This essay explores the oral history of Ali through a Kuching Bomoh, traces the verbal history through living relatives, examines the work of the American Dr. Thomas Barbor and provides additional evidence with a pantun. It concludes the Ali was from Sarawak and returned here after his journeys with Alfred Wallace.
In the *Malay Archipelago*, Alfred Wallace describes a relationship between him and a boy named Ali. Several writers have attempted to explain where he came from and what happened to him. Piecing together both oral history and scholarly sources, we have finally found the answer to this quest. Through a seven year search and a dukun named Sapien bin Morani, the following narrative, translated from the Sarawak Malay, explains where Ali came from and what happened to him.

The South China Sea washed the fishing village of Kampung Jaie about two hours from Kuching. Most of the houses were probably on stilts to allow the waste to wash away. Ali bin Amit was born around 1840. He was not alone. He was the youngest of his siblings, Chek, Osman, Tad and Lon.

While growing up, he learned about jungle medicine from his brother Tad (Panglima Putad) then they went to Kuching to work for the Rajah, Mr. James Brooke. Ali soon followed a as young teen lad. He worked under the tutelage of his brother Osman soon to be known as Panglima Seman. The title of Panglima was usually earned in battle as leader of soldiers.

Panglima Putad had learned medical skills from his father and Ali assisted in treating the wounded. In his book, *Ten Years in Sarawak* volume 1, Charles Brooke describers the Malays as “the worst kind” except for Panglima Seman and Abang Ali. Later he tells of “good Panglima Seman”. Finally, he informs that he kept a small force back to guard the stockade under Panglima Seman. Ali probably followed his brother through battle, helping to bandage wounds and cooking for the troops.

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11 Tom McLaughlin holds a Masters Degree from Ohio University in Southeast Asian Studies and has lived in Kuching for the past seven years. Suriani binti Sahari speaks Malay, Sarawak Malay and reads Jawi and Arabic.

2 Sapien bin Morni is a dukun. In the Sarawak Malay world, a dukun uses herbs to treat disease. A dukun uses fragrance oils to help those who have marriage problem and to make the couple fall in love again. Sapien acquired this knowledge from his father and grandfather who were both dukuns and probably further back. He also acquired the historical knowledge from a lineage that spans several generations. Sapien can also uses verses from the Koran to treat people. He has travelled widely throughout Borneo, the south Philippines and west Malaysia to acquire more knowledge. His knowledge has been translated from the Sarawak Malay to English by Suriani binti Sahari.

3 Interview Sapien bin Morni 5 August 2016

4 Ibid

5 Charles Brooke *Ten Years in Sarawak* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1866) pp.347

6 Ibid p. 351

7 Ibid p. 352

8 These skirmishes were probably in December 1853 and early 1854. See Robert Pringle *Rajahs and Rebels* (Kota Samarahan: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak 2010, 1970) pp. 102-103
Following the raids, Ali knew that his fortunes lay with the white people who came to rule Sarawak. He befriended a person named "Edward" to learn the English language. He was no stranger around the Astanna where the English Rajah lived.

The skirmishes ended and, at some time, Panglima Seman was granted a tract of land in 1852 from the Rajah for services to him. The land still bears his name. The first year, Ali did not live in the kampung. Only Panglima Putad, (Tad) one of the brothers, worked with Seman. He opened a prosperous blacksmith operation and people came in to fill up the kampung.12

However, a person named Awang Mat (Pengiran Ahmad) became jealous of Seman’s success and started to spread rumours to the Rajah about Panglima Seman. He stated that Seman was plotting to overthrow the Rajah and to make himself the head of government. The Rajah believed in the plot because Panglima Seman’s family members were there and able to forge arms from the blacksmith shop. He could also produce weapons to fight the Rajah. The Panglima went to see Brooke eight times but Brooke refused to meet with him. A few months after that, Brooke went to Singapore. While he was there, rumours spread that Brooke was forming an army to attack the Panglima Seman.14

