

## **THE LEGEND BY SUE HARRIS: A CRITIQUE OF THE RUNDUM REBELLION AND A COUNTER ARGUMENT ON THE REBELLION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

*Artikel ini merupakan kritikan sepadu terhadap komen Sue Harris dalam artikelnya tentang Pemberontakan Rundum 1915. Di dalam artikelnya, beliau kurang memberi perhatian kepada ketepatan fakta sejarah serta gagal menggunakan kaedah antropologi yang sesuai, mengakibatkan Pemberontakan Rundum 1915 diberi gambaran sebagai satu penentangan yang didorong oleh magis, bersifat tidak rasional dan merupakan respons terhadap perubahan-perubahan yang dibawa oleh British di Borneo Utara. Hasilnya, penulisan Sue Harris tidak berbeza daripada penulisan-penulisan kolonial lain dan turut mereproduksi ilmu dan rasional kolonial di zaman pasca kolonial. Dengan itu, artikel ini menekankan penulisan semula sejarah perjuangan Murut dengan memberi penekanan kepada ketepatan sejarah dengan menggunakan rekod kolonial (colonial records) dan sejarah lisan sepertimana yang diperturunkan oleh masyarakat Murut sendiri dengan memberi penekanan kepada penggunaan kaedah antropologi dan analisis sejarah rekod kolonial yang jitu dan komprehensif. Hasilnya ialah sejarah pemberontakan Rundum 1915 telah dikonstruksi semula dan mempamerkan kelebihan dan kompleksiti pemberontakan baik dari segi struktur dan juga kepimpinan dan seterusnya melampaui penulisan-penulisan lain yang mengikuti gaya dan motif sejarah kolonial.*

The publication of the article by Sue Harris on the Rundum Rebellion (Harris, 1997) is perhaps long overdue as this rebellion has never appeared in a journal. Ironically, the most advanced, well-planned and largest anti-colonial rebellion has always occupied the periphery of history. My own research since 1995 has been on the Rundum Rebellion and other Murut rebellions since the 1880s (Fernandez, 1998; 1999a; 1999b). What prompted me to write on Sue Harris' effort is the inherent weaknesses in her effort such as historical inaccuracies and the

poor use of anthropological methods in collecting native narratives. What is more destructive is that her lack of understanding of the rebellion and the dynamics at play has marginalised it into the periphery of history. By a stroke of a pen, the Muruts have again been reduced to a non-rational group as she has chosen to highlight this, diminishing the planning and effort actually put into launching the rebellion. Too late for regrets, as the damage is done. My effort would attempt to deconstruct her paper, and perhaps in doing that, expose the vast errors in her paper.

The problem with her paper is two-fold. The first is the historical inaccuracy in general. It is evident that Sue Harris made little attempt to do a through study of the history of North Borneo, whether it be from archival or secondary sources. She relied heavily on Ian Black (1981), but ended up doing his article little justice.<sup>1</sup> This is evident by a number of errors in her article which could have been avoided had she properly understood the contents of Black's article. She also relied, secondarily, on Leong's article (1982) on the "Rundum Rebellion", which actually draws heavily on Black's work mentioned above. Ranjit Singh's article (1981), on the other hand, is a very general account although one can raise doubts about some of the facts mentioned with regard to native leadership prior to colonial rule. Then there is Rutter's work (1985), which was quoted twice, although once the year was noted wrongly. Last but not least, Tregonning (1965) is found in the bibliography, but the use of the book is limited and does not appear to be quoted. This very much explains the historical inaccuracies that plague her paper. By inadequately understanding the historical events in North Borneo, Sue Harris failed to portray the Rundum Rebellion in true light. This is a result of her rudimentary understanding of the social, economic and political scenario facing the Muruts.

Her second weakness pertains to the native accounts of the rebellion. Here, she relies on Murut images of Antanum as the sum of the rebellion. She emphasizes his role as leader and the events as narrated

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<sup>1</sup> This is an interesting paper in which Black tries to look into the millenarian nature of the Rundum rebellion. He stated in his paper that the idea was speculative in nature. As a historian, his efforts for detail needs to be applauded but like all historians he falls short of truly understanding the intricate dynamics of the rebellion.

