Fiction and Faction in the Malay World

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Edited by

Mohamad Rashidi Pakri and Arndt Graf

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Fiction and Faction in the Malay World,
Edited by Mohamad Rashidi Pakri and Arndt Graf

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4119-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4119-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I am very grateful to Prof. Arndt Graf of the Southeast Asia Studies Department, Goethe-University of Frankfurt, for giving me the opportunity to be the co-convenor for the "Fiction and Faction in the Malay World" conference and for hosting me in their new West End campus for more than a month. I wish to thank Dr. Rob Spence of Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire, also for hosting me for six months, during a sabbatical leave in the UK in 2010 which was funded by my university, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Special thanks to my research assistant, who is also my Ph.D student, Mr Marzban Mahdavi, for putting the chapters in this volume together. Special thanks must also go to Dr. Mary Jane Ainslie of University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus who helped review this first volume. Last but not least, I must thank my wife, Nazima Versay Kudus and my children, Fitria, Daniel and Adam for their love and support at the time when I needed it the most.

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PREFACE

When first approached to review what is arguably the first volume of Fiction and Faction in the Malay World, I experienced a mixture of deep appreciation and much trepidation. As a British academic working in Malaysia, one occupies a contradictory and problematic position as a liberal educator and producer of knowledge who is also the embodiment of an imperialist memory, one that still remains firmly embedded in the Malay psyche.

It is to my delight therefore, that this collection goes some way towards reconciling, engaging and addressing the presence of such a memory and its impact upon the formation of present day Malaysia. Indeed, to be involved in the formation of such a ground-breaking volume has been a privileged experience and one that I hope and believe is only the first step on a long journey towards greater understanding of the unique nature of Malaysia, a journey of which this volume is an integral part.

I have no qualms in stating that many of the essays contained within may not be of ideal construction when compared to the bureaucratic criteria demanded across the EuroAmerican-dominated world. Many raise more questions than answers and skirt across topics and subject matters that have the potential to confuse a reader who is unfamiliar with this specific cultural framework. They invite compelling questions regarding the purpose and status of the author and cover a context that is as diverse and problematic in reality as it is in an academic essay. Such irregularities are a significant part of this intricate process of constructing and understanding this 'shared space' now known as the diverse nation of Malaysia and I invite the reader to grapple with these important issues simultaneously with the authors.

The essays allow us to glimpse the fascinating process involved in addressing the changing status of the national and international world today. Specifically, they reflect the complex and conflicted status of a postcolonial nation undergoing radical political, social and economic change, change that is both external and internal. Constructing, reimagining and re-addressing the relationship between the colonizer and colonised, the past and the present and the self and other is the focal point of this collection. Contributors address the colonial era and its contradictory

relationship with Malay inhabitants, the Islamic traditions and influences which have impacted so significantly upon everyday life and the diverse nature of contemporary Malaysia, all through the scrutinising lens of the literary medium.

In short, this is a radical collection which bespeaks the need for scholars from the non-West to begin reclaiming that which is theirs. It provides a space for analysis and discussion in an era when this is increasingly necessary on an international scale. Together with their colleagues from the Goethe-University of Frankfurt, this diverse (and truly global) group offers much to consider about the contemporary Southeast Asian world.

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INTRODUCTION

This collection is comprised of selected papers from the seminar "Fiction and Faction in the Malay World" held in November 2010. This was a sequel to the jointly organised seminar "Trade and Finance in the Malay World" held at the Goethe-University of Frankfurt, Germany on 17-18 June 2010. This second seminar was a particularly complementary topic to the original subject: regardless of whether or not they continued to stay in the region, many of the foreign traders who came to the Malay World wrote extensive fiction and "faction" (writing that portrays real people or events in a dramatised manner) during their sojourn.

In this book, the contributors analyse works of fiction, diaries, vignettes, letters and other documents left by the various traders and colonial officers who visited the region in past eras. These writings and their detailed encounters with the 'natives' begin to reflect the views and personalities of the writers themselves. The collection begins with Dr. Timothy P. Barnard's chapter on H. N. Ridley's Book of Travels. Ridley served as the director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens from 1889 to1904 and was a key figure in the development of the Malaysian rubber industry. He journeyed across the Malay Peninsula to Borneo and Sumatra and maintained a journal throughout his travels (now kept at the archives of the Kew Botanic Gardens) that gives detailed descriptions of the plants and landscape of the region. Several decades after writing the journal, Ridley annotated his notes with further memories of these journeys in which he describes his encounters with local rulers and Orang Asli, as well as eyewitness descriptions of the Pahang Rebellions of the 1890s and the Mat Salleh Rebellion in North Borneo. Despite the variety of accounts and details provided over time, Ridley's focus, Dr. Barnard argues, continually remains within a British perspective of Malaya.

