan, Mandahan and Buang Sayang at Papar until the Japanese were defeated in September 1945. However, many died due to poor diet and various diseases. Among those who migrated were Kambangtuli, KK Jawak, Masiah, Illang, Edallah, Rukaiyah Saman, Sahawi Maamon, Misli Saman, Eksi Saman, Palahuddin Maamon, Pillak Jimlok, Makhsi Saman and Tasiah Toron. After the war ended, they returned to Sulug Island, but the island had suffered tremendous damage due to the war. Thus, they moved to Mamutik Island and in 1960, they again moved to Manukan Island. The other half, led by Jawak KK, opened new settlements in Tuaran in 1966. He opened Kampung Baru-Baru. He passed away in 2005 (Damiah Panglima Alli, *pers. comm.*, 23rd November 2010).

The nationalist and patriotic nature of the indigenous fighter also manifested in other local leaders such as Saruddin from Dinawan Island, warrior Jamalul from Mantanani Island and Arshad from Oudar Island, Menggatal (Hall 1968). The leaders and warriors of the indigenous people from the islands surrounding Jesselton did their best to attack from the sea, which eventually made it impossible for the Japanese forces to cope with the Bajau and Suluk fighters who were renowned for their maritime prowess. Individuals in Sabah (North Borneo) who were known as *panglima*, or warriors, were greatly respected by the local population (CSO 2749 1946; Hiam Lamit, *pers. comm.*, 16th August 2012; Jainal Nasip Undong, *pers. comm.*, 17th August 2012; Jirab Uling, *pers. comm.*, 16th August 2012). Panglima

Alli's greatness in resisting *kempietai* (Japanese military police) led to the title of "Commander" by the BNCC government (CSO 1162 1946).

### **The Petagas Memorial Park**

The Chinese community, with the collaboration of the indigenous people of North Borneo, had exhibited opposition towards the Japanese occupation in 1942–1945 which culminated with the abortive 1943 Jesselton uprising (Whelan 1968; Ken 2010; Reece 1990; Gin 2011; Akashi 2001; Leong 1982; Abu Bakar 1981/1982). In 1946, a year after the war had ended, efforts were made by the multi-ethnic War Victims Caring Committee to establish the Petagas Memorial Park. This monument was built from a slab of wood at an abandoned Japanese mass burial that was intended to be a graveyard. The War Victims Caring Committee was transferred to the West Coast Residency Monument Fund Committee in April 1947 to assure the appropriate maintenance of the memorial and the Petagas Memorial Committee took its place in 1970. Since then, it has been up to the new committee to oversee the memorial park. Among the committee's early success was securing the British agreement to have an annual commemoration of the war victims on 21st January at Petagas Memorial Site. Over 500 people, including family members of those who perished in January 1944, were invited to the first commemoration held in 1948. The committee had the bodies of those slain in Labuan by the Japanese forces removed on 29th April 1949 and buried at the Petagas Memorial Site.

However, since 1958, the local government has taken over the memorial's management (*Harian Mercu* 1998; Ken 2010).<sup>3</sup> In 1979, the Kota Kinabalu Municipal Council upgraded Petagas Memorial Park at the cost of MYR190,000.00, which was funded by the Ministry of Energy and Environment. The memorial park was upgraded into a landscape floral garden (*Sabah Times* 1979; 1989; 1990; *The Borneo Post* 1994; *Daily Express* 1994).

The Petagas Memorial Park has attracted many local and foreign visitors. In fact, the memorial park was visited by Nur Misuari, a former leader of the Moro National Liberation Front, in October 1997, who was also the governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao at the time (*Daily Express* 1997; *Borneo Travel News* 1990; 1993). On 16th March 1999, 25 former Australian troops involved in World War II visited the memorial park with their 65 relatives (*Utusan Borneo* 1999).

