

A TRULY REMARKABLE LAND

FASCINATING SARAWAK TALES FROM LONG AGO

NEW Straits Times *30/10/2021*

The chance find of stunning prints featuring key Kuching landmarks gives **ALAN TEH LEAM SENG** an opportunity to turn back the clock and revisit interesting tales related to Sarawak's capital

A PLEASANT surprise in the form of long misplaced postcards and photographs surfaced recently in the study while I was looking for references for an upcoming article. Almost immediately, the precious keepsakes took me back to the time when I attended the Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival some years back.

It was at the well attended annual global event celebrating talented musicians from the world over that I crossed paths with Puan Sri Liz Moggie, who graciously showed me the sights around her beloved Kuching once the music fell silent in Santubong.

were interesting enough to warrant an entire morning at the oldest historic repository in Borneo and one of the finest in Southeast Asia today, it was the eye-opening fact that a sultan once ruled pre-Brooke era Sarawak that proved most fascinating.

The appointment of the first and only Sarawak sultan took place soon after Sultan Muhammad Hassan, the 9th Brunei ruler, died in 1598, leaving behind two sons who both laid claim to the throne. The brief power tussle ended after the elder sibling garnered sufficient backing from loyal courtiers. Installed as Sultan Abdul Jalilul Akbar, the monarch lost no time in placating his subjects by appointing

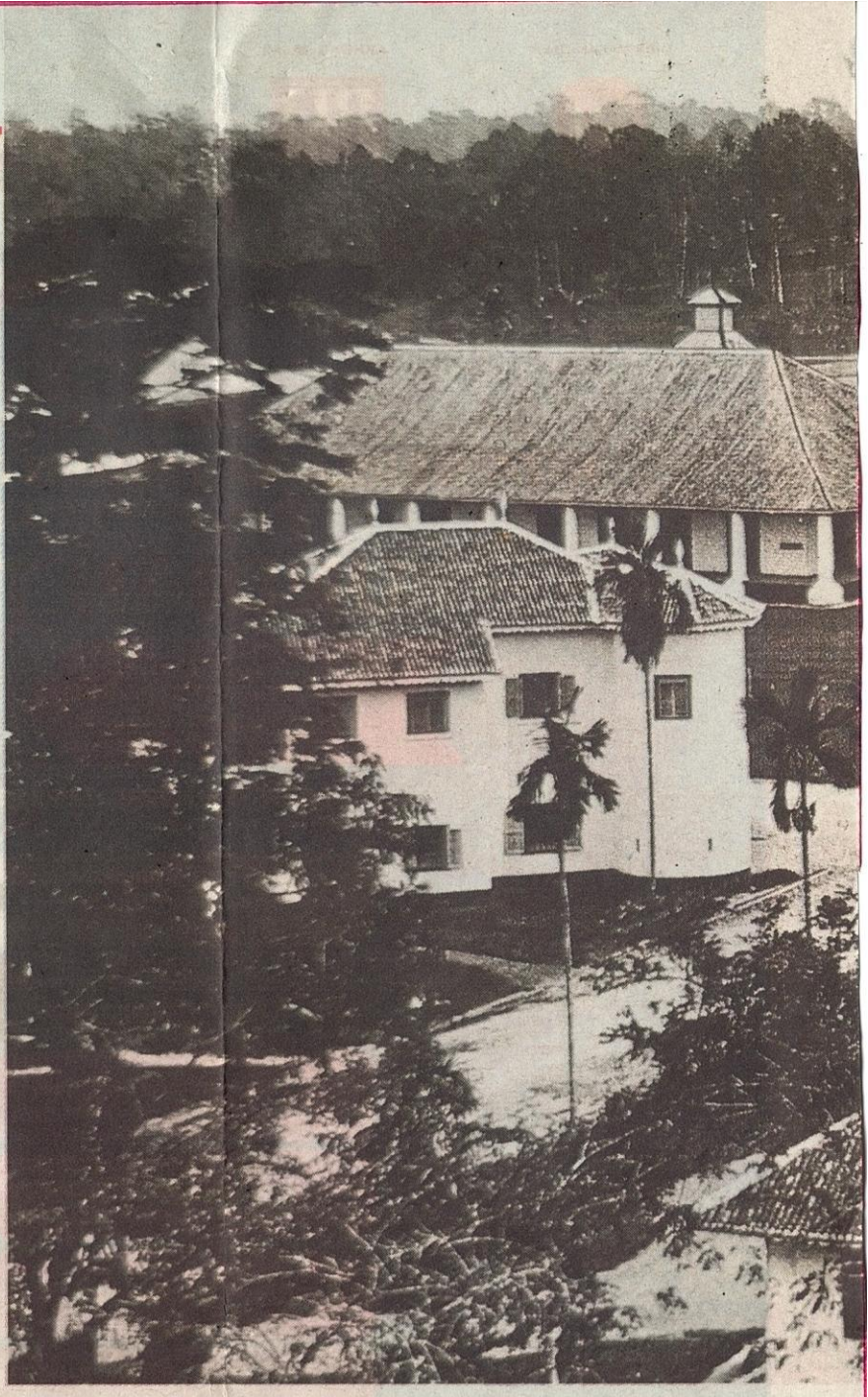
Ibrahim appointed four Datus to rule in his stead before undertaking a trip to visit his aunt, who was married to the sultan of Johor.

