

The Mat Salleh Uprisings, 1895-1903

by

D.S. Ranjit Singh

"At any rate, you will admit that your Company cannot prevent us from dying for what we think are our rights".¹

These words were uttered with some emotion by Mohammed Salleh or Mat Salleh, the famous Sabah fighter to William C. Cowie, the Managing Director of the British North Borneo Company (BNBC) who had personally come from London on a special mission to arrange peace talks with him. Cowie was convinced of his own cause, though the senior Company officials in Sabah strongly disapproved of Cowie's line of action. Cowie also had great regard for, and tremendous faith in Mat Salleh, so that despite forebodings by the Company officials, he was prepared to meet Mat Salleh alone, unarmed. This personal meeting to persuade Mat Salleh to lay down his arms was held on 19 April 1898 at Kampung Palatan in Ulu Menggatal. During the discourse, Mat Salleh aired his grievances, but Cowie replied that they were not just ones. It was in reply to Cowie's remarks that Mat Salleh uttered the words quoted above. These words succinctly and appropriately capture the philosophical tenor of the armed resistance he had been leading against Company rule since 1895. Mat Salleh raised the banner of revolt to fight for rights which he believed belonged inalienably to the indigenous people and which the Company, as an intruder, had either taken away, or destroyed.

A number of researchers have written on the subject.² but Mat Salleh's struggle continues to evoke the greatest emotions and awe, at least locally in Sabah, and at the same time defy a through and conclusive explanation. This is particularly so because Mat Salleh's armed struggle was a series of

campaigns, spread over a long period of time, comprising different stages and involving different settings and different groups of people. The uprisings shook the foundations of Company rule, affected an area from Sandakan right across to Gaya Island, including the interior, especially Tambunan, and involved almost all the major communities of Sabah at one time or another with the exception perhaps of the Murut. It is difficult to comprehend, let alone explain, such wide-spread support, given the heterogeneous nature of the population in terms of ethnicity, religious belief systems, political systems, economic pursuits and the absence of a common political identity. Paradoxically however, the answer may well lie in the nature, structure and the workings of traditional society itself.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAT SALLEH'S CAMPAIGNS

Mohammad Salleh was of a mixed parentage. His father, Datu Balu, was of Suluk origin and formerly the Sulu Chief of part of the Sugut River. His mother was a Bajau. He was born in Kampung Inanam³ and later married a relative of the Sultan of Sulu named Dayang Bandang. Mat Salleh seems to have inherited his father's position and was acting in the manner of a traditional Sulu Datu in the Sugut river in 1894, though it is unclear whether he had the sanction of the Sultan of Sulu. He also did not have the Company's authority to his position. He had a number of houses on the Sugut River and one on Jambongan Island.⁴ Moreover Company presence in the Sugut, Paitan and Labuk was minimal. Like the old days when central authority was weak, local chiefs who had influence and power regulated trade and protected the local inhabitants from excessive exploitation by outside traders. Mat Salleh was doing just that in the Sugut River. Another problem arose when the government imposed poll-tax and passes for boats on local communities. These new taxes were considered as an infringement of native rights. In 1894 the Company established a customs station on Jambongan Island under a native clerk, not so much as to provide any semblance of administration, but mainly to have greater control over the taxation of commerce in the region.⁵ These developments came into direct conflict with Mat Salleh's perceived role.

THE SANDAKAN AND JAMBONGAN AFFAIR, 1895

In exercising his traditional role, especially protecting the local population against the undue demands of outside traders, Mat Salleh and his followers were purported to have killed two Iban traders on the Sugut River in 1894. The Company gave orders for his arrest, but Mat Salleh submitted to government and promised to follow the law whereby he was let off lightly.⁶ On 17 August 1895 however, Mat Salleh visited Sandakan with a large body of armed men together with a number of dissatisfied traditional chiefs with