According to Rumaizah Lisun (*pers. comm.*, 9th January 2013), the memorial caretaker, some Japanese visitors regretted the Sabah massacre during World War II. As a sign of remorse, the Japanese government contributed a fund amounting to MYR9,000.00 in 2013 to assist and preserve the Ceremony Commemorating

the Petagas War Victims (Elizeberth Borubui, *pers. comm.*, 9th January 2013). According to Ken (2010), the construction of the Petagas Memorial Park allows the general public to commemorate the KGDF struggle, which is well taken care of until today. The commemoration was also supported by the former Sabah state leaders such as Donald Stephen, Datu Mustapha Datu Harun and Datuk Yong Teck Lee (Ken 2010). Why did these leaders pay close attention to the KGDF? Undeniably, a few have a very “special relationship” with KGDF. For Donald Stephen, former chief minister (1963 to 1964 and April 1976 to June 1976) and Governor of Sabah (1973 to July 1975), it was a family matter since his father, Jules P. Stephen, was one of the victims. Tun Mustapha Datu Harun himself was also a former guerrilla fighter who fought alongside the KGDF. Yong Teck Lee’s commitment was based on his appreciation of the struggle of the Chinese community in North Borneo during Japanese rule; this resonates with the current state of political development in Sabah.<sup>4</sup> The annual ceremony at Petagas Memorial Park on 21st January, dedicated to honouring the martyrs of the anti-Japanese movement, appears to predominantly recognise victims associated with Sabah’s current leaders. In essence, this event carries an elitist tone as it exclusively highlights prominent individuals. Unfortunately, the indigenous community fighters, integral to Sabah’s and North Borneo’s history, are overlooked, with no deliberate effort made to include them in the ceremony despite their deserving recognition.

Such attention led to the incorrect representation of the anti-Japanese movement, which the KGDF and the Chinese dominated. Events such as the Ceremony Commemorating the Petagas War Victims, which is an official state event undertaken by the Kota Kinabalu City Board, are more likely to commemorate the sacrifice of KGDF fighters together with the Chinese community. Under Japanese rule in North Borneo, the prevailing circumstance fostered a belief within the population that the KGDF’s resistance against Japan represented the sole nationalist movement. This perception is further heightened by the annual commemoration of war victims, which tends to be largely dominated by families affiliated with the KGDF.

Why is the annual commemoration at Petagas Memorial Park, honouring the victims of the anti-Japanese war, exclusively reserved for specific families, particularly those associated with the KGDF movement? According to Elizeberth Borubui who is also the secretary of the Ceremony Commemorating the Petagas War Victims, as the organiser of the annual event, the Kota Kinabalu City Hall differentiates the invitees into two major categories: formal and informal. The formal includes the heads of state and heads of federal government departments. The informal category consists of descendants of war victims and the public. While proper invitation cards are distributed to official invitees, the unofficial ones never receive

such invitations. Instead, they are invited through advertisements in the local newspapers. This means that the presence of the war victims' descendants in such ceremonies is "voluntary". For those who cannot afford to come due to financial problems or live in islands or remote areas, such as Sulug, Mantanani, Dinawan and Oudar Islands located far from Kota Kinabalu, they would almost invariably be unable to attend. Both distance and financial constraints pose huge challenges for them to attend these official functions, especially if they have to pay their expenses on their own. In addition, only three representatives of the war victims are permitted to lay wreaths as a sign of respect during the annual event honouring the war casualties at Petagas Memorial Park. For example, John Ben Stephen, Shay Yen Pen and Trese Lee Yuk Fun attended the wreath-laying ceremony in 2020 on behalf of the families of war victims. Three individuals represented the 2022 Council: Benedict Liew Stephen, Shay Yen Pen and Liew Siew Me. The public therefore views the Ceremony Commemorating the Petagas War Victims as both "honouring and mourning" war victims. No effort was made to understand and appreciate the struggles of those involved in the movement.

The ceremony is quite short, as is typical. It lasts for an hour and begins at 8:00 a.m. It ends with the "Last Post", while other aspects include meditation that lasts for 20 seconds, a wreath-laying ceremony, blowing of "rouse" and a parade (Sabah State Government 2012).<sup>5</sup> Through such a ceremony, which is mostly common in the West or in the cemetery of the allied forces located in Southeast Asia, the government expected the public to remember these men and to strengthen the spirit of unity and patriotism in defending the state's sovereignty and independence. Hopefully, such commemoration would also lead to harmony among the races with different religions and cultures. However, such a simple ceremony may lead to the inability of the local community to understand the true facts behind the anti-Japanese movement in the state. In the end, the intention of the memorial plaque that says "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 21st January 1944 and also those who met their death in the same cause at Labuan and were later buried here" will never be fully appreciated especially by the younger generations who are in the dark about fighters from the indigenous community who had played a role in the anti-Japanese resistance. It is commonly believed that KGDF's resistance to the Japanese did not involve the indigenous people nor their vital assistance which they had provided.