On the return journey, the royal flotilla was blown off course by a hurricane and ended up in Sukadana, West Kalimantan, that was ruled by Sultan Muhammad Syafiuddin. Apart from receiving a warm welcome, Sultan Ibrahim received blessings to marry Sultan Muhammad's sister, Ratu Surya Kusuma.

After lengthy sojourns in Sambas and Tanjungpura-Matan to spread the Islamic faith among the locals, Sultan Ibrahim and his family, which by then had enlarged to include four children, finally decided to return home.

It was said that news of the royal entourage's impending arrival affected influential Santubong courtiers who had become accustomed to their unbridled grip on power.

Equally reluctant to see decades-long malpractices surface and judged, those in the corridors of power were said to have conspired an evil plan that led



once the music fell silent in Santubong.

The decision to first peruse the treasures at the renowned Sarawak Museum highlighted her tireless heritage preservation endeavours, especially those concerning centuries-old landmarks in Malaysia that had played pertinent roles in nation building.

SULTAN OF SARAWAK

While the countless exhibits

monarch lost no time in placing his younger brother by bestowing upon him Sarawak, one of the many peripheral areas controlled by the then sprawling Brunei empire.

Taking on the title Sultan Ibrahim Ali Omar Shah, the younger sibling established the Sarawak sultanate capital in Santubong. Once his power base was secured with the construction of a grand palace complete with a well-guarded fort, Sultan

roads of power were said to have orchestrated an evil plan that led to Sultan Ibrahim's assassination in the hands of his trusted escorts soon after arriving at his palace in 1641. After the monarch was laid to rest in Santubong, Sarawak reverted back to Brunei until James Brooke arrived some two centuries later on board the well armed schooner, *Royalist*.

FOND MEMORIES

A number of stunning Brooke-

era landmarks came into sight during the short drive to Kuching's scenic waterfront. Over a mouth-watering *mee kolok* lunch, Puan Sri Liz told me that her mother, Marjorie Compton, loved to explore the surrounding streets whenever a quick getaway from London was on the cards.

Guided by memories of Compton's fascinating visits that began in the 1960s, Puan Sri Liz began pointing out familiar places like tin smiths, sundry shops filled to the brim with bags of *ikan bilis* (called *ikan pusu* locally) and jars filled with local delicacies like dried squid as well as exotic Indian spice shops in Gambier Road. Just before bidding farewell after the meal, she highlighted several places that had special places in both her and her mother's hearts.

"Trace the Sarawak River and enjoy the view across to Fort Margherita before heading off to the quaint Malay villages. Along the way, enjoy the warm hospitality of the many races that make up Sarawak's amazing social fabric," she said, adding that picture postcards from shops nearby would make lasting keepsakes.

The tip certainly proved useful as the well taken images depicted on the postcards gave an imme-

diately introduction to the key landmarks around Kuching.

Sight of the quintessential Astana taken from various angles on quite a number of the items on sale immediately brought back memories of the outbreak of World War 2, which marked the beginning of the end of the Brooke rule in Sarawak.