the aim of bringing before the government a series of grousers and obtaining redress. These chiefs petitioned against the collection of poll-tax and the imposition of passes on boats by Government Chiefs. Mat Salleh and his men waited in the harbour for two days for an audience with the Governor or his representatives. However, the principal officers of the government at Sandakan, including the Governor, C.V. Creagh, the Resident of the East Coast, Mr. Barraut, and the Adjutant-in-Charge, Mr. Jones were away on another expedition. The only senior officer available was Alexander Cook, the Treasurer-General, who made no attempt to receive the delegation. There was a general fear amongst the residents that Mat Salleh would sack Sandakan. Contrary to their beliefs, Mat Salleh sailed away after two days of waiting, feeling slighted and snubbed.⁷ He also seemed to have formed the opinion that the Company was irresponsible and did not have the interest of the inhabitants at heart. He had come looking for redress and this was denied. He felt a deep sense of injustice which left a lasting mark on him.

These impressions were reinforced when the Company sent a strong force on 29 August 1895 to his house in Jambongan to apprehend him and four of his followers on the grounds that they had disturbed the peace in Sandakan and that the four men were implicated in the murder of the two Ibans in 1894. Mat Salleh promised to deliver the four men personally at Sandakan, but the Company's officers were adamant and issued an ultimatum to him. Upon Mat Salleh's refusal to comply, his house and village were attacked, burned, and looted by the Company's forces. Some of his personal belongings, including his expensive boat, were confiscated. Mat Salleh made his escape, but became a hunted man as the Government issued a reward of \$500 for his capture.⁸ This high-handed action of the Company caused Mat Salleh to lose complete faith in the Company. It was a turning point in his career - from that instant he declared war on the intruder.

THE ULU SUGUT, LABUK AND PAITAN EPISODES, 1895-1897

Within a month, Mat Salleh had consolidated his position at Lingkabau, some fifty miles up the Sugut River. With the support of the Kadazandusun community there, he had built a strong fort for himself. The Company sent another expedition in October 1895, which again failed to capture Mat Salleh, though the fort was destroyed and about sixty Kadazandusun arrested for helping in the construction of the fort.

Having been displaced from the Sugut, Mat Salleh soon established himself on the Labuk with his headquarters at Limbawan. The people of the Labuk rallied behind him, accepting him as their chief. They built a substantial fort for him and refused to pay poll-tax to the Company. In September 1896, Government forces planned a massive operation in an effort

to surround Limbawan and cut off all escape routes for Mat Salleh. Consequently, Company forces approached Limbawan from three directions, that is, from the Sugut, the Paitan and Kudat. The expedition however was a costly failure. On 25 September 1896, the fort was captured and destroyed, but Mat Salleh and his followers could not be apprehended. By March 1896 he had built another fort at Padang on the Ulu Sugut.⁹

THE GAYA RAID, 1897

From Padang, Mat Salleh quietly moved to Inanam, his birthplace, on the West Coast and from there planned to give the Company a taste of its own medicine. On 9 July 1897 he made a lightning attack on the Company's principal trading station on the West Coast on Gaya Island, and razed it to the ground.

The Company's government was visibly shaken. On the other hand, Mat Salleh's reputation increased in the eyes of the local people who now saw him as a hero and a liberator. With the immense support that he enjoyed, he was able to move with ease and establish forts at different points within short periods of time. After the attack on Gaya, he moved to a fort on the Soan on the Labuk, and then to another in the neighborhood of Paranchangan on the Sugut. Repeated attempts to capture him failed. Mat Salleh was making the government look hopeless and helpless.

In November 1897, Mat Salleh took the offensive again and made another surprise attack on the West Coast, this time burning the Government Residency at Ambong in the process. He then retired to his new impregnable fort at Ranau.