In the second chapter, Dr. Laurent Metzger examines the 'Exploration of Upper Perak' written by the explorer Jacques de Morgan in 1884. In the past many European travellers to the Malay world wrote detailed accounts of their visit. Such documents are particularly useful when examining the history of this geographical zone as descriptions from local writers are unfortunately rather scarce. Jacques de Morgan was one of these numerous travellers, he was the first European to explore the jungle of Upper Perak where even few local inhabitants (apart from the aborigines) had set foot.

His contribution to the Malay World at the turn of the 19th century is somewhat unique as he was a very complete scholar whose work encompassed geography, geologiy, anthropology, linguistics, botanisty, entomologiy and many more. De Morgan was a methodological scientist happy to make discoveries and keen to impart this new knowledge with his fellow human beings, his inclusion in this collection is due to the vital contribution he can make to understanding colonialist-era Malaya.

In chapter three, Dr. Tarmiji Masron and his co-authors bring an examination of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, the famous Malay literary masterpiece. The original text in Jawi script has been translated into several languages and many writers have examined this saga from literary, linguistic and historical perspectives. Taking one such translation, this chapter examines the relationship between space, time and events in the text. While geographical space has a close relationship with the culture of a particular place, space and time also play important roles in human daily activities. In a literary narrative, these corresponding elements are characters, time and location or space. Location or space refers to the place in which an event or a character is situated. Questions relating to the geography of a narrative are referring to this study of place, time, mood and event settings. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah* there are 155 locations specified in the saga, these include places in the Malay Archipelago, India, Siam, Mecca, Egypt and Turkey. Using the geographical information system (GIS) this chapter begins to unravel some of the questions that remain about the elements of Fiction and Faction in text, including location identification, the existence of a location at a particular time and the mode of travel used by the characters.

Aris Ahmad‘s chapter provides us with a reading of *Dayang Bunting*, an unknown idol from oral Malay fiction. The author relates his analysis to the treatment of Islamic Arts amongst institutionalized academics and in doing so begins to highlight major contradictions in the nature of and definition of Islamic Arts. The chapter further examines the visual, writing and performance elements of such works and addresses the current state of the collection of Islamic Art in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. It concludes that further interviews with practitioners in various fields are needed to explore the meaning of such a term.

Remaining on the subject of historical figures (i.e Hang Tuah and Dayang Bunting), Prof Dr. Othman Yatim’s chapter ‘The Belief in Keramat Among the Malays’ begins to a more detailed understanding of Malay cultural life. Much of the early research and writings on the history of Malay culture were conducted by amateur and professional British colonial officials such as Sircom, Winstedt, Wilkinson and many others

when they served in Malaya. The authors were astonished with what they saw and wrote on many diverse subjects that caught their attention. Among these was a Malay Grave known locally as *keramat*, a term which identifies the grave as belonging to a Saint. The Saint was a powerful man during his lifetime who was blessed with a special power to be able to heal the people in the villages. When these Saints passed away their graves were regarded as *Keramat* and the Malays visited the site (mostly on Fridays) with offerings to ask the Saint to grant their wishes. Since most of these graves could not be identified with actual personalities, the Malays used to associate them with a prominent legend known to the region. This is how names such as *Keramat Seri Bunian, Keramat Tok Susu Lanjut* and *Keramat Puteri Berdarah Putih* were created. Since the 1980s, the religious authorities in Malaysia viewed visitations to *keramat* as *shirik* (idoltry), an act against the teaching of Islam. Because of this most of these graves were destroyed to prevent the believers from continuing to visit.