When Brooke returned from Singapore, the ship passed the kampung. It was three days after his return, he planned to meet with Brooke but he was not allowed to see him. They sent someone to tell Brooke that Panglima wanted to meet him. He was not allowed to enter the Astanna. Rumors spread again that Brooke want to attack Panglima Seman and his followers. A few weeks later a large ship docked at the mouth of Sarawak River. The debates became heated between the Rajah and the Panglima, and in a fit of temper, The Rajah threatened him and his family. Upon seeing the ship, they assumed the rumors were true and fled to Kampung Jaie. He packed everything out. His residence and the land is called Mungguk puang (Sarawak Malay for an empty place).16 17 18

The Panglima, along with Ali, evacuated his family to Kampung Jaie. He changed the names of his children to Chinese and white men names because he took the threats seriously. Bibi, Tang, Chong, Ben and Mu are their names. It was not true that the Rajah wanted to attack the Panglima’s family. Panglima Seman disappears from history and it is thought he fled to Sambas. Ali arranged people to take care of the children and returned to Kuching where he met Alfred Wallace. 19

Ali used his skills as a speaker of English, his ability as cook and his knowledge of jungle medicine to gain a place in Wallace’s entourage. He actively solicited the position. In his first conversation with Wallace he told him of the herbs but he had not been hired. He got to know Wallace and thought he was close friends with the royal family in England. 20

He remained with Wallace, off and on, for six years. During his off time with Wallace he returned to Kampung Jaie to check on Seman’s children.21 His exploits have been dissected elsewhere and are described in Wallace’s book The Malay Archipelago.

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9 Probably Edward the groom and valet. Letter James Brooke to Charles Thomas Constantine Grant 1851/07/01 Brooke Trust
10 Interview Saipan bin Morani
11 The area was a former Iban orchard called Kampung Buah. Panglima Seman probably became ketua kampung in 1854 and the area took his name. Interview Peter John Jaban and Walker Power and Prowess p. 111
12 Interview Saipan bin Morni 5 August 2016
13 The Rajah was stricken with small pox in May, 1853 from which he never fully recovered. See J.H Walker Power and Prowess (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002) p. 111 The Malays who nursed him back to health had somehow been vaccinated against the disease. see Donald Hopkins, The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History (Chicago: Chicago University Press) p. 124-125
14 Interview Saipan bin Morni and Suriani binti Sahari
15 It is believed he was returning from the Royal Commission of Enquiry who were investigating Brooke in September 1854. See Pringle Rajahs and Rebels p. 95 and Brooke Letters
16 Walker, in his account recites a similar version only with Abdul Gapor in place of Panglima Seman. See J.H. Walker, Power and Prowess (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002) pp. 107-115
17 It is still called that today, 2016
18 Interview Saipan bin Morni translated by Suriani binti Sahari
19 Ibid
20 Ibid
Following his travels, Ali returned to Kampong Jaie. He took care of Panglima Seman’s children. He also married and had two children of his own, Said, who died as a bachelor and Rajak who bore seven children, 2 males and five females.  

Alfred Wallace has stated that Ali was married in Ternate. His marriage would probably have been one where the father or guardian (wali) can give her away. Then two witnesses are required. The “ceremony” is conducted by a person who familiar with the laws of Islam.  

A more formal marriage would include akad nikah which is the Islamic part of the ceremony as described above. Then there could be a bersanding where the couple sits on a throne for a few hours. The tepung tawar is where the bride and groom are sprinkled with water and shredded pandan leaves with flowers. A white powder paste are dabbed on bride and grooms foreheads and the back of hands for the purpose of blessings. The Berlulut is where the female changes into different costumes. This followed by makan nasi temuan where the bride and groom try to feed each other rice. There is also the buang peraja where the spirits are kept appeased.  

Wallace, with his keen observational powers and brilliant mind, probably only observed the Islamic ritual because he would have recorded the intricacies of the larger ceremony in his books. The Islamic portion could possibly have been the only part of Ali’s wedding. Again, after surveying the Malay sections of Ternate who speak Malay, there was no sign of Ali or his issue.  

The third idea is that among travelling Malays during the period, the marriage would only last for ninety days if the husband did not provide them with funds. His wife could have asked for a divorce and given the circumstances, it was probably granted. Given the fluidity of the times, then and now, his wife could have remained with her family with no stigma attached.  