In 1998, the Kota Kinabalu Junior Chamber attempted to rectify the situation through a project known as the "Kota Kinabalu Junior Chamber: Reach Out and Achieve; In Remembrance of Our Heroes (1942–1945) "Learning from the Past a Better Foundation". The main purpose of the September to October 1998

project was to ensure that the general public knows about the struggles of the anti-Japanese movement. This project was also conducted to clean and restore the damage caused by vandalism. Restoration activities were accomplished around the monument (*The Borneo Post* 1998). Throughout the project, the Kota Kinabalu Junior Chamber teamed up with Borneo Post which published articles about the anti-Japanese movement. These articles tended to highlight the struggle of the KGDF and allied forces. Unfortunately, the role of allied forces and KGDF stood out more compared to the indigenous people. In fact, through this project, KGDF leaders (like Albert Kwok and Li Tet Phui) were immortalised into the Sabah state history and their names have been used to grace street names in Kota Kinabalu (Ken 2010). Unfortunately, these unsung heroes from indigenous communities, such as Panglima Alli, who fought against the Japanese during World War II were never honoured in Sabah by having streets or buildings named after them, as was the case with the KGDF fighters. In fact, the indigenous community's contribution to the campaign against Japan is no less significant than that of KGDF (Juhurah Pulahan, *pers. comm.*, 23rd November 2010; Rahini Sahat, *pers. comm.*, 16th August 2012).

This situation has prompted descendants of these fighters to express profound regret. Damiah Panglima Alli, one of the sons of Panglima Alli, consistently refuted the assertion that his father was a member of the KGDF, emphasising instead that he had fought alongside them, as documented in numerous accounts. His dismay stemmed from the fact that his father was never acknowledged as a pivotal figure in the anti-Japanese campaign (Damiah Panglima Alli, *pers. comm.*, 23rd November 2010).

The situation significantly differs when compared to how the allied forces treat the locals. The allied forces honour and appreciate the assistance of the indigenous people and they were recognised in the same fashion as members of the allied forces. Medals and financial compensation were given to many of the fighters as a token of appreciation (Silver 2010; Abu Bakar 1981/1982).<sup>6</sup> Such honours and appreciations are clearly visible at the Kundasang War Memorial Park and the Sandakan Memorial Park. This plaque clearly spells out the contribution of the indigenous community together with other races who fought against the Japanese in Northern Borneo:

This war memorial is situated on the former site of the Sandakan prisoner-of-war camp 1942–1945 and is dedicated to the memory of the Australian, British and local soldiers of Sabah who were serving in the British colonial forces and also to the memory of the local civilians that assisted the prisoners-of-war. It was from this camp that the infamous Sandakan Death March commenced in 1945.

### **Who Were the Heroes in the Anti-Japanese Movement in North Borneo (Sabah)?**

Who were the heroes in the history of North Borneo is fairly subjective since each person has their own interpretation and perspective. However, this does not mean we should forget, deny or never appreciate the role of the Indigenous fighters between 1941 and 1945. When North Borneo was under British rule, the names of Syarif Osman and Mat Salleh were labelled as national fighters. The people of Sabah are unanimous on these two choices.

However, there is a marked difference when we try to highlight who actually were the heroes during the Japanese occupation. For instance, the older version of Form One Malaysian History textbook highlights the KGDF movement (led by Albert Kwok) and guerrilla groups (led by Tun Datu Mustapha Datu Harun) as key figures in the anti-Japanese movement (Ahmad Fawzi, Mohd Fo'ad and Azami 2009). Could these two figures be regarded as heroes in the anti-Japanese movement? This question remains subjective as no single figure successfully led a movement against the Japanese in the state. The authors argue that determining who the heroes are should not be limited to specific individuals, as the anti-Japanese struggle in North Borneo was a collective effort that encompassed people of all races. Individuals like Pak Musah, Panglima Alli, Arshad, Saruddin and Jamalul equally deserve to be known as heroes in the history of the anti-Japanese movement (*The Borneo Post* 1998). Despite their unsuccessful struggle, they significantly contributed to the history of the anti-Japanese movement in North Borneo (Hall 1968).

