

Note

Rizal, Aguinaldo and North Borneo

THE British North Borneo Company, chartered in 1881, controlled territory granted by the Sultans of Brunei and Sulu in 1877-78. The grant by the Sultan of Sulu had prompted protests from Spain, the ruling power in the Philippines, of which it claimed Sulu, and thus the Sulu dependencies in northern Borneo, were a part. A tripartite Anglo-Spanish-German agreement of 1885 was intended to settle the issue by defining the imperial frontiers in the area: Spain withdrew the claim to North Borneo, which subsequently became a British protectorate. These frontiers survived the Filipino revolution against Spain and the take-over by the Americans in 1898. They were to be challenged in the post-colonial era by the Philippines claim to Sabah. This context adds to the interest of an episode in the life of José Rizal, the polymath who inspired the Filipino nationalist movement.

In April 1892, L. P. Beaufort, the acting Governor of North Borneo, reported to the Directors of the British North Borneo Company in London that Rizal had visited the capital, Sandakan:

He says that the Tagal[og] people there are so oppressed by the Spaniards that they want to emigrate en masse, and having met Mr Pryer on his way out from Europe his attention had been called to this country. I think it likely that he will take up some land either from the Development Company or from some other Company that has cleared land to dispose of. He informed me that the people he represents are very peaceful and are good agriculturists and ship-bulders. He asked no concession but came to learn whether natives receive fair treatment here. I could not discover that he had formed any very clear scheme of operations; but he said that he had already formed a wealthy syndicate with a view to emigration. . . .¹

Rizal had come to believe that the Propaganda movement of the Filipino nationalists in Spain must transfer its efforts to the Philippines: little was to be expected from the politicians in Madrid.² On board a French ship going out to the East late in 1891, he had travelled with W. B. Pryer, previously the Chartered Company's Resident in Sandakan and now manager of the British North Borneo Development Corporation,³ and had charmed his wife Ada.⁴ In Hong Kong he had subsequently made the acquaintance of H. L. Dalrymple, the Chartered Company's agent. In January he sent Pryer details of his project. He wished to secure land by sale or 999-year lease; but to found more than a mere settlement. The object was 'the creation of a free, independent and happy people', and the

settlers were to 'rule themselves in accordance with their own usages and laws', and 'be judged by their own judges and juries'. Pryer invited Rizal to Sandakan to discuss details.⁵ The result was inconclusive. Alexander Cook, acting Government Secretary, appears to have offered a free grant of 5000 acres, which was not confirmed by Beaufort.⁶

Rizal had meanwhile informed Despujol, the Governor-General of the Philippines, of his project. To assure the tranquillity of his régime, Rizal and his followers would go into voluntary exile in North Borneo, he declared. He sought permission for them to change their nationality, liquidate their possessions, emigrate. The reply was discouraging: it was not very patriotic to take men out of the Philippines to cultivate foreign soil when the Philippines was short of men. The Governor-General was 'opposed, indeed very much opposed, to it'.⁷

In his biography of Rizal, Guerrero presents Borneo as an alternative to 'Cuba', to revolution,⁸ and several of Rizal's associates, he believes, saw Borneo as an asylum.⁹ But perhaps the Spaniards did not view the proposed colony in so favourable a light. Some of the Company officials certainly were to suggest that the idea contributed to Rizal's arrest. Some years later, Alexander Cook wrote that Rizal 'proposed in 1892 to settle a large number of Philipinos in North Borneo in the Benkoka River and visited Sandakan with that purpose in mind but no actual terms were offered, or agreed to, and the visit to Borneo and projected emigration from the Philippines appear to have led to his arrest in 1892 and exile to Mindanao'.¹⁰