The question that remains is why Ali did not return to Ternate to be with his wife. She could have died, the family could have moved away or Ali was conflicted between Ternate and his brothers children. According to Islam Law, when you leave your wife after a certain period, then divorce automatically occurs. Another possibility is that because he was lame he could had decided to stay in Sarawak instead of going back to Ternate. Given the altruistic nature of Ali, the first two reasons seem to be in order.  

After his service with Wallace and with his money earned in his travels he built a 20 post house on stilts at Kampung Jaie. Here, he took care Panglima Seman’s children and later his own. It would become a refuge for people travelling during the monsoon season and for those whose houses that became swamped. He became involved in processing of palm sugar. It would be said he had the ability to selected those trees that would produce the best palm sugar. Those who remember him say he smoked palm cigarettes and loved coffee. The people recall him purchasing sweets for the children while walking with a cane. Ali was always away (melelang) with the white man and brought money back. In his later years, he was known at the local kedai. He was called Tok Ali. Ali died somewhere around the Japanese invasion of Sarawak.  

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21 Ibid  
22 This information is from the family of Panglima Seman and Ali bin Amit. Neither family had any clue who Ali was.  
23 see Wallace, Alfred My Life London: Chapman and Hall, 1905 p. 383  
24 See https://www.theknot.com/content/muslim-wedding-ceremony-rituals  
25 Tom McLaughlin and Suriani binti Sahari were married in such a ceremony.  
26 Interview Suriani binti Sahari  
27 This information was from Tom McLaughlin and Suriani binti Sahari  
28 Interview Jompot bin Chong Interview 28 Sept 2016  
29 Arenga pinnata  
30 Interview Loni binti Chong 26 September 2016, Panglima Seman’s granddaughter  
31 Ibid  
32 Tok is Sarawak Malay for very old man.  
33 This information is from Sapian bin Morni 5 August 2016 and the descendants of Panglima Seman and Ali bin Amit
Ali’s grave is in Kampong Jaie, at the center of the graveyard with knee high grass. The guns, given to Ali by Alfred Wallace were said to have been picked up by the Japanese during the occupation. A sword given to Ali was used to behead people by the Iban. The box was inherited by his nephew Chong.

The Box

Ali’s box was described as a black coloured sea chest of British origins. Those that have looked in related it contained a picture of Ali with a European gentleman. There were also papers with British seals on them. The box became alive each Friday night making noises. Because of the belief in ghosts, the box was taken out and placed in the sea.

Alternatively, the box was taken out from underneath the house when the government decided to build a berm between the sea and the land. The rain and sunshine destroyed the box and whatever contents it held.

The Pantun

Most pantuns written during the 1860’s and 1870’s were composed by people who could neither read nor write. They relied on sounds and memory to pass the pantun from one generation to the next. The following pantuns are written in Sarawak Malay as they were heard from the people of Kampung Jaie.

A pantun has four lines with an abab rhyming scheme. Each line has between eight and twelve syllables. The first two lines usually have no relation to the second two. They are often performed at weddings and other kampung celebrations. Each kampung has its’ own pantun unique to that individual setting. An old pantun in Sarawak Malay from Kampung Jaie relates:

\[
\begin{align*}
Apa kaba Weles serani \\
Abang Ali duak sekawan \\
Apa daya setuan ini \\
Berpecah kongsi berputus seratan
\end{align*}
\]

The first line Apa kaba Weles serani

Apa kaba means how are you; Weles is Wallace; serani is Sarawak Malay for white man.

Abang Ali duak sekawan

Wallace (from the top line) and Abang Ali are good friends

Apa daya setau ini

Unfortunately, this year

Berpecah kongsi berputus seratan

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34 Sapian bin Morni Interview
35 Loni binti Chong Interview
36 Interview Loni binti Chong
37 Interview Sapian bin Morni
38 This pantun was told to us by Sapian bin Morani and was confirmed by Arii binti Ladi. Ari binti Ladi also known as Mak Errek is a Seh Gendang which means a drum beater and pantun expert from Kampung Lintang. She is well known among the elderly of Kuching. She is 85, or there abouts and is illiterate.
Our cooperation and team work has ended. Berpecah kongsi in Sarawak Malay means to break up. Berputus seratan means the end of a relationship.