Jamilah Ikhsan and Wan Rose Eliza Abdul Rahman's chapter on 'Warkah Al-Ikhlas: Description of trade during the Farquhar era in the Malay World' discusses trading relations with Malaya in the 19th century. The chapter conducts an analysis of all the letters and billets contained in the Al-Ikhlas Epistles (1999), also known as *The Farquhar Letters*, which discuss the type of goods traded, the states involved and the various measurements and weights used. This original data, rendered in the Jawi script, is evidence of the existence of trade relations between the West and the East between circa 1818 – 1821. Data from these 108 letters and 12 billets clearly details trading activities between the local Malay feudality and the British trader William Farquhar. The letters mention goods, the names of Malay noblemen and various locations in the Malay World. For instance: buying and selling, trading, cupak, gantang, roll, pouch, a roll, a bundle, European felt and the price for each. Although penned by his scribe Yahaya, the contents of the letters and billets sent by Farquhar clearly intimated that the thoughts and intentions contained therein were those of Farquhar. Certain writing styles can be detected which include expressions of deference, enquiries about well-being and various invitations and requests for permission to trade. The collated data reveals the cultural adaptation used by Farquhar to win the hearts of the Malay nobility and so facilitate the smooth flow of trade activities. In analysing the collated data, the paper utilised the 'Grounded Theory' approach (Creswell, 1998) which is based upon the possession of all the relevant contextual materials as a means to begin the case study. In addition,

informational polydiversity also allows a more expansive and in depth analysis to be conducted.

In chapter seven, Wilhelm Synman discusses Henri Fauconnier and his use of Malaya as a medium for self-exploration. Synman‘s analysis indicates how Malaya functions as a metaphor for the writer to escape his Western demons and further contextualises this analysis through reference to some of the surrounding debates regarding Sir Hugh Clifford’s writing. The chapter then examines the extent to which Fauconnier’s *Soul of Malaya* helps us to understand the Malaya of Fauconnier’s time, especially when the novel is not a quintessentially Western novel but instead deploys Malaya as the locus for the exploration of the Modernist self.

In the next chapter “Cheh! Sial-nya pembunoh, penderhaka!”: The Sultan Idris Training College Translation Bureau’s *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, Dr. Nurul Farhana explores issues relating to the translation of William Shakespeare’s works into Malay. According to Dr. Farhana, the Malay vernacular education during the era of British Malaya was elementary and functional and was largely restricted to reading, writing, arithmetic and handicrafts suitable to an agrarian existence. To ensure a sufficient supply of trained Malay teachers, the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) was established in Tanjung Malim, Perak in 1922. While it was primarily directed towards “reproducing the Western stereotypes of the pleasant, nimble Malay agriculturist or the rustic Malay schoolteacher”, in reality the SITC presented a stark contrast to the urban, elite Malay-Colonial bureaucratic English education. The SITC was the site of the first stirrings of Malay nationalism, events that have been largely attributed to the extraordinary leadership of its first principal, O.T Dussek. Dussek was aspired to elevate the status of Malay education by producing well educated teachers. He set up the Translation Burea and published Malay translations of English fiction to provide “healthy reading matter within the reach of every Malay villager”. Among the texts he selected were two Shakespeare plays, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*. This chapter explores the two translations, situating them within the worldview of traditional, feudal Malay society. It suggests that despite his dedication towards uplifting the status of Malay culture, language and education, Dussek’s choice of texts (perhaps unwittingly) reinforced prevailing feudal attitudes in the Malay world, potentially entrenching rural Malays’ acceptance of British rule.

Chapter nine by Mr. Marzban Mahdavi concerns the recently published novel *Evening is the Whole Day* by Preeta Samarasan. The alienated and marginalized characters of Samarasan’s novel are deeply entwined with its wider historical context. This informs their complex and contradictory identities that are a product of various interpersonal, intercultural and

interracial relationships. The author depicts an overarching failure to connect as well as the deep sense of alienation experienced by the Malaysian-Indian characters who simulteneously suffer as individuals caught between their consciousness of the imperial power and their colonial upbringing. Their existence in Malaysia under Malay influences is further complicated by their own personal distaste for such ethnocentric hegemony. The novel addresses the major challenges faced by this Indian ethnic group. These include the colonization of the country by the British who proceeded to marginalize the culture, language and identity of the native people. The characters are also subject to Malay hegemony and power over the Indian minority, actions that lead to the alienation of this group. Finally the novel depicts their awareness of the crises and contradictions that surround them and follows their struggle to carve an identity of their own.