Built to replace the derelict wooden government house in 1870, the sturdy Astana became the residence of the Brookes as they consolidated power over the state.

Each year, all the important and well connected people in Kuching would be invited to the traditional Christmas and New Year's Eve balls held at the building. At each of those functions, distinguished guests feasted and made merry at a banquet table with the *rajah* and *ranees* seated at opposing ends.

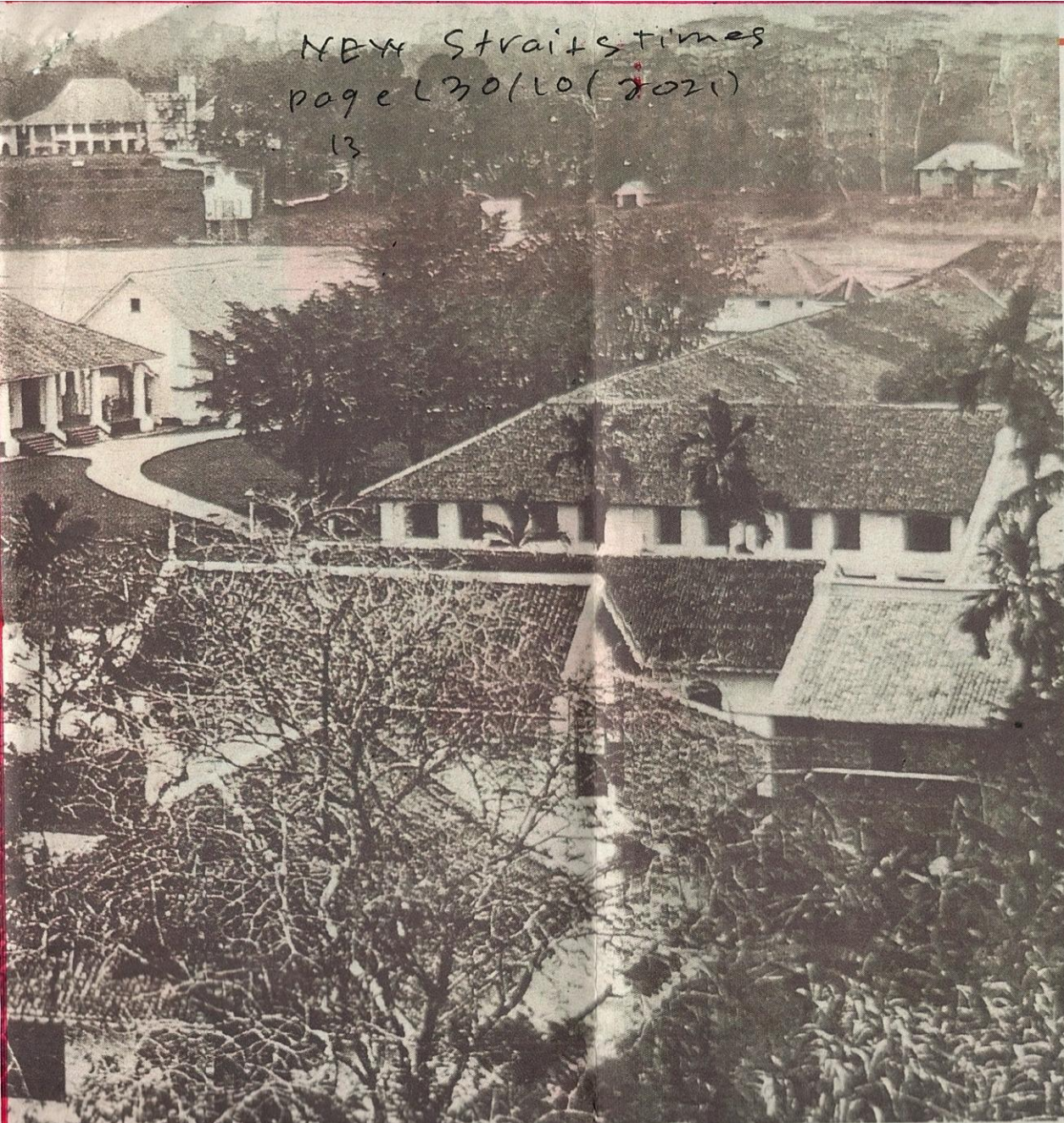
ILL FORTUNE STRIKES

True to their British heritage, the Brookes zealously ran the Astana — which meant palace in the local language — like an English country estate to the extent of instructing gardeners to plant a type of local creeper that very much resembled the English Ivy. Legend has it that the plant bestowed protection upon the As-