At times Rizal himself does appear to have seen the North Borneo colony as an asylum. 'We can found a new Kalamba', he wrote to his Austrian admirer Blumentritt, using the name of his home town in the province of Laguna; a haven for the exiled and the persecuted.¹¹ Yet some of his associates recognized something else in it besides. Antonio Luna saw it not only as 'a new asylum', but 'a keystone for us'.¹² Lopez Jaena, who, as Guerrero says, wished to dedicate himself to sugar-planting in North Borneo, at the same time praised Rizal's 'idea of founding in that colony a town of Filipinos, the centre from which later will spring the redemption of our Archipelago'.¹³ It seems possible that Rizal, too, saw in a colony in North Borneo a possible source of revolution in the Philippines in the longer term. The Liga Filipina, conceived at this time, may have had revolutionary purposes, as Guerrero suggests. Rizal had written to Despujol offering his services, either as a cover or, more likely, Guerrero adds, as an alternative.¹⁴ But Borneo may have been more than another alternative, and the letter about it that Rizal sent to Despujol was thus intended as something of a threat. Whatever the intention, it probably seemed to be a threat, and the threat rebounded.

Perhaps Cook realized this. But North Borneo officials viewed the idea of Filipino immigration with interest, and without apprehension, even after the Filipino revolution had begun in 1896. True, it was during the Biyak-na-bato truce that the Commissioner of Lands, Henry Walker, wrote to Birley Dalrymple and Company in Hong Kong early in 1898, offering the late leaders of the revolution now in Hong Kong the option of settling in North Borneo on, as he put it, somewhat similar terms to those offered to Rizal.

Unfortunately Dr Rizal's proposal was objected to by the Authorities in Manila and I believe it ultimately led to his being persecuted by the Philippine Government.

At that time Dr Rizal proposed to make a settlement near Kudat on the Benkoka River, but I have now no hesitation in saying that the Padas District is the most suitable,

being connected as it now is with the telegraph cable to Hong Kong and Manila by the Station at Labuan and also because a Railway is now being constructed up the Padas valley which will afford easy means of Transport from the Interior where there are large plains with a pleasant climate suitable for tobacco, rice and cattle grazing, and where the hills rise up to 10,000 feet affording elevations suitable for coffee, tea and other subtropical plants. In this district too, Manila hemp (*musa textiles*) grows wild in immense quantities and would alone sustain a considerable industry. . . .

The agents could give free passage to two or three Filipino delegates from Hong Kong who might discuss the idea in Sandakan. The Company would make a free grant of 20 acres per adult and allow the purchase of 160 acres in a square block at \$1.50 per acre. Anyone with a capital of £5 sterling per acre could purchase 1000 acres on those terms. Above that the cost would be the normal price: \$12 per acre for tobacco land, \$3 for other land.¹⁵

The agents reported in March that 'the matter is not a very easy one to negotiate as the men who are still in the Colony are very naturally not in good repute, and we understand do not speak any English'.¹⁶ In May they reported that they had still 'not succeeded in getting an interview arranged with the Rebel leader in the Philippines, one E. Aguinaldo; we do not think the man is or has been in the Colony for some time past, and the last we heard of his whereabouts was in Singapore, he was expected here a few days back but we cannot hear of his arrival: it is quite likely that he has in some round about way found it in his interest to return to Manila. The movements of this individual are much shrouded in mystery, and his place of abode seems to be always doubtful'.¹⁷ Indeed the Americans had just destroyed the Spanish fleet, and Aguinaldo was on his way to Manila. In Singapore he had been talking to the American consul, E. Spencer Pratt, with Howard W. Bray as the interpreter.¹⁸ This man appears in the North Borneo story the following year.

By late 1898 it had become clear that the Americans, having defeated the Spaniards, intended to retain the Philippines, and growing tension between them and the Filipinos broke out into hostilities by February 1899. In May 1899 W. E. Roberts, of the North Borneo Trading Company, received a letter from 'a gentleman of great influence among the Filipinos' in continuation of a conversation in Hong Kong. If the American flag was to fly permanently over the Philippines, he, 'in company with many more Filipinos', intended 'clearing out'. If favourable conditions were offered, they would colonize Banggi, an island off the tip of northern Borneo. The conditions included the right to ban the immigration of Chinese into the concession, and the right to administer justice 'more or less under the Spanish Filipino code'.¹⁹ Walker was again interested. Banggi was a possibility: so also the lands along the railway line. But he suggested that a delegate should be sent to investigate what was available.²⁰