by the Muruts on the rebellion. My questions are rather on methodology: How did she get the narratives? How did she screen it? What attempts were made to scrutinize their accuracy? She mentions two informants, who gave her lengthy accounts, and numerous others who assisted. The whole problem with native narratives among the Tagols is that they are scarce resources. The accounts of oral history in some African societies, as described by Jan Vansina (Thompson, 1978) are not applicable in the case the Tagols, as there are no systematic institutions to describe the past in a coherent manner. For example, Alex Haley's search for his ancestor Kinte was possible due to the existing systematic institutions for the purpose of narrating the past to the present generation (Thompson, 1978). Without these systematic institutions for the preservation of the past, the past gets caught up in a sequence of competing narratives with uncertain historical accuracy. Keesing (1990), in his study on the Bell Massacre in the Solomon Islands, showed the existence of competing versions even within native discourses on the events that transpired. Furthermore, native discourses that were rejected were found to be those not accepted by other native groups influenced by colonial construct, suggesting that narratives change over time and also stand to be influenced by external forces (Keesing, 1990: 295). I myself had great difficulty in identifying people who could talk in detail about the events. It is based on this that the very foundation of Sue Harris' methodology is questionable. She failed to note the inherent problems with oral history. This is a result of the selective distortions that occur, as memories of the narrators constantly change.<sup>2</sup> This distortion can be a result of time. What it means is that over time, events are spiced up, altered and goes through a transformation totally dependent on the narrator's whims and fancies. Oral history is also trapped within its own limited perspective. This simply means that the narrator is trapped in the perspective that he intends to portray. And oral history is often influenced by non-native suggestions e.g. colonial writers. Here, colonial discourse can easily cloud the perceptions of the narrator. Finally, there might be a willful desire to replay the past in a particular way. Again, narratives change according to the mood of the narrator or the social setting he is in.

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Associate Professor A. Halim Ali on sharing his thoughts on Oral History and its problematic application. His paper, Halim (1997) might provide some useful insights on the matter.

The apparent inadequacies of the paper could be further attributed to a person who knows little or nothing about anthropological methods. This is coupled with the evident lack of understanding of the ordering of Murut society and the centrality of important concepts such as nation, kinship, blood feuds, head hunting and the importance of magic among the Muruts. Under these circumstances, one must seriously doubt the credibility of her paper. One wonders whether there is any real value to Sue Harris' description of the rebellion. Were her two main informants truly well versed in the narration of events? Or were they simply giving Sue Harris a nice story to bring back as she was so interested in the magical elements of the rebellion.

Another point that needs mention is the relationship between oral history or native narratives and normal history (as found in colonial records). At a societal level, there is an evolutionary process in which legends spring into history and historical reconstruction is about putting these pieces together, and by doing so, moving towards rationality.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately no such attempt was made by Sue Harris in this article. Harris continues to be trapped in the world of the exotic, where a nation launches a large scale rebellion and all that can be written about is the legendary aspects such as magical practices and the odd indigenous belief systems.<sup>4</sup> How far has this article escaped the crude colonial discourse that relate native rebellions to irrational and emotion driven behaviour? As Fraser commented on the Muruts; "they are like children, easily excited even to the point of hysteria and they are full of superstition" (Fraser, 1915). This does not imply that native narratives have no value. On the contrary, it plays a complementary role to normal

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<sup>3</sup> Again, my thanks to Associate Professor A. Halim Ali on his witty comments on the role of legends in anthropology.

<sup>4</sup> Based on Murut metaphysics, magic plays a central role in their daily life. All great warriors are said to be magicians. Among the Muruts, Tahang, the Sapulote Murut who began the Malingkote of 1891 was said to be a brave warrior and magician. Likewise, Onteros is also said to possess both attributes. In fact, even in World War II, a Murut by the name of Sergeant Korom, serving the British, was said to possess powerful magic. The most common types of magic attributed to warriors are invincibility, i.e. protected from all harm befalling him, and the inability to be hurt or killed by conventional weapons. The other is invisibility so as not to be seen by his enemies. Incidentally, Mat Salleh too was believed to possess magic and also said to be great warrior. This was one of the reasons for his large following.

history. For instance, an event is given more substance by combining different versions as done by the historical anthropologist, (for example, see Cohn, 1986, 1996; Keesing, 1990 and Fernandez, 1997). For instance, Fernandez (1997) provides an account of the advanced, well planned and rational rebellion built on concepts such as nation, a definitive political agenda and the quest for statehood by combining native narratives and colonial records. To our “colonial masters”, such a rebellion was unforeseeable and one wonders in amazement that, after 80 years, Harris’ article continues to be trapped in a colonial view of the Muruts.