The last line in Sarawak Malay mean the breakup of a relationship who will not see each other for a long time. All four lines refer to the relationship between Wallace and Ali. (This pantun is translated from the old Sarawak Malay by Suriani binti Sahari)

As Ali and Wallace’s exploits fade from memory, the pantun changes.

_Apa daya weles tinggi_

_Tiang dia bersegi lapan_

_Apa daya ditaun ini_

_Berpecah kongsi berputus seratan_

_Apa daya weles tinggi_

The telegraph wires are too high, what to do? Weles and wireless sound the same for the rhyme

_Tiang nya bersegi lapan_

The post is eight sided

_Apa daya ditaun ini_

Unfortunately this year

_Berpecah kongsi berputus seratan_

Our cooperation and team work has ended.

The pantun retains it’s sad imagery. (This Pantun was translated by Suriani binti Sahari)

A pantun was used in the old days as form of entertainment. A cloth would be raised between the men and women. Drums and violins would play. There would be three beats to the drum, samsudin a medium beat, sampayak a slow beat and labuan a fast beat Somebody would yell _jual_ ! To sell the pantun. He/she would recite the pantun. A woman would say _beli_ (to buy the pantun) Someone would then answer it . The female would sell to the male who is usually dancing with another male. When he cannot answer, he usually sits down. The drum beater is called the ngindok who starts the pantun while the nganak picks up if the ngindok cannot pick up the rhyme. This action would go back forth most of the night with the drums beating faster and faster. Many times, as the evening wore on, the pantons would become very risqué. 40

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39 This pantun was translated by Suriani binti Sahari
40 Arii binti Ladi Interview
Ari binti Ladi, an expert in pontun literature

The pontun about Wallace and Ali would probably begin the session because it was so sad. The people would then add to it and liven up the evening. It also probably why it was remembered.

A possible answer to the pantun might be:

- Buah duku didalam cawan
- local duku fruit in a cup
- Ikan sardin didalam perigi
- Sardines in a pond
- Yang ini setaun ini putus seratan
- This year if the relationship ends
- Carik yang lain untok penganti
Find someone to replace them\footnote{Arii binti Ladii composed this pontun as a possible answer.}

Here, the mood changes to a more uplifting one.

Sarawak Malay

Ujan mas negri Urang

ujan batu negri Dirikpun

\textit{bagus lagik Negri dirik pun}

Even though it rains gold in other countries

And it rains rocks here

We would prefer the rocks \{ than the gold because it is your birthplace.\}This information was given to us by??and translated from the old Sarawak Malay by Suriani binti Sahari

\textbf{Adat and Amanah}

\footnotesize

Adat, for this paper, is the social behavior of the people. Taking off your shoes before entering a home is adat. Offering a drink to visitor is adat. Marriage ceremonies are adat. Speaking softly is adat. Wearing a sarong is adat. Cleaning the graves at Hari Raya (EID) is adat. Returning home for Hari Raya is adat. A thirty day confinement after birth is adat. There are hundreds of these small rules which govern life. They are rules people do without thinking. The one we will deal with Ali is returning to the kampong after travels.\footnote{Tom McLaughlin who has lived in the Sarawak Malay world for seven years.}

Coupled with adat is the Islamic sense of Amanah. This Muslim teaching requires one to fulfil promises made.\footnote{\textquoteleft Roman Translation of the Holy Qur\’an\' (Beirut: Dar Al Furqan, 1934) The Women v. 58, p.92; The Spoils of War v. 27, p. 179 ; The Believers, v. 8 p. 336} It requires one to be trusted with life’s problems. For example, if a person is given money for another person it his amanah to give it to the other man. Ali probably learned the amanahs as a small child of about five years old from lessons in the mosque or surau. A breach of amanah will count against you when you reach heaven and is considered to be a big sin.\footnote{Ibid The Family of Imran, part 3, v.76-77, p. 62-63}

Ali probably had both adat and amanah within his being. Adat, a very strong force in the Malay world was the semangat for social interaction while amanah was probably responsible for the next world. Both were very powerful forces governing an individual. It must be through this lens that scholars must view Ali’s actions.\footnote{Commentary by Tom McLaughlin and Suriani binti Sahari}