THE RANAU ENCOUNTER, 1897

The Government was in a flurry and made hurried preparations to attack the Ranau fort.¹⁰ A concerted attempt was made to siege the fort on 13 December 1897. A force of 250 Ibans and Kadazandusun surrounded the fort while 38 Sikhs and Pathans waited for the final attack. The fort was shelled continuously by a 7-pounder gun in the morning. At noon the Sikhs and Pathans were given the order to storm the structure. The attacking party however could not penetrate the defenses and lost five men, including the Police Adjutant, Jones and four Sikhs. Where upon the expedition was withdrawn and returned to Sandakan.

A fresh attempt was made on 5 January 1898 and achieved success on 9 January, but by then Mat Salleh and his men had deserted the fort. In the months that followed, they established their new headquarters at Tambunan in the interior.

THE PALATAN PEACE PACT, 1898

It was in these circumstances, when the West Coast was in turmoil, and the Company's administration in a precarious position, that Cowie decided to come down from London to make peace with Mat Salleh. In his attempt to bring Mat Salleh over to the Company's side, Cowie made use of his long-standing friendship with the Sulu royal house. Upon Cowie's request, the Sultan of Sulu wrote a letter dated 17 January 1898 to Dayang Bandang urging for a peaceful settlement with Cowie.¹¹ This culminated in the historic April 19th meeting between Cowie and Mat Salleh at Palatan in Ulu Menggatal.

During the talks, Cowie appealed to Mat Salleh to submit to the Government with the offer that Mat Salleh and his followers would be given free pardon. Mat Salleh said he would accept the offer on two conditions: that his men who were in goal were released, and that he be allowed to stay at Inanam. Cowie turned down both these requests but instead offered to allow him to stay in Tambunan or any part of the interior, except the Ulu Sugut and Ulu Labuk, his former strongholds. After some deliberation with his group, Mat Salleh agreed to Cowie's terms. As a gesture of goodwill, Cowie made an additional promise to the effect that,¹²

If he kept the peace for twelve months and otherwise showed himself friendly to the Government, I would send him a present and recommend him to the Court of Directors for an appointment as Chief or headman of a district.

With this, the meeting ended in a most cordial manner. In the evening Mat Salleh sent Cowie his spear and kris (Malay sword) as a mark of submission, but Cowie in high diplomatic tradition returned them. On 20 April 1898, Cowie, the Governor L.P. Beaufort, and two officers, P. Wise and A.C. Pearson met the warrior again at the former's village. Terms were discussed again, and this time the Company's representative offered to **"allow [Mat Salleh] to live in the Interior and take charge of the Tambunan district"**.¹³

After this second meeting, messages were sent to Mat Salleh requesting him to give his final answer by 22 April when a ceremony was to be held to take official possession of the Menggatal River.¹⁴ On the appointed date, as the take-over ceremony was being concluded, Mat Salleh appeared and offered his submission, telling his own countrymen present that **"from this time on he was on the side of government"**. He then took an oath of allegiance before the Holy Koran.

On 23 April 1898 a document was drawn up and sent to Mat Salleh for signature. The principal terms were as follows:¹⁵

1. Mat Salleh and his men were pardoned, except those still in prison, or those who had escaped from goal.

2. Mat Salleh was to be allowed to stay in Tambunan or elsewhere in the interior, except the Sugut and Labuk Rivers.
3. He had to report to the District Officer concerned if he visited the coast.

Mat Salleh signed the document though he expressed apprehension and dissatisfaction with the written terms which he felt were not totally in accord with the verbal promises given to him. The document for example made no mention of Cowie's promise of an appointment after twelve months of good behaviour or the one which placed him charge of the Tambunan District. There was also no mention of him being allowed to eventually return to Inanam, a promise made probably during the second meeting, but not recorded by Cowie then, though reference to such an offer is subsequently made in Cowie's diary and the Company's correspondence.¹⁶

THE LAST STAND AT TAMBUNAN, 1900

Though rumours began to filter-in indicting that Mat Salleh was abrogating his agreement with the Company, it is fair to say that he was willing to give the peace accord a trial and a grace period of at least twelve months. In the following few months, Mat Salleh was busy consolidating his position in Tambunan. He had the support of one section of the inhabitants there, the Tegas Dusun, while another community, the Tiawan Dusun, opposed him. It was only a matter of time before Mat Salleh and his allies, the Tegas were thrown into a state of warfare with the Tiawan, a situation the Company's Government felt was good enough reason to bring Mat Salleh to book.