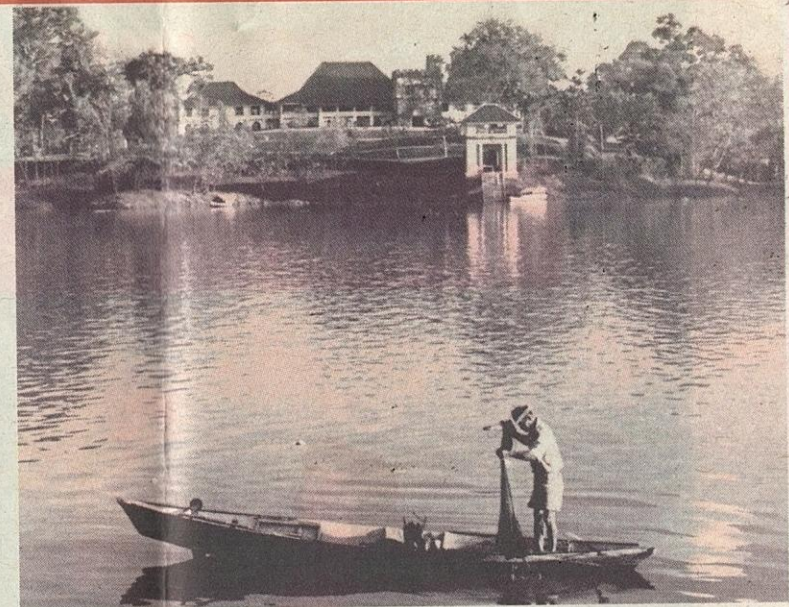


The Sarawak Museum was the first of its kind established in Borneo.

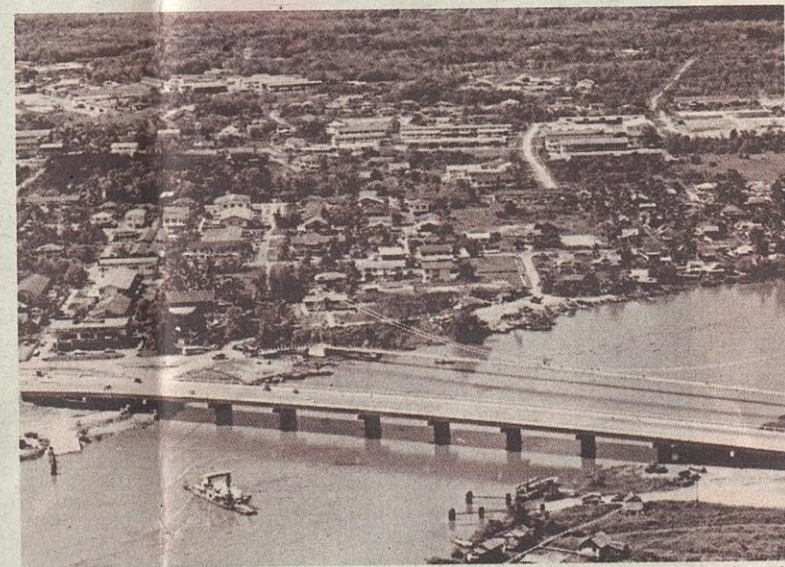
NEW Straits Times
page L30/10 (2021)
13



View of the main Kuching landmarks in the early 20th century. PIX BY ALAN TEH LEAM SENG



View of the Astana from the Sarawak River.



The Satok Suspension Bridge ran parallel with the Datu Patinggi Haji Abdul Rahman Bridge that was built in 1975.

homes after dark and streets were ed water volume flowing through

tana and its occupants, and bad luck struck those who had it removed.

On Christmas eve in 1941, the Astana banquet hall fell silent as the Imperial Japanese Army marched triumphantly through Kuching's streets. Not long after, Marquis Toshinari Maeda, commander of the Japanese forces in northern Borneo which included Sarawak, Brunei, Labuan and North Borneo, made the Astana his official residence.