According to the above oral story, Ali was trusted with an amanah by promising to take care of Panglima Seman’s children. Panglima Seman probably knew that Ali would work for Alfred Wallace and he would have the financial resources for their care. Ali, far too young to be a parent, probably entrusted others at Kampung Jaie to watch the children while he went travelling with Wallace.\footnote{Alfred Wallace \textit{The Malay Archipelago} (London: p. 91)}

The beginning of Ali and Alfred Wallace’s association begins with Wallace mentioning a Malay boy.\footnote{This would be just after Ali made the promise to Panglima Seman to take care of his children. He would have taken the kids to Kampung Jaie}
and then returned to work for Wallace. Wallace spent three weeks in Santubong and Ali could have easily travel by boat back and forth to Kampung Jaie. Alfred Wallace visited Kampung Jaie in 1856 on his way to an Iban village.

About three weeks later, Ali accompanies Alfred Wallace to Singapore. Ali must have performed admirably after a possible three week trial period. Ali does not show up until page 161 where he is described as a servant and is helping Wallace with bird skinning.

Alfred Wallace laughs at Ali because of his fear of ghosts and other apparitions. In fact, Ali will not go out alone at night to fetch water for firewood. From his perspective, Iban head hunters were a very real menace in the Kampung Jaie area. Also, adat dictated many hantu (ghosts) as part of his life experience.

The next passage explains that a lame Ali returns with horses from somewhere on Lombock. Wallace states he placed Ali on a horse and he would walk with the horse. Wallace must be confused here because Ali would never, ever allow this to happen as it is against adat.

In the next episode, Ali is attacked by a fever and Alfred Wallace must tend to him, and yet Ali is soon cooking breakfast for him. Apparently, it seemed like a three day fever, so common here in the tropics.

Our trip to Ternate was eventful. We went to huge graveyard in the center of the island. I started at one end with my wife and son at the other. The graves are marked with either a wooden stake as a head and foot marker while some of the others are upraised with cement covered in tile rectangular boxes with another rectangle in the middle. The rectangle in the middle has earth in the center. Unfortunately most did not have any names.

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48 Ibid p. 93
49 Ibid p. 65
50 Ibid p. 97
51 Ibid p. 155
52 Hantu Bangkit is a ghost the comes from the dead and is well known among the Malays of Sarawak. Ali would have problems with his leg throughout his life. Lorni binti Chong Interview
53 Wallace Malay Archipelago 167-8
54 Ibid p. 214
55 A cure for fever or to remove heat from the body here in Sarawak is take hibiscus leaves and boil them until a slime forms. This concoction is then applied to the head.
56 Wallace Malay Archipelago 215
59 Tom McLaughlin and Suriani binti Sahari who travelled extensively through Ternate.
In the graveyard, there were ladies who collected the fallen white flowers (*plumeria*) from trees. They were sold to the perfume makers for scents. We asked one about Ali’s grave and they immediately knew what we were talking about. They led us to a small plot and insisted that was the grave of Ali Wallace. When asked how they knew they explained one orang putih (white person) and two others had come and said that was the grave. We went to a retired Doctor and he was surprised to learn of the events. We also went to a couple of cement people and they denied making the grave.

Ali’s supposed grave (center) in Ternate. The cement and blue paint was added very recently.

Mbak Iiss, a clairvoyant in Ternate

The following day our driver took us to the home of a lady who, he said, went into a trance could tell the things about the past. I was expecting an old woman but a motorbike drove up and a beautiful girl of about 27 drove up. She put on a tudong and started her incantations. In an elderly persons voice and seemingly in a trance, she told the driver to quit

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61 Mbak Iiss was her name
having an affair with a local lady. She told us about Ali Wallace and said he was buried in a plot about a two hour boat ride from Ternate. When she came out of the trance we thanked her very much. The next day she rode with us around the island showing us the intensely beautiful sights of the island.

**Dr. Thomas Barbour**

Dr. Thomas Barbour came from a family of great wealth. He graduated from Harvard with a B.S. in zoology. He immediately and, with an eye on his doctorate degree, went with his new wife and collected many specimens during his trip through Indonesia. He became an expert in the west Indies, especially in Cuba. Using his money, he donated much to Harvard University and became head of the museum in 1927 where he remained for the next 18 years.  