From the beginning however it was obvious that the peace pact was doomed to failure. Cowie had been most unrealistic and to an extent insincere in offering Mat Salleh the Tambunan District. At the second meeting, it was clear that Mat Salleh was given charge of the said District. Mat Salleh rightfully interpreted this to mean that he had complete jurisdiction over Tambunan and that the Company would not interfere in anyway with the affairs of the place. Cowie cannot be absolved from having lent his promises open to such an interpretation. He himself must have been aware of the implications, and that being the case, he was being untruthful as such a course was diametrically opposed to Company objectives. It was clear that it was only a matter of time before the Company extended its jurisdiction over Tambunan and the rest of the interior. In fact in the 1890s, Cowie had drawn up grand designs for opening the interior to capitalist enterprise. Under his direction the Company embarked upon an ambitious plan to build a system of bridle-paths and a railway line linking the West Coast with the interior. A telegraph line spanning the country and connecting Labuan with Sandakan was also agreed upon.¹⁷ Under the circumstances it would be naive

to assume that the Company would not extend its jurisdiction over Tambunan, a process which would surely be interpreted by Mat Salleh as a breach of faith. It was inconceivable how Mat Salleh could retain his semi-independent position in Tambunan in the face of this forward policy. From the beginning therefore it was evident that Mat Salleh's position at Tambunan was untenable, based on a false premise, and bound to lead, eventually to a serious crisis between him and the Company.

In the process of building the telegraph line, two new stations were established in the interior: one at Sapong in 1895 and another at Keningau in 1896, each under a European Officer. The appointment of F.W. Fraser as District Office at Keningau in 1898 signaled the extension of Company rule to Tambunan.¹⁸ Meanwhile in Tambunan the attempt by Mat Salleh and the Tegas to subdue the Tlawan led to urgent appeals by the latter for Company intervention. On 15 January 1899 the Governor, Beaufort, and Fraser visited the Tlawan villages and obtained an oath of allegiance from the inhabitants.¹⁹ The Government also made plans to establish an administrative centre at Tambunan. Mat Salleh considered these acts as violations of the promises given to him and prepared for war.

The Court of Directors, especially Cowie, belatedly realised that the Company had gone back on its word. In a letter dated 3 December 1899, he wrote to the authorities in North Borneo advising caution in establishing a government station at Tambunan and recommended that Mat Salleh be appointed Government Chief at Tambunan on a salary of \$30 per month as the twelve months bond on good behaviour on the part of Mat Salleh had long passed. Cowie admitted that the Company was largely to blame for Mat Salleh's reaction. He wrote:²⁰

... the fact that the Company have so far failed to fulfill my promise, it is not difficult to conceive that his movements were dictated by a dread that a treacherous combination against him was on foot. We have unfortunately been guilty of an oversight, and some explanation is due to Mat Salleh.

Cowie's attempts to redress the situation had come too late. Mat Salleh had become thoroughly disillusioned with, and mistrustful of the Company and was in no mood for a compromise. In December 1899, R.M. Little, the Resident at Labuan was instructed to initiate negotiations, but Mat Salleh demanded the withdrawal of the Government establishment in Tambunan as a precondition. With this failure, both sides prepared for hostilities.²¹