### **A STEP BY STEP GUIDE LEADING TO THE RUNDUM REBELLION OF 1915**

The Rundum rebellion in North Borneo began in February 1915, peaked and ended by April 1915 not 1916 as noted by Sue Harris. Incidentally, it took a few more months until the region was totally pacified. The use of the term Tagol Murut to include all Muruts in Nabawan-Pensiangan, Tenom, Sipitang and Keningau is a linguistic categorization. This categorization cannot be applied to the Muruts of 1915. Firstly, they were river-based – meaning that every tribe was associated with a river and took the name of the river as their source of identity. Thus we have the Tagols, the Telekosons, the Sapulotes, the Selalirs etc. Their past was one of headhunting and inter-tribal blood feuds (Fernandez, 1997). Thus the category employed by Sue Harris might be true to an extent today, but in the past the various river-based Murut tribes were a world apart. In fact the use of the word Murut is a term alien to the tribes themselves. Harrison (1967: 111-129), asking a prominent Tagol chief on the name of his tribe and how he wanted to be identified, noted that they were Tagols because they resided at the river Tagol. This is actually in line with the native narratives collected and further substantiated in colonial records of the era.<sup>5</sup> I am opposed to starting

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<sup>5</sup> The following process was used to gather native narratives. Firstly, the Muruts were asked of any person who knew and could narrate on the Rundum Rebellion and on the ways of the past and based on consensus of different Muruts, I would look up the person in question. This resource person will suggest other knowledgeable narrators. The rule of thumb being that the Murut themselves know and suggest the best narrators on the basis of their knowledge of the rebellion and other matters. The screening of native

with the so called unity under the name of Tagol Murut because it acts to downplay the very efforts made by the rebel Antanum to unify these rivers i.e. the formation of a nation to oust colonial rule. It was never a unity created with a stroke of a pen but forged in blood. As for the name Antanum, the rebel, it is what is noted in all colonial records and every book ever commenting on the rebellion. However, in collecting native narratives, I have been corrected on numerous occasions and told that his real name was Onteros, and not Antanum.<sup>6</sup> To me it is odd that a researcher who spends a long duration (1984-1990) among the Tagols does not mention the man's real name.

Before I proceed any further, British intentions need to be further clarified. Governor Treacher (1890: 112) noted:

The company has paved the way to the ultimate extinction of the practice of slavery; it has dealt the final blow to the piracy and kidnapping which still lingered on at its coast; it had substituted one strong and just government for numerous weak, cruel and unjust ones; it had opened courts of justice which knows no distinction between rich and poor, between master and slave; it is rapidly adjusting ancient blood feuds between tribes and putting a stop to the old

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narratives gathered is done by focusing on narratives having not less than two identical or similar versions of the events in question. Where historical/colonial records are available native narratives are used in cross-reference to check the accuracy of the narrative collected. Narratives of the past is a scarce resource as only a few Muruts have actually paid any attention to knowing their past and are credible narrators. Those who just came forward to narrate the past to me after knowing I was studying the rebellion turned out to be not credible narrators. Other Muruts did not consider them knowledgeable and their narratives were based on a collection of hearsay or what they have read.

<sup>6</sup> Based on native narratives gathered in 1996. Native narratives here are based on the narratives narrated by Andayul b. Ampuli, Bakir b. Ansang, Tandon b. Andau, Manggas b. Mantau, Kurios b. Labu, Gambir b. Kapng, Malinau b. Kapang, Andul b. Ekup, Rikin b. Antiph, Olok b. Embak, Ampakat b. Anam, Eukuoi b. Asie and Lawrence b. Ampok. My field work would not have been successful without the assistance of the Tagols. Native narratives in this paper will take to mean narratives provided by one or more of the elders to me.

custom of head hunting; it has broken down the barrier erected by the coast Malays to prevent the aborigines having access to the outer world and is thus enabling trade and accompanying civilization to reach the interior races; and it is attracting European and Chinese capital to the country and opening markets for British traders.

British policy had two clear objectives. The first was to “civilize” the savage natives of North Borneo by abolishing piracy, slavery, blood feuds and head hunting. The second was the promotion and development of trade and making North Borneo economically viable to their London investors. It is no wonder then that these policies ran smack into trouble as it disrupted the Murut way of life.

