

*DANNY WONG TZE KEN*¹

The Name of Sabah and the Sustaining of a New Identity in a New Nation²

Introduction

On 16 September 1963, the former state of North Borneo became part of Malaysia. Among the major changes in the new state was the change of name from North Borneo to Sabah (Fig. 1). The term “North Borneo” had been used since the setting up of the British North Borneo Company administration in 1879, when the Provisional Association of North Borneo Company was established. From that time, the newly constituted territory was known as North Borneo (Borneo Utara in Malay), designating the northern region of the state on the island of Borneo. Its people were called North Borneans; and a flag was designed along with a coat of arms. In 1963, this new name of Sabah, a new flag and a new coat of arms marked the beginning of an era when the state and its people assumed a new identity, and thus began a period of adjusting to the notion of being citizens of the new Federation of Malaysia as well as the new identity of being a Sabahan (vis-à-vis a North Bornean). Yet, the name of Sabah is not new; neither was the effort to foster a new identity of Sabahan. This paper will look at the provenance of the name “Sabah,” and how this old name was given a new interpretation and meaning at the time when the state was heading for independence. The paper will then turn its attention to the efforts to foster and sustain this Sabah identity after 1963; and its relation to the national identity of being a Malaysian.

1. Department of History, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

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