Through their involvement, the pattern of the resistance movement considerably broadened and became more widespread. With the KGDF having only 300 members, it would have been very difficult to oppose the Japanese on their own and without the help of the Indigenous fighters (Dukiah Wajah, *pers. comm.*, 23rd November 2010). This partnership enabled the entire resistance to collaborate with the KGDF who later focused on Jesselton, Menggatal and Tuaran, while the indigenous fighters launched guerrilla attacks on the southwest coast, the islands and coastal areas of Jesselton and Sandakan. On the southwest coast, Albert Kwok had confidence in and trusted Pak Musah and his followers. This is crucial evidence regarding the important role of the Indigenous fighters. Pak Musah's resistance is significant since the Japanese took swift action to nip it in the bud by rounding them up. In the coastal areas and islands, many KGDF members sought help from the Bajau and Suluk fighters like Panglima Alli from Sulug Island, Saruddin from Dinawan Island, Jamalul from Mantanani Island and Arshad from Oudar Island, Menggatal. Their knowledge and experience of fighting strategy at sea were important in determining the success of the anti-Japanese movement, although the

success was brief. Similarly, in the east coast, especially in Sandakan, KGDF had received much support from other classes of indigenous people.

Sabah's indigenous people have provided a long line of patriotic, nationalist and loyal fighters to the point where they risked their lives and the lives of their families to achieve the movement's goal. Saruddin and his followers from Dinawan Island were willing to accept Japanese military execution. As a result, almost the entire island's male population were arrested and subsequently jailed in Batu Tiga Jalan Sembulan. The Japanese army brutally tortured all prisoners. Some of them were hung upside down. Their heads were submerged in water and their wounded bodies were sprinkled with salt (Aishah Awang, *pers. comm.*, 16th August 2012; Asmah Abdullah, *pers. comm.*, 23 November 2010). After several days of detention and investigation, they were sent back to Dinawan and shot to death in front of their wives and children (Hall 1968; Wong 2019). Similarly, indigenous people who were strong supporters of Jamalul of Mantanani Island were also sentenced to death. In February 1944, 24 Japanese soldiers interrogated the residents of Mantanani. At that time, the islanders were not allowed to go out to sea. However, 58 of them refused to abide by Japanese directives, leading to their detention and torture in Jesselton. As a result, many of them died (Hall 1968; Wong 2019).

Similar fate befell Arshad and his followers from Oudar, where 29 residents out of 64 were subjected to torture and execution. Simultaneously, a group of 30 women and children from the village were sent to Bongawan to engage in labour in the rice fields (Hall 1968; Jasni 2006).<sup>7</sup> At the end of the World War II, the Sulug community had very few men in their midst. When the British came to the island in September 1945, its residents only consisted of women and children. As a result, boys of 11 years old were appointed as heads of the village on the island. Sulug Island received extensive international media coverage as the "woman dream island" since the island had no male occupants, prompting Hall (1968, 86) to write "It is a kind of Eve's garden of Eden without an Adam".

According to Elizeberth Borubui (*pers. comm.*, 9th January 2013), efforts in tracing Indigenous fighters is difficult since most of them did not retain their original family name, unlike the "Stephen Family" or the "Kwok Family". Such problems make it challenging to track down the descendants of the indigenous fighters and invite them to attend the annual Ceremony Commemorating the Petagas War Victims.

Both factual ambiguities and the lack of serious efforts to highlight and emphasise the struggles of Indigenous fighters resulted in them being less known to younger generations and the local population. In fact, there are even those who claim that Joseph Rayner and Fadris Mohd Abdullah, who were listed as fighters on the Petagas Memorial Garden, were simply unfortunate war victims, whereas the names of the Indigenous fighters crafted on the stone memorial were the real heroes of Sabah but they were never fully acknowledged (Joseph Rayner, *pers. comm.*, 9th January 2013; Fadris Mohd Abdullah, *pers. comm.*, 9th January 2013).