It was said that Maeda disliked the creepers enveloping the building as they reminded him of time spent in Great Britain as a Japanese military attaché from 1927 to 1930.

Brushing aside subtle warnings as utter idle talk, Maeda gave instruction for the creepers to be removed. News of the act soon reached public ears and the whole of Kuching was awash with rumours of an impending calamity.

Just three days later, after witnessing the execution of five men accused of stealing petrol, Maeda boarded a plane bound for Labuan to officiate an airport named in his honour on Sept 5, 1942. Sadly, Maeda never arrived. His plane disappeared off the radar and was not found until a

month later. It had crashed off the coast of Tanjung Datu, Bintulu. Although crash site experts were unable to determine the cause of the fatal accident, the locals back in Kuching knew that the calamity could have been avoided if the Astana creepers had been left alone.

The incident further accentuated their long-held belief that traditions should be respected and not challenged.

After the war ended in September, Rajah Vyner Brooke, faced with a series of family disputes concerning succession, made the difficult decision to cede sovereignty of Sarawak to the British Crown. The Cession Bill was passed by the Council Negri with a narrow majority of just three votes on May 17, 1946.

BLOOD SACRIFICE

Remnants of the collapsed Satok Suspension Bridge came into sight while travelling along the Datuk Patingi Haji Abdul Rahman Bridge on the evening trip back to the airport.

Taking the unplanned encounter as a sign of the city saving the best for last before bidding farewell, an interesting tale started to unfold as pages of the book, *Sarawak Long Ago*, pur-

chased at the Sarawak Museum bookshop earlier, were turned.

Known also as the Yellow Bridge, the idea for its construction was first mooted by Rajah Charles Brooke in 1902 when work commenced on Matang Reservoir as the bridge would house pipes bearing much needed additional water supply for the growing Kuching population.

As the bridge foundations were laid with huge boulders ferried all the way from Sejingkat, near the Sarawak River estuary, stories began to spread throughout Kuching regarding an ancient Dayak custom known as *gense-lan*.

According to the tradition that was observed for centuries until slavery was abolished by James Brooke in 1886, blood offerings were made to appease the spirits each time a longhouse or bridge was built. The bygone ritual was said to involve casting a slave into a hole and ramming the main structural support post on top of it.

While rumours spread about the constructed Satok Suspension Bridge requiring its blood sacrifice, Kuching residents became fearful of falling victim to the age-old observance. Few dared to leave the safety of their

homes after dark and streets were eerily deserted by evening. The situation was worse in the immediate suburbs as news spread through the grapevine had it that the construction company was sending out teams to kidnap children destined for the main bridge foundation.

Tensions eased weeks later when a labourer, while working on the foundations, tragically fell into the water and drowned. Despite the tragedy, everyone heaved a sigh of relief as the sacrifice was considered fulfilled and the town's latest pride and joy was well on its way to become a reality.

The overwhelming happiness, however, was short-lived for as soon after the bridge was operational in 1926, the steel work began to sway and the towers shifted from their positions.

Superstitious residents once again set the rumour mill in full motion by spreading tittle-tattle that the unfortunate demise of the lone labourer was insufficient for such a huge structure and the bridge was calling out for more sacrifices to be made.

Fortunately, Public Works Department engineers managed to put concerns to rest by successfully rectifying the imbalance caused by the larger than expect-

ed water volume flowing through the pipes on the bridge.

After serving as an important link between modern-day Petra-jaya and the city's heritage quarter for nearly eight decades, the aging Satok Suspension Bridge collapsed into the murky depths of the Sarawak River when several steel bracing cables anchoring it to the southern bank gave way during an unusual tempest that raged over Kuching in the wee hours of Oct 7, 2004.

Realising the iconic landmark's significant bearing on the collective memories of Kuching residents, the authorities set plans in motion to restore the bridge to its former glory and, when time came, declared it open once again for public use on Aug 20 this year.

The sight of Kuching bathed in the soft evening glow came into view as the plane made its final turn before heading towards the South China Sea and Kuala Lumpur in the distance.

The sight of the many recognisable landmarks brought warmth to the heart for this is a truly remarkable land where the combined impetus of ancient customs and modern pursuits drive the people to successfully forge ahead towards a promising future.