In chapter ten, 'Narratives of Prejudice: Insights into Stereotypes in Singapore Malay Literary Works', Annaliza Bakri explores the portrayal of the Malays in narratives from various literary works. She indicates how such narratives often provide the platform to affirm or rebut stereotypes that are prevalent in society, ones often aligned to the interests of various social groups. In the Singapore Malay context, literary works offer the opportunity to highlight certain prejudices, ones against the Malays by non-Malays and also those propagated within the Malay community itself. Such prejudices reflect a society in which certain stereotypes are deeply embedded and viewed as fact rather than myth. Narratives in Singapore Malay literary works can also be regarded as an attempt to further sustain such stereotypes, increasing the need to re-construct such an image and address the position of the Malays in society. Literary works can oppose such stereotypes and seek to correct such a portrayal by providing an alternative viewpoint with rounded characters. Singapore Malay literary works have presented various images of the Malays and this chapter highlights, discusses and critically evaluates the prejudices portrayed in such works. The existence of narratives that proliferate stereotypes and also those which attempt to rebut such bias through creating stereotypes about the non-Malays, thus begin to create new 'myths' and portrayals that similarly begin to influence society. Thus, this chapter evaluates to what extent such narratives can portray the 'real' Malay society.

Nuraini Ismail, another Singaporean writer, explores the confluence of diverse thoughts through the perspectives of the traditional Malay text *Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang China.* History has shown that issues exploring the relationships between different countries have evolved over time against a backdrop of philosophical thoughts and changing civilizations.

The prowess of one's country's sovereignty and its relationship with neighbouring nations can be depicted in literary works. In this traditional Malay text, the paradigm of society's mindset is represented by the role of each of the characters in the text. Through these characters the '*weltanschauung*' of the Malay world can be deciphered. This chapter discusses encounters between the indigenous Malay "natives" and various foreign characters through the assimilation of politics, economy and social integration in the text *Syair Siti Zubaidah Perang China*. The chapter explores extent to which this assimilation of thoughts conjures up new systems of cultural exchange and ways of harmonious living. It also explores how such elements have revolutionized the status of Malay women within a prevalent patriarchal system. Through a historical and feminist approach, the values and perception of Malay women are compared to the status of foreign women in order to give a comprehensive overview of their postiiton in the hierarchical Malay system. Through an examination of this fiction, the chapter illustrates the divergent thoughts brought into the Malay World through the portrayal of these various characters.

In the final chapter, Dr. Chuah Guat Eng attempts to address some of the important issues related to the questions and contradictions surrounding Malaysian literature in English. Dr. Chuah analyses the portrayal of Malay characters in selected Malaysian novels written in English, with an emphasis on those published from the mid-1970s to the present. She frames this analysis within theories of social integration in multiethnic societies. Notably, this addresses the extent to which novelists who call themselves Malaysians and write about Malaysia yet choose to do so in the English language can be considered socially integrated with Malaysian people and the Malay world. Her analysis is thus both literary and sociological. Dr Chua uses both the Zen-based reading procedure developed in her doctoral thesis (2008) and concepts of social integration, such as the "Concentric Circle Model" (2009) developed by Salfarina Abdul Gapor and two other sociologists from Universiti Sains Malaysia Penang. The analysis explores whether there are significant differences in terms of perception and understanding between English-language writers (Malay and non-Malay) who are Malaysian nationals and those who are now citizens of other countries. In doing so it uncovers the novelists' preferred concepts of social integration that are embedded in their portrayal of Malays and the Malay world.

It is hoped therefore, that the present volume can shed some light upon the complexities of the Malay world and in doing so bridge the various academic disciplines that must be brought together to enable such an

understanding. It is also our sincere hope that all readers may benefit from the publication of this book and perhaps, in an attempt to 'revisit' our colonial texts and past experiences, be somewhat wiser about the increasingly blurred lines that separation fact from fiction in the construction of contemporary Malaysia.

