Understanding the East Malaysian Perspective of Local History

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Figure 1: Remix project featuring colorized photographs from the CU Boulder Rare and Distinctive Collections. Created by the author.

To "remix" an image is to transform the original by altering elements, juxtaposing components, or changing focus to create new meaning or reveal hidden narratives within the original work. The photos I chose to remix come from an album taken by a British photographer named Clement Charles Newson. There is a saying about history that only the winners get to tell their story. It is important to consider both sides of a narrative; otherwise, we risk forgetting the nuances and possible hidden truths behind the past. With the artifacts I selected, my goal is to consider the context that we do know and compare it to what is not told—the silent story.

First, it is important to understand what history we do have physical evidence of, whether that be in written or photographic form. As mentioned earlier, I obtained the images in my

remix from Clement Charles Newson's album titled "Photograph Album of East Malaysia and Shanghai, China by Clement Charles Newson, 1908-1912" from the CU Boulder Library Rare and Distinctive Collections. The album primarily features animals and children, specifically an English girl who appears to be three or four years old. According to the library's photographic record, these photos "show indigenous peoples (the Dayak, Kenyah, and Dusun peoples) and Sandakan residents, as well as daily life for British colonizers. The photographs in Shanghai largely show the family's residence and local buildings" (CU Rare and Distinctive Collection). This context makes sense given that Clement Charles Newson was a British man. The photos in East Malaysia are my focus, and they were taken in what was then known as British North Borneo, now Sandakan in Sabah state (CU Rare and Distinctive Collection).

The photos I used in my remix are from the Sekong Rubber Estate in Sandakan. They depict plantation workers actively collecting rubber from trees and a British family with what appear to be Malaysian nannies. I was also able to find a British Journal called the Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts, which mentions the economic significance of the Sekong Estate. The journal describes the Sekong Estate as the most successful rubber plantation for the British and that 1910 was their best year yet (Lovegrove 548). The journal speaks briefly about the payment system for the laborers, using a derogatory term to describe the locals, and claims that they are earning good wages and are pleased with the opportunity for steady work (Lovegrove 549).

Another quote I found interesting was, "Whilst on the subject of these plantations, I should like to say how much the directors and shareholders are indebted to their European staffs, from the managers downwards" (Lovegrove 549). Lovegrove only acknowledges the European personnel at these plantations and makes no reference to the people performing the hard labor—the local workers. From what I can access, these sources represent the tangible evidence remaining from life in East Malaysia in the early 1900s. However, since history is not one sided, it is vital that we consider what is missing from this narrative.

While I do not have any firsthand accounts from the locals of this time period, it is entirely possible that contentment was not the general consensus about the colonial occupation of their land. In class, we studied The Singapore Story by Lee Kuan Yew and how it captured only one version of history rather that its full extent. "Family Memories as Alternative Narratives to the State's Construction of Singapore's National History" by Kevin Blackburn explores how oral history may be the only means by which certain perspectives are passed down. Blackburn conducted a study involving students interviewing their elder family members about controversial topics in Singapore's history, revealing many viewpoints that were omitted

from Yew's official historical account (Loh, Kah Seng, et al 30). The first case study examined the forced relocation of village residents in villages to facilitate Singapore's modernization. A father named Tan Swee Guan contradicts the official narrative of citizens being happy with improved conditions by sharing his heartbreak over losing his home (Loh, Kah Seng, et al 32).

This same situation could apply to East Malaysia, but there was no Blackburn conducting a study to investigate the local's perspectives. There could be infinite speculations about what happened during that time, but unfortunately, all written records come from the British perspective. In my remix, which was originally black and white, I chose to add color only to the backgrounds of the images. This is to focus attention solely on the people whose voices cannot be heard. I did consider that one of the images includes a colonial family, but I chose not to color over them because their perspective is also relevant, especially if we aim to understand the complete picture. There is limited background information on the indigenous peoples of this area of Malaysia. Even though Malaysians are indigenous to Malaysia, the indigenous people are known as Orang Asli (IWGIA). Their history is not clearly connected to the images I chose, but I wanted to mention that the workers could possibly be part of the Orang Asli community, as the land the plantations occupied was partially theirs to begin with.

Another source from our class discussion was "Key Points and Theories" from Michel Rolf Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*, which discusses an interesting debate between positivist and constructivist views on history. A positivist would accept what I have presented as hard evidence of history without considering alternative perspectives. A constructivist would be willing to accept any narrative that appears to retell the history of East Malaysia as the truth. Trouillot's approach takes the middle ground, acknowledging that multiple interpretations of what happened may exist, but not all of them are true (Trouillot, 1995). This framework can be applied to the people in these photos, reminding us that even though we only have British accounts of what happened, we need not accept everything we read as the complete truth.

Memory politics are vital to how we approach historical narratives today, and we can view significant events in our lives as opportunities to tell our own stories. With technological advancements, the complete silencing of a particular group's perspective is less likely, though still possible. For the people of Sandakan in Sabah state, there is a chance that they do have history documented that I simply did not have access to because of the language barrier, or it may survive as oral history passed down through families. Archives are essential to the preservation of history and the way we study the past, but it is also equally important to remember that they are not capable of telling the whole story.

Our responsibility as readers is to seek as much context as possible and become thoroughly informed to properly honor these people and the memory of their lives.

Works Cited

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