With this in mind, Sue Harris’ paper has a few historical inaccuracies. The statement that it was only in 1910 that the Muruts (Tagols, in the article) were affected by colonial policies is simply incorrect. The imposition of poll-tax began on the eve of British rule. The Muruts had been influenced by a number of rebellions, even prior to 1915. For instance, the Padas-Klias affair of 1888 saw the Muruts under Dato Stia Bakti and Banessah contesting colonial rule. This was a large rebellion, boasting a force of 300 warriors. Their dissatisfactions arose from the banning of headhunting activities and the excessive debts incurred by trading.<sup>7</sup> The Muruts were up in arms again in 1889 in the Padas-Damit rebellion supporting a prominent Brunei Pangiran. Again the whole region was in uproar (Black, 1983). In 1890, the murder of Charles Flint resulted in a retaliatory massacre of the Tengaras (Murut) at the river Pigau, in central North Borneo.<sup>8</sup> In 1891, a Sapulote Murut warrior, Tahang, began a pseudo-religious movement called the Malingkote.<sup>9</sup> What is interesting is that the movement spread like wild fire and transcended cultural boundaries into other coastal communities, mainly the Dusuns. The sheer extent of the movement was worrisome to the

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<sup>7</sup> Davies to Governor, 28 March 1888, CO874/245. Also see Black (1971).

<sup>8</sup> G. Hewitt to Beaufort, 4 November 1890 and Raffles Flint to Chairman, 10 November 1890, CO874/250.

<sup>9</sup> Acting Governor Beaufort to Chairman, 23 June 1891 and Magistrate Wheatley to Governor Beaufort, 11 June 1891, CO874/251. Also see a brief description of the Malingkote by Wise (1894:201).

British because of the total destruction of crops and livestock. The Muruts of various rivers were hostile towards foreigners and 21 of them, mainly traders, were killed. It is in every sense an attempt to transform society or perhaps revert back to pre-colonial days (before the British).

There were other significant transformations that affected the region also. Traders grew in numbers and they played a crucial role in bringing the subsistence Muruts into a money economy. As all capitalists, it was a relationship that favored the traders and the Muruts were left to be exploited. As the famous explorer John Whitehead (1893: 34) said; "... by trading, the Muruts receive no more than one hundredth part of the value of barter with the Orang Sungai". Another feature of trade was the increasing debt situation that the Muruts fell into. As a result, it became one of the main sources of conflict between Muruts and traders, usually resulting in bloody British expeditions. With traders came more investment by the colonial government to further open up the region. The extent of change was dramatic. By 1905, the railways had reached Tenom (Kaur, 1994). The construction of a bridle path began in 1901 and had reached Rundum, Pensiangan and Sapulote country by 1907.<sup>10</sup> Thus the influx of traders mushroomed. With high numbers of outsiders arriving in the interior region, an outbreak of the smallpox followed in 1905-1906. The death toll in the coastal villages of Papar, Putatan, Tuaran, Beaufort and Jesselton alone totalled 2773 persons. The estimates for the interior region were presumably higher due to the lack of proper medical facilities.<sup>11</sup>

The introduction of Dayaks in Murut country not only resulted in burdensome and excessive taxes but also saw Murut laws violated and increased head hunting expeditions against them. A Murut Chief complained to Fraser (Black, 1981: 13):

... Taking and selling slaves, fining people at their own will, divorcing and fining their wives or relations without a proper inquiry according to Murut customs before the chiefs, and inciting others to raid, and at times accompanying raiders.

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<sup>10</sup> Construction of Bridle path, SGA File 834.

<sup>11</sup> Small-pox in North Borneo, SGA File 1061.



However, Sue Harris' comments on the Dayaks replacing the local chief are grossly inaccurate. They were in fact empowered by the British to administer the region and not replace the traditional chief of Murut long houses. They were to keep the peace, collect taxes, encourage trade and administer the region on the behalf of the British (Black, 1969).

In short, the Muruts, once isolated by difficult terrain and forest, were now open to foreigners. With the foreigners came exploitation, disease, slave labor (for building bridle paths) and death.