The 'chief mover' of the scheme, Roberts' contact, was Bray, formerly, as Cook explained to the Directors, employed by the great English merchant house in Manila, Smith Bell & Company. Like Rizal, Cook noted, Bray wanted to have the Filipino code of laws in force. But the Sandakan authorities thought 'that if our system of village administration . . . were explained . . . this matter need not form a bar to the settlement of Phillipinos in North Borneo and also that the need of any extraordinary terms would disappear if a deputation could be got to visit our territory and to examine for themselves the state of the Chinese who live happily under our administration and laws'. Could the North Borneo authorities offer the same terms as suggested in 1898? 'We confess that as

matters now stand we do not anticipate any immediate results from the opening up of negotiations by Mr Bray as the Americans appear to be inclined to allow autonomy to the Phillipinos in which case they may not wish to leave the Philippines, but the fact of a large number of exiles 300 or 400 having made a temporary home in Sandakan and also of an increasing trade between the Philippines and Sandakan we think that it would be well to publish what terms we can offer.²¹

The Court of Directors drew back. Their objection was to the conditions Bray, like Rizal, seemed to require. 'All Natives and others arriving into the country must accept and abide by the Company's laws.'²² Neither the Court, nor the Company officials, seemed to be concerned at the prospect of harbouring revolutionaries.

Perhaps it was not inconsistent with this complacency that the Company entertained some hope during 1898-9 of securing Sulu, though the British were careful not to offend the Americans.²³ In fact the boundaries settled among the older imperial powers were unaffected (save for a dispute over the offshore islands) by abortive revolution and trans-Pacific imperialism. The revolution had produced the idea of an association between the Philippines and the rest of the Malay world.²⁴ Later Filipino nationalists were to see North Borneo in this context,²⁵ and President Macapagal, in putting forward a claim to North Borneo, also propounded the concept of a 'greater Malay Confederation'.²⁶ But he may also have had in mind the threat to the security of the Philippines of a possibly unfriendly regime in North Borneo. It was the sort of apprehension that probably affected Despujol seventy years earlier.

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NOTES

¹ Beaufort to Martin, 8 April 1892, No. 109, C.O. 874/252, Public Record Office, London.

² J. N. Schumacher, *The Propaganda Movement*, Manila, 1973, pp. 220ff.

³ K. G. Tregonning, 'William Pryer, The Founder of Sandakan', *Journal Malayan Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, XXVII, 1 (May 1954), 48.

⁴ Austin Coates, 'The Philippines National Hero: Rizal in Sandakan', *Sarawak Museum Journal*, X (1962), 538-40.

⁵ L. M. Guerrero, *The First Filipino*, Manila, 1963, pp. 320-1.

⁶ Coates, p. 550.

⁷ Guerrero, pp. 321-2, 327.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 319, 223.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 320.

¹⁰ Cook to Martin, 5 July 1899, No. 204, C.O. 874/264.

¹¹ Rizal to Blumentritt, 23 February 1892, *The Rizal-Blumentritt Correspondence*, Manila, 1962, II, 2, 436.

¹² *Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformists*, Manila, 1963, p. 656.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 690.

¹⁴ Guerrero, pp. 315-8.

¹⁵ Walker to Birley and Dalrymple, 8 February 1898, C.O. 874/264.

¹⁶ Birley and Dalrymple to Walker, 11 March 1898, C.O. 874/264.

¹⁷ Birley and Dalrymple to Walker, 3 May 1898, C.O. 874/264.

¹⁸ T. A. Agoncillo, *Malolos. The Crisis of the Republic*, Quezon City, 1960, p. 123.

¹⁹ Roberts to Walker, 13 May 1899, C.O. 874/264.

²⁰ Walker to Roberts, n.d. [?May 1899], C.O. 874/264.

²¹ Cook to Martin, 5 July 1899, No. 204, C.O. 874/264.

²² Cowie to Commissioners, 8 September 1899, No. 243, C.O. 874/313.

²³ See my forthcoming book, *Sulu and Sabah*, chapter 5.

²⁴ Cf. C. A. Majul, *Apolinario Mabini Revolutionary*, Manila, 1964, p. 204.

²⁵ See, e.g., *Philippines Herald*, 26 November 1922.

²⁶ Statement at press conference, 27 July 1962, D. Macapagal, *The Philippines Turns East*, Quezon City, 1966, pp. 28-30.

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