Immediately, Mat Salleh's forces began conducting sporadic attacks on Government stations on the West Coast. The Company on its part organised a force of 140 men and a seven-pounder gun led by Captain C.H. Harrington. The force reached Tambunan on 31 December 1899 and fighting commenced

on 1 January 1900. On the 10th, the village of Laland was taken by Government forces in a fierce encounter. Mat Salleh lost sixty men and the Company one. On 15 January 1900, the Tega village of Teboh capitulated upon which most other Tega villages surrendered. Government forces scored a major victory subsequently when the fort of one of Mat Salleh's chief lieutenants, Mat Jotor, was burned by shell-fire. Mat Salleh suffered a further serious setback when the Company's police cut-off water supply to his fort by diverting the Pengkalan River to the Sensuran. On 27 January, his fort was sieged and shelled continuously for the next four days. It was later confirmed that Mat Salleh was killed by shell-fire at mid-day on 31 January 1900. The fort was occupied the following day, but it was mostly deserted except for some women and children. Mat Salleh's wife, Dayang Bandang and his son and two daughters also survived and were later sent back to Sulu. So ended the Mat Salleh saga. A memorial stone erected in his honour still stands at Kampung Tebabar, Tambunan and reads as follows:²²

This plaque marks the site of Mat Salleh's fort, which was captured by the North Borneo Armed Constabulary on the 1st February, 1900. During this engagement Mat Salleh, who for 6 years had led a rebellion, met his death.

Though Mat Salleh's stronghold at Tambunan was taken and Mat Salleh himself perished in the encounter, some of his lieutenants and men managed to escape and carried on the struggle. On 28 April 1900, two of his comrades, Mat Sator and Mat Daud, attacked Kudat with a force of more than three hundred Bajau. Substantial damage was done to Kudat before Company forces were able to dislodge the attackers. Mat Sator and Mat Daud however died in the counter-attack mounted by the Company's police.²³

The fight against the Company was taken up by other leaders, such as Komunta and Si Langkap and throughout 1901, the Tempasuk, Tuaran and Menggatal area experienced sporadic attacks. The Company's forces were kept busy for the next two years during which concerted counter-attacks and repeated expeditions finally led to the surrender of most of the remaining leaders and men. Thus the uprisings started by Mat Salleh in 1895 ended after a long guerrelling struggle in 1903, almost three years after his death. In 1901, the new Governor of North Borneo, E.W. Birch, sensing that Bajau resistance was nearing its end, recorded:²⁴

I told them [the Bajau] in homely language that their day was over and that now they would learn that the Government was the Raja of Borneo and that they must keep their promises so often broken in the past and obey the Raja's rule.

DIMENSIONS OF MAT SALLEH'S STRUGGLE

Before attempting an explanation of Mat Salleh's struggle, it may be worthwhile noting some of the characteristics of his campaigns against the

Company. Two important dimensions are the nature of the support for his cause and the military and strategic element. It may be said that the core of his supporters and fighting force was composed of the Bajau-Suluk element. This is understandable in the sense that Mat Salleh was behaving basically as a traditional Bajau-Suluk Chief. In such a system, the Bajau-Suluk Muslim coastal communities had always played such a role. Mat Salleh was able to marshal retainers from both communities, especially the Bajau due to his mixed parentage and also his links with the Sulu royal house through his marriage.

However, the more-important aspect of Mat Salleh's success was due to the fact that he was able to garner support from Kadazandusun communities spread over a wide area, a feat seldom achieved by Suluk or Bajau Chiefs in the past. These Kadazandusun communities were instrumental in providing him with a number of power bases, for the supply of food necessities, and for the construction of impregnable forts. The Lingkabau fort for example had been constructed by the Kadazandusun community of Sungai-Sungai, sixty of whom were arrested by the Company after the fort had fallen. The Ranau fort received its food supplies from the surrounding Kadazandusun population even when the fort was in the midst of Company attack, thus placing themselves at great risk and possibly inviting government retaliation. At Tambunan Mat Salleh was able to entrench his position with the support of his Tega allies, though the Tiawan refused to submit to his jurisdiction.