As far as the reason for the rebellion goes, Sue Harris' reliance on Black (1981) is accurate to a point. Firstly, the Ladang Ordinance of 1913,<sup>12</sup> on the requirement of natives obtaining permits for clearing forest for shifting cultivation, must surely have been an irritation to the Muruts. Likewise the Native Liquor Tax<sup>13</sup> was another point to further sour Murut-British relations. There are two arguments that I would like to highlight. First, the reports concerning the rebellion by Governor Parr to the Chairman, based on H.L. Bunbury's comments,<sup>14</sup> W.J. Worth's "Memorandum on the unrest in British North Borneo"<sup>15</sup> and F.W. Fraser's report to the Chairman<sup>16</sup> were conclusive in their view that the tax could not have caused the rebellion because, although it was introduced, it was not enforced in the interior region. W.J. Worth noted that the probable cause of the rebellion was the forced labour to build the bridle path as it was also the main reason for revolt of the Blayong. Native accounts found in W.J. Worth's report seem to suggest that these taxes were among the chief causes for the rebellion but this was rejected by the colonial officers as the tax was not imposed. Fraser, on the other hand, rejected any fault on the part of the British and their policies and attributed the cause of the rebellion to Onteros's opportunism.

The bridle path was rightly an issue among the Muruts. The difficulty involved did bring about the Blayong revolt in 1914 and native narratives suggest works on the path for durations up to 3 months in a

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<sup>12</sup> Shifting Cultivation – Ladang Ordinance, SGA File 284.

<sup>13</sup> Native Liquor Taxation, SGA File 1178.

<sup>14</sup> Parr to the Chairman British North Borneo, 11 April 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>15</sup> Memorandum on the unrest in North Borneo, W.J. Worth to Governor Pearson, 29 July 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>16</sup> F.W. Fraser to the Chairman British North Borneo Company, 22 September 1915, CO874/835.

year (Fernandez, 1999). This is highly likely as the Muruts were expected to construct a section of the path measuring 22 meters in length and 1.6 meters in width (Fernandez, 1999). Thus the estimated duration of 6-8 days as suggested by Fraser is impossible.<sup>17</sup>

The conventional notion of empty villages as a result of people fleeing into Dutch Borneo to avoid doing government works is also improbable. First, migration in this fashion is only possible if peace was a feature among the various Murut tribes. In reality, this was the age of blood feuds and no person or village is safe leaving their long house and the defensive parameters found surrounding a long house to ward off opposing head-hunting parties (Rutter, 1985). Under further scrutiny, we find that these reports were made around 1913 and onwards. These would be highly possible as native narratives suggest that Onteros had unified the Muruts of the various rivers and they were going to the river Silangit to assist in the construction of the fort. In fact all the elders I spoke to mentioned their parents or grandparents making trips to the fort when it was being constructed.<sup>18</sup> Not to mention that in the wake of the rebellion, not less than 60 villages were in a full-scale revolt against the British and these villages were found as far as the river Dalit in the north, the Telekoston and the Rundum watersheds in the west and center and the river Selalir in the south – incidentally, part of Dutch Borneo (Black, 1983). This is an indicator of the inter-river peace brought about by Onteros, which made the rebellion unique as it provided the basis for a Murut nation of intent.

## **THE RUNDUM REBELLION OF 1915**

Sue Harris' discussions on the rebellion are limited to describing the magical aspects of the rebellion, with focus on the attributes of Antanum. To her, Antanum was first and foremost a powerful magician who fought the British to free them from colonial rule. Her discussion fails to explain how he united the tribes. She just assumes they were united because they are one people speaking a common language and they were attracted to follow Antanum because of his magic. However,

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<sup>17</sup> F.W. Fraser to the Chairman British North Borneo Company, 22 September 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>18</sup> Based on native narratives gathered in 1996.

in the end, another Murut, Binandung, betrayed him resulting in his capture.<sup>19</sup> As Antanum could not be killed by normal means, he was killed only after he told the British how he could be killed i.e. with a sharpened bamboo or his sword. This is the gist of the rebellion according to Sue Harris. However, she made no attempt to conduct any inquiry into the accuracy of the narratives nor did she make any attempt to reconstruct the events of 1915 along rational lines. She paid no attention to how a Murut nation arose from nothing and covered a large region; how the fort was built; how the blood feuds ended; how labor was mobilized; how warfare was organized; how hierarchy of leadership to organize the rebellion was established; and the contribution of the Murut-British relationship prior to and after 1910 to the rebellion. Her mediocre skills in historical reconstruction is further evident by her failure to use colonial records on the rebellion to assist in a better understanding of the rebellion. I am quite aware that colonial records favour colonial discourse but they do provide detailed accounts of time, space and events. In short, her whole description of the Rundum rebellion is flawed on two counts. Firstly, she has made poor use of native narratives and therefore failed to get down to the essence of the rebellion. Secondly, she failed to use colonial records in understanding the rebellion. Historians to date have chosen the latter as their source of information in constructing the rebellion, as evident in the works of Black (1981), Rutter (1985) and Leong (1982). Sue Harris chose to be an anthropologist and by using anthropological methods created a pickle of things. She failed to use native narratives creatively and left many of the core questions I have outlined earlier unanswered.