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CHAPTER ONE

NOTING OCCURRENCES OF EVERY DAY DAILY: H. N. RIDLEY'S "BOOK OF TRAVELS"

TIMOTHY P. BARNARD

In 1897 a British botanist sailed up the Siak River in Sumatra where he was to inspect a timber concession and estimate its value for a colleague. He recorded the trip in a journal he made of the various expeditions from 1888 until 1904. The timber concession was located on the Mandau River, a branch of the Siak River, which begins approximately thirty kilometers above the capital of the local polity. Upon his arrival in that capital, known as Siak Sri Indrapura, the botanist met with the ruler of Siak in his palace. During the meeting, Sultan Syarif Hasyim Abdul Jalil Syaifuddun called his son over and asked him to pass out cigars to the visitors. According to the botanist, "The kid, about 7 or 8, did so politely and when he returned with the box retired behind him and out of sight of his dad and stuffed his pockets with cigars and I could see him distributing them to his little naked village friends."[1]

This account reflects a number of intersecting threads of colonial culture and observation in the Malay World. Sultan Syarif Hasyim Abdul Jalil Syaifuddun was the eleventh sultan of Siak, a polity that had been formed in the early eighteenth century from an amalgam of Minangkabau, Malay and other local cultures. The Sultan ruled from 1889 until 1908, and was a reformer, reflective of the type of ruler who took pride in his independence but also worked alongside colonial authority. In the 1890s he directed the construction of a new, European-style palace in Siak while a Dutch controller and military troops were housed across the river from

[1] RM 10, Papers of Henry Nicolas Ridley, The Book of Travels (or Minute Book), 1887-1912 (Royal Botanic Library Archives, Kew), p. 264. [Hereafter described as "Book of Travels".]

the palace. The Sultan also oversaw the modernization of his state, rationalizing bureaucracy through the development of a modern police force and the promulgation of a modern constitution.[2] His son – who distributed cigars to his friends after his encounter with the botanist – would become Sultan Syarif Kasim Abdul Jalil Syaifudin (and better known as Sultan Syarif Kasyim II), the last ruler of Siak. Sultan Syarif Kasyim II was known both for promoting local entrepreneurship, based on small rubber holdings, and for his support of the Indonesian Revolution. In 1998 he was officially made a national hero (*pahlawan nasional*) in Indonesia. Finally, the botanist who made the observation was Henry Nicholas Ridley, a man who is glorified as the key figure in the development of the rubber industry in Southeast Asia. While these three figures were important in the development of our understanding of the colonial Malay world, the account of the meeting is seen through the viewpoint of a British colonial official who was – as the subheading of his journal proclaims – "noting occurrences of every day daily".

This paper will focus on the travel journal that H. N. Ridley maintained during his tenure in Singapore. While accounts of encounters with rulers can be fascinating, Ridley's journal is interesting for a variety of other reasons. Ridley was an important figure in the development of the rubber industry, particularly in Malaya, and his journal is valuable for the insight it provides into the perspectives of a colonial official who was traveling the region as a scientist and not just an administrator. While he maintained the journal during his tenure in the region, Ridley also re-read it many decades later, and then added additional notes and memories. Inherent in such cultural underpinnings, Ridley's "Book of Travels" allows for a view into the ideas, prejudices, and concerns of British residents of the region. Ultimately, his notes have the ability to set the parameters for how scholars and citizens view the area and its historical figures some one hundred years after they were written. In this account he takes us on a journey that focuses on rebellions, plants, and the aboriginal peoples that populated the Malay World outside the usual centers of authority. He was noting occurrences of everyday life that, while ultimately subject to the dominating narrative of British power and the vagaries of memory, was also taking place beyond the reach of both British and Malay authorities.

[2] Timothy P. Barnard, "Rules for Rulers: Obscure Texts, Authority, and Policing in Two Malay states", *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, 2: 211-25; *Bab al-Qawa'id: Transliterasi dan Analysis*, ed. OK Nizami Jamil et al (Siak Sri Indrapura: BAPPEDA Kaputen Siak and Masyrakyat Peduli Lingungkan Wisata Siak Sri Indrapura, 2002).

To understand such observations, however, we first have to understand the man who noted them down.

