

WINDOWS INTO HISTORY TWO:  
**ROAD HUNGER,  
COMMUNITIES, LAND AND  
RIBBON DEVELOPMENT**

Windows into History Two:

# Road Hunger

Communities, Land and Ribbon Development in Sabah

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The failure and subsequent debts of the 1894-1905 mega-projects highlighted in the previous article, created a pressure cooker effect with people and farms crowded around few roads and the railway, and not even 2% of North Borneo under cultivation in 1939. As we proceed further through the “Windows Into History”, we trace the past journey and culture of “road hunger” in Sabah.

Decades of under-investment in infrastructure by the British North Borneo Chartered Company were compounded by the Japanese occupation during World War II. However, by the 1950s the British Government had gathered the strength to turn to road building as the foundation for North Borneo’s economic development. After a decade of hunger and suffering in the 1940s, the desperate search for opportunity meant Borneans quickly learned to follow new roads into the forest and settle with their gardens in long thin lines along both sides of the road in a pattern known as “ribbon development”. This article tells that story and explores how that history still shapes Sabahan attitudes to road building today, even though everything has now changed.

Following the Japanese surrender in 1945 the British Government took control of the wreckage of the old North Borneo Chartered Company territory. Allied bombing and war-time misery only heightened the stagnation caused by decades under a private company unwilling and unable to invest in the necessary transport infrastructure to properly grow the economy, still saddled with the debts from the ill-advised trans-Borneo mega-projects pursued from 1894 to 1905. Britain too was struggling, and it was only in 1948 that it had the capacity to put £6 million into a North Borneo Reconstruction and Development Plan. Given the small sum available, that plan focused on housing, rebuilding government buildings and on getting the ports, railway and road system back up and running.

According to Professor Ooi Keat Gin of University Sains Malaysia in his 2013 book *Post-War Borneo, 1945-50*, only 1.3% of that first investment budget went into education, and other social services remained similarly unfunded, but that this was because the authorities believed that with basic infrastructure back in place people could rebuild the economy themselves and quickly generate the revenues that would enable the North Borneo administration to rebuild society. That proved to be the case: by 1949 the economy had returned to the level before the Japanese invasion of 1941 and by 1950 North Borneo’s tax revenues had more than doubled those received in 1947. The North Borneo Government was now able to expand social services and contribute to financing its own development, alongside ongoing assistance from the UK Government and other international sources.

Could Sabah as a Crown Colony do better at investing in development than the Company?

The business model of the Chartered Company (1881-1941) had indeed been flawed. Having failed to develop minerals or lasting success with any of the estate crops (coffee, tobacco, rubber, hemp, etc.), the Company fell back on living off customs and license revenue. These taxes focused on exploiting for London shareholders the financial energy of immigrant Chinese, while failing to make investments in rural infrastructure that would enable these Chinese and Indigenous Borneans to grow a real economy for themselves. Only the accidental railway down the West Coast, the bridle paths (for use with horses) and a few short mud tracks had enabled the success in rubber.

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Accidental, in that the railway was only built because the ultimately never constructed Trans-Borneo Railway was so poorly planned that it had to wind up the coast looking for a port, as described in the last article.

The absence of roads meant it was cheaper to import rice from overseas than it was to bring it to the towns from the interior (North Borneo imported half its rice from overseas throughout the Company's rule). And since there were so few roads built out to the people, a large slice of Borneo's population themselves moved towards coastal towns or wherever roads existed.

Thus under the Chartered Company North Borneo had stagnated while its people struggled over limited patches of land in a vast undeveloped territory. In the lament of Professor Tregonning in 1958 "Road construction, the crying need for an unopened country of which by 1939 only 318,330 acres, or 1.7% of the total area were cultivated, was never possible at a significant scale".

Coalition 3H asks: in this moment of Sabah's development trajectory, what can we learn from our history, particularly about our habit for ribbon development? Could building networks of minor roads bring more benefits without the congestion that comes with single, major roads? Are we still living off the modern equivalent of customs and license revenue and exploiting the financial energy of immigrants? Have we grown a real, diverse economy which is equitable and generative for all Sabahans?

In the next part of this journey, we will witness how the British eventually learnt that successful road development is correlated with high population growth. It had not much to do with spending huge amounts of money on roads that are economically not feasible and are socially beneficial to only a small group of people.

Ends.

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