As the social conditions facing the Muruts have already been highlighted and the discussions by Sue Harris on the rebellion dealt with, a brief overview of the rebellion is in order.

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<sup>19</sup> None of the narratives I collected can verify Sue Harris' accounts. There is nothing to suggest Binandung as a traitor. However, Binandung was noted as one of the ringleaders who surrendered along with Onteros, Ansukul and Kalur. I have also not been able to find any reference to him in the specified colonial records (CO874/834-835).

In February 1915, the interior region erupted into a full scale violent rebellion of extreme proportions. The extent of the rebellion came as a shock to the British as the region was said to be in state of tranquility.<sup>20</sup>

The extent of the rebellion also could be seen in the sheer size of the villages participating. Babaneau (1915) estimated that there were not less than 60 hostile villages. He further noted that "... we do not have a single friendly native in the district on whom we can rely as a guide or informant"<sup>21</sup>

The first attack occurred in Rundum where the colonial forces under N.B. Babaneau and C.H. Pearson were attacked by not less than 600-700 Murut warriors. The Murut forces were defeated with 12 killed and 20-30 wounded. This prompted the British to pay more attention to the seriousness of the rebellion and they assembled a larger force in the course of the next two months. In April, they began their expedition against the forces of Onteros at the Silangit River. The assault on the fort began on 14 April but caused little damage. The subsequent blockade was successful in cutting the water and food supplies to the fort. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the Muruts gave word that they intended to surrender. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, white flags were displayed and the hostages held were released. Bunbury sent his interpreters who secured \$800 in cash, some goods and two rifles. They also asked for the surrender of Onteros. Finally he and his two right hand men, Kalur and Ansakul came out and were immediately hand cuffed. After a brief inquiry, Bunbury had Onteros and his right hand men executed. That night the war raged on with the Muruts trying to escape the fort.<sup>22</sup>

The loss of human life was considerable to the Muruts. An estimated 350-400 Muruts were killed. A further 300 escaped. However the pacification of the Muruts did not come so fast. Late in April, eight telegraph linesmen were murdered by the people of the Mesopo. They also threatened to attack the company station in Keningau. It was not until September 1915 that the first surrenders occurred (Black, 1981: 20).

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<sup>20</sup> N.B. Babaneau to Resident Bunbury, 27 February 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>21</sup> N.B. Babaneau to Resident Bunbury, 27 February 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>22</sup> Bunbury to the Government Secretary, 24 April 1915, CO874/835.

Colonial versions of the rebellion are shabby, with an apologetic tone. It is based on colonial constructs of a savage and illogical Murut, incapable of reason and sophisticated planning. By focussing on the magical elements of the rebellion and highlighting the rebellion as legendary Sue Harris too failed to comprehend the complexities involved and the nature of a well planned and rational rebellion. The following are some points that will help better our understanding of the rebellion.

This rebellion marked a unified Murut nation against the colonials. By unifying the various head-hunting river-based villages, Onteros was able to bring to an end inter-village warfare, blood feuds and create a common enemy in the British. He was able to dictate policy on who was the enemy and directed violence towards them effectively. This is evident by the size of the Murut forces (numbering 600-700 warriors) throughout the rebellion against the British and their agents.

Onteros himself moved from being a charismatic leader to a great warrior and magician, by virtue of gaining a large following among the various rivers to follow him. His greater accomplishment was as a bureaucrat, who established a hierarchy of authority and built an elaborate fort, and organized attacks on the British. As far as the hierarchy of authority goes, Onteros, the supreme leader, was backed by his number two and three, Kalur and Ansukul. Other chiefs also played a prominent role in the rebellion, such as Ingkun, Chief of the Silangit, Singadu, Chief of the Telekoson, Mulang of the Talangkai and Antak.<sup>23</sup> What is important is that these influential chiefs of other rivers also played a dominant part in the rebellion. The extent of Murut unity and an elaborate hierarchy is evident even after the death of Onteros and his right hand men. The remainder of the warriors refused to surrender and pledged to fight to the death and hold the fort. It is extremely likely that other leaders had taken over and the region had continued to be plagued by violence for months after the rebellion. The building of the fort, too, is of extreme significance. Bunbury (1915) noted:

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<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Sue Harris' article, the Rundum rebellion was in actual fact not just a Tagol rebellion. It included warriors and chiefs of other rivers and villages. This is noted by Murut narratives that mention other leaders of the rebellion. This is further corroborated in colonial records, mainly CO874/835 and also in Black (1983).