Thomas Barbour wrote to Alfred Wallace in England, sent him a picture of men that he knew in Ternate. He also, apparently, from Wallace's reply, told him about meeting Ali. Wallace was very disappointed that Barbour did not send a picture of Ali.  

Thomas Barbour did not write about finding Ali until 1912 in an obscure Harvard Journal. Here, Barbour showed "Ali" a specimen of a lizard (L. muelleri (Schlegel) and stated "Ali, a faithful companion of Wallace during his many journeys, now an old man, and all agreed they had not seen such a lizard before." He again repeats the claim in a 1921 journal. In his 1943 autobiography he devotes only one paragraph to Ali. There are no conversations, no offers for meal or drink (a Malay adat standard) or any other pleasantries reserved for the Malay people. Strange for a man who described meeting "Ali" as a "real thrill." These are the only places Barbour mentions Ali in his long and illustrious career.

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64 A search of the New York Times and Times of London did not reveal any discovery.  
66 Ibid 39  
67 Thomas Barbour 'Aquatic Skincs and Arboreal Monitors', *Copeia* 97 (Aug 31,1921) 43  
68 Thomas Barbour Naturalist at Large (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1944): 42
Two National Geographic stories, published just after his trip, did not mention the encounter. One would think finding Ali would be akin to Stanley finding Livingston in Africa. There would be no reason for Barbour not to reply to Wallace’s missive and send him a picture of Ali. Until his biography, there are only lines about Barbour and Ali meeting in Ternate.

For these reasons, it is probable Barbour met somebody in Ternate who claimed to be Ali. Even Barbour was probably sceptical.

There is also no connection between Ali of Kampong Jaie and Ternate. All of the relatives deny any contact with the small volcanic island.

Our adventures in the search for Ali Wallace in the kampungs on the Sarawak River. We interviewed hundreds of people, off and on, over a seven year in our search. We combed kampungs from Tupong to Panglima Seman. It was at Kampung Bintawa Hilir that we met the Bomoh, Sapian bin Morni.

We interviewed him, in Sarawak Malay, and discovered contradictory stories between the official rendition and kampung facts about Sarawak history. We were about to leave, and as an afterthought, I asked about Ali. The above narrative flowed forth. I didn’t believe it until he came to the pantun. Then, I was almost convinced.

Ali’s Granddaughter

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69 Thomas Barbor, ’Notes on a Zoological Collecting Trip to Dutch New Guinea’, *National Geographic* (July, 1908) 469-484 and Thomas Barbor ‘Further Notes on Dutch New Guinea’ *National Geographic* (August, 1908) 527-545

70 A good deal of the Wallace correspondence is missing.

71 Speculation on my part is the person might be Baderoon See Wallace *Malay Archipelago* v. 2 p. 164

72 Interviews with Loni binti Chong, Sadam bin Morni and Sapian bin Morni
I told him we were going to Kampung Jaie. He said he couldn’t make until mid September (this was early August, 2016) I told we were going anyway and would meet Ali’s relatives. He came with us. A two hour drive and a winding road towards the sea took us to the Kampung. There lived the relatives of Panglima Seman and, in the grave yard Ali’s grave. The man who sang the pantun for us was Jompot bin Chong the son of Chong whose father was Panglima Osman. (Seman). We interviewed several of the relatives, noticed the physical similarities and came away convinced this was indeed the home of Ali, the boy who accompanied Alfred Wallace through the Archipelago.

Standing on berm looking north at Kampong Jaie. Ali’s house would been in what is now sea.
Conclusions

There can be no doubt that Ali returned to Sarawak following his journey. The pantun is proof of that.

Ali had a life before and after his adventures with Alfred Wallace. He was a medic with the forces that combated Rentap and then opened a business at Kampung Panglima Seman. After his journey, Ali left Singapore with a sea chest probably containing mementos from his trip with Wallace. He returned to his home Kampong Jaie to satisfy both adat and amanah. He continued to have problems with his leg. Ali probably composed a pantun in remembrance of Alfred Wallace which stands today in the minds of the elderly. He built a large house and raised his brothers family and, later his own. He was active in the manufacture of palm sugar. The guns were later confiscated by the Japanese. The box was either sent seaward or became the victim of neglect when the new berm was built. Ali died in his late nineties. His grave is in Kampong Jaie.