In terms of military strategy, such widespread support gave Mat Salleh two advantages. One was that he was able to have at his disposal a number of well-constructed forts from which he could defend his position and the second, the greatest amount of mobility. The Tambunan case was an exception. Many of the forts were constructed with great speed but with the greatest of intricacy and military sense. Within a space of three years, from 1895 to 1897, Mat Salleh had at his disposal at least six forts, which in itself was a testimony to the resources and manpower he could mobilise at short notice. These forts, at Lingkabau, Padang and Paranchangan on the Labuk; at Limbawan and Soan on the Sugut, and one at Ranau, not only gave Mat Salleh complete control of the vast Sugut-Labuk-Paitan region, but made it practically impossible for Company forces to apprehend him. Mat Salleh was a brilliant military strategist; the structure of the forts afforded him security; the availability of others, mobility. A picture of how carefully these forts were designed may be gleaned from the description of the Ranau fort:²⁵

The fort was a most extra-ordinary place and without the guns [the Company's seven-pounders] would have been absolutely impregnable. The buildings covered three sides of a square, the fourth side being closed by a stone wall. The whole square was 22 yards by 20 and the fact that over 200 shells burst inside will give some idea of its strength, the en-

emy still remaining in possession. The walls of the building were of stone, 8 feet thick with numerous large bamboos built into them for loopholes. The whole fort was surrounded with three bamboo fences ... and the ground between was simply covered with 'sudah' (bamboo spikes) ... On the inside of the square the loopholes were also very cunningly arranged to repel internal attack. There was neither exit nor entrance to the buildings and had an attacking force, no matter how strong, succeeded in reaching the middle of the square they would have been no nearer capturing the place than if they had stayed away, and they would have been shot down like sheep by an invisible foe without the possibility of returning the fire.

As has been noted, the capture of these forts by the Company's forces did not have a devastating effect on Mat Salleh. He was always able to make his escape, and find another fort awaiting him. It was the Company which was faced with a dilemma, not Mat Salleh. The circumstances of the Tambunan case were quite different as they related to another stage of the struggle.

AN ASSESSMENT

Having laid the facts of the case it now becomes imperative to make some sense of this immense upheaval. What was Mat Salleh fighting for? How was he able to garner support from a vast area, over a prolonged period of time from different settings and communal bases? Was there a unity of purpose, affinity-of-interests and objectives? From the onset it may be said that Mat Salleh was not fighting a nationalist war. There was no nationalist sentiment in the modern sense of the word at that time in Sabah. Neither was he fighting to establish an independent Sultanate or a Malay *Negeri* with its paraphernalia of a Royal Court and attendant structure. Another point to note is that Mat Salleh fought mainly a defensive war and took the offensive only in extreme circumstances. He was a man of high honour and integrity in many ways; he could have attacked Sandakan in 1895, when it was extremely vulnerable, but he withdrew as a gentleman; he burned the Gaya settlement and the Ambong Residency in 1897 as retaliation for the hard time the Company had been giving him, chasing him from one fort to another in the Sugut-Labuk-Partain hinterland; and he made his last stand at Tambunan in face of broken promises on the Company's part.

There were many reasons why Mat Salleh fought the Company and these were not quite the same at different stages of the struggle. The various communities who gave their support had their own reasons, except that Mat Salleh was able to mobilise these for his own purposes. Mat Salleh's fight with the Company may be divided into three stages: the initial confrontation pertaining to the Sandakan affair until the destruction of his residence on Jambangan Island was in the nature of protests against Company impositions; the period from Jambangan to the Palatan Peace Pact, 1895 to 1897

was in the nature of total rejection of Company rule characterised by total war; and the Tambunan episode, in defence of a compromise position which he had accepted but which the Company did not honour.