## **Conclusion**

The KGDF's resistance against the Japanese in North Borneo between 1942 and 1945 had strong ties with the indigenous community, although some indigenous groups within the anti-Japanese movement were never recognised. The resistance led by Pak Musah, Panglima Alli, Saruddin, Arshad and Jamalul undoubtedly carried elements of patriotism and courage. Despite their disadvantages, they were imbued with loyalty to liberate their motherland from colonial rule. They should be elevated to the same status as other resistance figures who fought the Japanese, whether at the state or national level. However, such hope may not be realised when celebrations commemorating the anti-Japanese fighters only involve the families of former KGDF fighters and the armed forces from Australia and Britain. These celebrations, such as "Heroes Day", take place at the national level. In fact, both ceremonies (for KGDF fighters and the armed forces) are conducted separately. One takes place every 21st of January at Petagas Memorial Park, while the other is on the 15th of August at Kundasang War Memorial and Sandakan Memorial Park. This situation confuses the public and does not facilitate their understanding of the anti-Japanese struggle in North Borneo. This confusion must be addressed for the benefit of the state, especially younger generations.

Therefore, this study argues that efforts to resolve the misunderstanding of facts should not solely rely on various annual ceremonies aimed at commemorating the heroes involved in the campaign against the Japanese, such as the one held every year at Petagas Memorial Park but should also include written efforts based on oral history. The use of oral sources brings to light a number of unsung heroes who were overlooked in prior works, which tend to exclusively depend on archival records. In fact, oral sources have also succeeded in highlighting the current reality that clearly shows that the history of the anti-Japanese movement in North Borneo does not emphasise the importance of the Indigenous fighters and their contributions against the Japanese army. In this regard, this study contributes by highlighting the role and involvement of these unsung heroes, which are undocumented in archival records. This also demonstrates the importance of historical research on all issues, especially those involving indigenous populations or subaltern groups who were ignored in the Sabah's historiography.



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## Notes

1. The Chinese Defence Association headquarter was located at Lee Khum Fah's home in Menggatal, who was a good friend of Albert Kwok. This organisation received support from several Sabah Chinese medicine organisations and managed to raise as much as \$11,000 (in British North Borneo dollar). Strong support from the Chinese community led to the establishment of KGDF. KGDF launched attacks on 9th October 1943 targeting Tuaran town, Menggatal Police Station and Jesselton, which ultimately led to the success of KGDF.
2. During the Japanese occupation, Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) policies only allow fishing activities in the daytime. During night, curfew regulations were conducted from 6.00 p.m. to 6.00 a.m. to avoid attacks against the Japanese interests.
3. The Jesselton Town Board (Kota Kinabalu) changed to the Kota Kinabalu Municipal Council Chamber and Kota Kinabalu city.
4. Datuk Yong Teck Lee invited former governor of the autonomous region of Mindanao, Nur Misuari, to visit Petagas Memorial Park as a KGDF fighter who has close ties with the anti-Japanese movement in the Philippine Islands at the time.
5. Parade contingents consist of the Army, the Royal Malaysia Police, the Navy, the Fire and Rescue Department, Prisons Department, City Hall Enforcement Department, Civil Defence Department Malaysia, St. John Ambulance, Red Crescent, Boys' Brigade, Girl Guides, Scouts, RELA, Police Cadets, Army Cadets, Fire Cadets, Navy Cadets, Ex-Police Correctional Association of Malaysia and Malaysian Ex-Servicemen Association.
6. It was estimated that more than 200 indigenous people helped the allied forces against the IJA in Sabah. Of the total, 53 people have been given a medal of courage by the Australian and British governments.
7. Among the methods of interrogation used by the Japanese military at that time was to force the drink of soapy water and then the victim will be stepped on until the stomach exploded or the prisoners were not fed and left to die of starvation. For victims who have impenetrable knowledge, the Japanese will bask them under the sun and then drown them in water. Some were tortured by piercing the head and putting salt on the wounds.

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