The fort consist of seven underground houses, closely connected with each other. The hills were guarded by *undang* and *sula* (long and short sharpened bamboo stakes), thickly planted, a fence amid innumerable loopholes ... (and) the size of the fort measured 80 ft. by 30 ft.<sup>24</sup>

An important question is how such a fort could be built and how long it might have taken? According to native narratives, the fort took two rice planting seasons, i.e. 2 years.<sup>25</sup> It was built with the labour from villagers from various rivers. A point of importance is that Onteros was able to mobilize labor efficiently. Muruts from far away villages came and assisted in the construction of the fort. Various colonial records noted empty villages and attributed them to natives escaping their duties in the bridle path construction. However, it is more likely that they moved without threat of loss of life under Onteros to the river Silangit to construct a fort.

By unifying the various head-hunting river-based villages, Onteros was able to bring to an end inter-village warfare and blood feuds, and helped in creating a mutual enemy in the likes of the British. The government of Onteros was able to dictate policy as to who should be their enemy and, at the same time, end all other feuding. Onteros was able to end feuding among Muruts by focussing on non-Muruts such as the Dayaks and the British. This is evident from the creation of a large Murut army, combining various rivers, raiding as a nation. The size of Murut forces numbered between 700-900 warriors throughout the rebellion.

Another unifying factor of the Murut nation under Onteros is their common history and shared oppression. They shared a few similar characteristics such as living in isolation, practicing shifting cultivation, head-hunting and participating in inter-generational blood feuds. They were also the last group to be pacified by the colonials who were viewed as encroaching into their cultural practices such as head-hunting and blood-feuds. They were forced into constructing bridle paths; witnessed the opening up of the interior region through railways; saw the proliferation of trading activities and exploitation by traders; and

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<sup>24</sup> Bunbury to Government Secretary, 24 April 1915, CO874/835.

<sup>25</sup> Based on native narratives gathered in 1996.

endured the expansion of tobacco and rubber plantation. These changes, coupled with the Ladang Tax of 1913 and the Native Liquor Tax of 1913, sowed the feelings of discontentment. It provided the basis for Onteros to forge a nation on their collective experiences and exploitations.

This rebellion also marked a sense of systematic planning as it involved a full-scale war covering an extremely large area. The warfare against the colonials took new forms such as a marauding army of 700 warriors which is unknown in head hunting. According to Babaneau, the District Officer, the Muruts, in the wink of an eye, moved from being, 'friendly' natives to marauding warriors against the British. In short, there is everything to suggest an advanced system of information dissemination that helped to launch such a large scale assault on the British in the whole region at one go.

The rebellion, too, had clear objectives: the freedom of all Murut from exploitation. This was to be achieved by defeating the British and retaking the Murut country. It was Onteros who envisioned a Murut country where they would be free and not be forced to be laborers, or pay exploitative taxes. The goal was to live by Murut culture with no infringement by external forces on their way of life.<sup>26</sup>

The envisaged Murut territory was to cover an extremely large area, with the Dalit River in the north, encompassing the Telekoston and Rundum watersheds in the west and center and river Selalir in the South (a part of Dutch Borneo). It was estimated that over 60 villages were hostile towards the British and united to create a Murut country. It was these Murut villages that made up the imagined Murut nation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The writing of Malaysian historiography must transcend into the rewriting of our history and rejecting colonial discourse. This can be done by the effectively merging native narratives and colonial records so as to reproduce a more balanced construct of the past. It would be a step backward in our common goal if historical writing remains trapped

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<sup>26</sup> Based on native narratives gathered in 1996.

within the parameters of a legend – an event perceived to be true by certain groups yet laughed at by the larger community. Sue Harris has turned the greatest of Murut anti-colonial rebellions into a parody by not focussing on the essence of the rebellion and the intricate internal dynamics involved in building, and planning the rebellion. The Rundum Rebellion of 1915 is a documented historical fact and emphasizing the legendary aspects diminishes its significance to Malaysian and Murut historiography.

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