The main grid of Mat Salleh's mission seems to have crystallized after 1895 and was valid to, during his stint at Tambunan, though in a modified form. During the initial stage, Mat Salleh formed the opinion that the Company's government was irresponsible, unjust, intrusive and exploitative. At this stage he had not rejected the Company, but was hopeful of redress. His main grievance throughout his six years of struggle, in addition to his personal ones, was what he called the preservation of "our rights". These rights pertained to the preservation of the traditional socio-cultural fabric, the pre-Company the system of commerce and administration, and freedom from such taxation as boat licences. When he could not obtain redress through diplomatic means, and especially when the Company turned him into an outlaw, Mat Salleh had one objective in mind - the reinstatement of the Suluk-Datu system in place of Company rule. He saw his vision, notwithstanding its own defects, as a panacea for the excesses of Company rule which to his mind was destroying the fabric of the traditional socio-economic structure and its attendant values and "rights". In addition to the Company's 'destructive' nature and its ineffective control over large areas of Sabah, Mat Salleh was aided in his mission by a host of other factors. He himself was born of the system and had claims to the Sulu type Datuship through his family background and his marriage to Dayang Bandang. His partial Bajau ancestry gave him almost undivided loyalty from that group. Moreover, the Bajau were known for their fierce independence; they had served as allies in the Sulu system, but had seldom accepted the authority of the Brunei Jajahan system on the West coast of Sabah. For the Bajau, the Company was alien; Mat Salleh was their chief, and not unlike Syarif Usman in the mid-nineteenth century, he would afford them protection and preserve their way of life.

Unlike Syarif Usman however, Mat Salleh's theatre of operation was much wider and his greatest achievement was the mobilization of Kadazandusun support in the Sugut-Paitan-Labuk area, Ranau and to some extent in Tambunan. It is this support, away from the traditional bases of Suluk-Bajau concentrations as in the Datu system, that gave Mat Salleh and his struggle almost a national character. The Kadazandusun communities however had their own reasons for supporting Mat Salleh's cause. In the Sugut-Paitan-Labuk region many of these communities were willing to accept Mat Salleh as their Chief. This was partly due to the non-presence of the Company, partly due to the new taxes imposed on them and partly to obtain protection against external traders. In the Ranau region,

Kadazandusun communities did not seem to have accepted Mat Salleh's jurisdiction, but were willing to furnish supplies in view of maintaining traditional trading relations with the Bajau on the plains and coasts of Western Sabah.

To what extent was Mat Salleh's scheme relevant pertaining to his position in Tambunan? As has been mentioned earlier, it was a modified version of his vision. At the peace talks at Palatan and in subsequent events and correspondence, Mat Salleh recognised the legitimacy of Company's authority, but it was only a partial recognition; he was to enjoy a semi-autonomous position in Tambunan commensurate with the Suluk-Datu system. This understanding was explicitly given to him, pending his absorption into Company service. As events were to show, the Company honoured neither one. Thus when final efforts were made to have peace talks with him in Tambunan, Mat Salleh insisted that Tambunan was his area of jurisdiction, that the establishment of a Government station in the district was tantamount to interference on the Company's part, and that as a precondition, the Company must withdraw its establishment. When the Company refused, Mat Salleh died fighting for what he believed was the right political solution for Sabah which alone to his mind would safeguard and preserve "our rights".

It might be argued that Mat Salleh was a "dreamer" for he was unable to see the reality of the situation. The old Sulu-Brunel structure was crumbling in Sabah, and the power of the two Sultanates was waning. The Company, unlike earlier syndicates, was also more determined to extend its jurisdiction over the whole of Sabah in the long-run. In such a state of affairs, the reestablishment of the Datu system, even in a highly reduced semi-autonomous fashion vis-a-vis the authority of the Company, was unviable. However such an analysis looks sound only with the advantage of hindsight. At the time of Mat Salleh the proposition of the Datu system was inviting for various reasons: the Company was not as effective as it wished to be, it was weak, it was disruptive and it was exploitative. Many of the local communities probably entertained the view that its presence was temporary, just like some of the earlier syndicates. Moreover, its rule was reminiscent of the earlier state of affairs pertaining to the old order under the Sultanates in the 1860s and 1870s. It is precisely in these types of conditions when central authority was weak that many Bajau and Suluk Chieftains would aspire to carve out semi-autonomous positions of their own. Moreover Mat Salleh believed that the system was far from dead and questioned the Company's title over certain areas, especially the Ulu Sugut and Ulu Tuaran, saying "they belonged to him and his people, having been made over to them by the Sultans of Sulu and Brunei".²⁸ Thus while the environment was ripe for Mat

Salleh to pursue such a course of action, the presence of the Company provided him with an additional and powerful dimension. Unlike the Sulu and Brunei Sultanates, the Company was alien, it was infidel and it was seen as destroying the fabric and values of indigenous society. Mat Salleh's vision and mission was therefore to annihilate the Company if possible and preserve the traditional social structure through the reinstatement of the Datu system. He saw in his scheme the only means of salvation for the indigenous communities and he and his men were therefore willing to sacrifice their lives for the cause they believed in, however defective and oppressive that system might in itself have been.

Notes

1. *Brief Daily Record* by W. C. Cowie. (*Manning Director of the British North Borneo Company*) of Matters in connection with his recent Mission to Borneo 1898. London: William Brown and CO. N. D., p. 32, Handlist 916, 14 & S. 19, Rhodes House Library, Oxford.
2. A detailed account of Mat Salleh's struggle against the Company has been compiled by W.K. C. Wookey in his article entitled "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", *SMJ*, VII, December 1956, pp. 405-450. The account here relies mainly on this compilation. Other writers include: K.G. Tregonning, "The Mat Salleh Revolt (1894-1905)", *JMBRAS*, XXIX, Pt. 1, 1956, pp. 20-36; C.N. Crisswell, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion Reconsidered", *SMJ*, XIX, 1971, pp. 155-156, and Ian Black, *A Gambling Style of Government: The Establishment of Chartered Company's Rule in Sabah, 1878-1915*, Kuala Lumpur; Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 128-176.
3. The Inanam River was transferred to the Company by Sultan Hashim of Brunei and the Pengiran Bendahara on 5 August 1896. C.O. 874/54 Documents 13 and 14.
4. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 405-406.
5. Black, *A Gambling Style of Government*, p. 141.
6. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", p. 406.
7. Tregonning, "The Mat Salleh Revolt (1894-1905)", p. 22.
8. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", p. 407.
9. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 407-410.
10. For a detailed account of the attack see Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 413-418.
11. A translation of the letter appears in Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 420-421.
12. *Brief Daily Record* by W.C. Cowie, p. 33.
13. *Brief Daily Record* by W.C. Cowie, p. 34.
14. The provinces of Manggatal, Mengkabong, Api-Api, Simbulan, Napas, and Tembalang were the tulin (hereditary private appanges), of Pengiran Jalaluddin, son of Pengiran Rauf. Pengiran Jalaluddin transferred the said rivers to the Company in an agreement signed on 23 March 1898. Sultan Hashim transferred his sovereign rights over these Rivers to the Company on 30 March 1898. See C.O. 874/54 Documents 17 and 18.
15. *Brief Daily Record* by W.C. Cowie, p. 36.
16. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", p. 430.
17. Tregonning, "The Mat Salleh Revolt", pp. 20-21; Black, *A Gambling Style of Government*, pp. 128-130; Amarjit Kaur, "Hantu" and Highway: Transport in Sabah 1881-1963". *Modern Asian Studies*, 28, 1, 1994, pp. 17-33.
18. Black, *A Gambling Style of Government*, pp. 133-139.
19. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 431-432.
20. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", p. 439.
21. For the final encounter at Tambunan see Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", pp. 442-450.
22. *The Borneo Bulletin*, 11 March, 1978.
23. Tregonning, "The Mat Salleh Revolt", pp. 33-36.
24. Birch, *A Report Upon British North Borneo*, p. 6.
25. Wookey, "The Mat Salleh Rebellion", p. 416.
26. *Brief Daily Record* by W.C. C Cowie, p. 34.