H. N. Ridley and His Travels

H. N. Ridley was a product of the British imperial system. Born in 1855, the son of a reverend, Ridley received his university education at Oxford, where he focused on the natural history of the tropics with a particular interest in entomology. In 1880 he began work at the British Museum where he was assigned to the Botany Department, thus beginning his movement into the field that would make him famous. Ridley arrived in Singapore in 1888 and over the next 23 years worked at the Botanic Gardens. He appears in a number of important roles in the colonial scientific and economic milieu, ranging from research into the economic applications of a variety of plants, the publishing of important scientific research (both in Malaya and England) and even providing the initial botany lectures at the King Edward School of Medicine, the precursor to the National University of Singapore, in 1905.[3]

Ridley is best known for his scientific approach to rubber cultivation which became a vital component of the British colonial system in Malaya for the next forty years and led to a transformation of the landscape. This was achieved through his research into, and promotion of, the *Hevea* genus as the main crop of the rubber industry in Malaya. In the late nineteenth century a number of different plants were being tested and promoted as a potential supplier of rubber for expanding industries but none were able to fulfill the general needs of productivity and ease of growth except for the *Hevea* plant. Through his experiments, Ridley developed a system of tapping that did not harm the trees, allowed for a more efficient collection of latex, longer life for the plants, and greater profits for the growers.

In addition to his contributions with regard to rubber production, Ridley reorganized and modernized many of the institutions in Malaya that were associated with the Botanic Gardens in Singapore and Penang as well as establishing Forest Reserves throughout Malaya. As the Director of the Botanic Gardens he also investigated the potential of indigo, gutta-

[3] J. W. Purseglove, *The Ridley Centenary* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1955), 1-2.

percha and variety of other plants, trying to unlock their potential for the economy and empire.[4]

Ridley's tenure in Singapore, however, was not always smooth. He was seen as a promoter of science over commerce, which was the main focus of those in power in the British port. In the mid-1890s important colonial officials such as Frank Swettenham perceived Ridley as a nuisance, a feeling that Ridley ridiculed in return as he felt that officials in the Straits Settlements expected too quick a return on investment and displayed little of the patience needed when dealing with agriculture and plants in general. In this regard, Ridley was a "systematist", who had trouble interacting with those around him. As a systematist he would patiently record his observations and try to apply the results, but he also had a reputation as a prickly character. This led to descriptions of Ridley being a "workaholic" and "cantankerous"; one of his former colleagues even called Ridley a "Victorian old codger." Ridley's dedication and personality – combined with the appearance that he did his best work away from others – therefore pushed the botanist to travel frequently, as he was occasionally called upon to assess lands for their plantation potential or conduct a survey of the plants of a region. Ridley enjoyed going on expeditions, as "he never missed an opportunity of collecting in the forest, and there is no doubt of his preeminence as a field botanist", and occasionally also went on brief vacations.[5]

When H. N. Ridley arrived in Singapore he had already begun keeping a journal of his travels. The "Book of Travels" was initially maintained as a record of his first overseas expedition, conducted in 1877, to Fernando de Noronha in Brazil. This island is important within the annals of both natural history and British Imperialism, as it was the site of a visit Charles Darwin made in 1832 during his voyage on the *Beagle*. Ridley's account of this journey is found in the first 175 pages of the 350-page journal and

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[4] J. H. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya, 1876-1922: The Genesis of the Industry* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1973), 6-12; R. E. Holtum, "Obituaries: Henry Nicholas Ridley," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* [hereafter *JMBRAS*] 33, 1 (1960): 104-7; Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005), 72-3.

[5] Holtum, "Obituaries", 104-7; Humphrey Morrison Burkill, Reel 5, Oral History Centre, National Archives of Singapore. The approach of systematists also can be seen in the encyclopedic work of I. H. Burkill, who replaced Ridley as the Director of the Botanic Gardens. His most famous work was *A Dictionary of the Economic Products of the Malay Peninsula* (London: Crown Agents of the Colony, 1935), a two-volume encyclopedia of plants. Drabble, *Rubber in Malaya*, 7; Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation*, 76.

covers a variety of topics including the geology, flora and fauna of the island. This account was among his first publications, appearing in an issue of the *Journal of the Linnaean Society* in 1890.[6]

The second half of the journal records his travels in the Malay World. The trips were to Pahang (1891), the Taiping Hills of Perak (sometime between 1891 and 1896), the Batu Caves (1896), Mandau, along the Siak River in Sumatra (1897), British North Borneo (1897),the Kinta Valley in Perak (1898) and Gunung Pulai in Johor (1904). However, while the first half of the journal was published in a prestigious scientific journal in Imperial Britain, only one expedition described in the second half appeared in print, in the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. A colleague H. J. Kelsall, who accompanied Ridley on the journey, officially wrote this account, although Ridley clearly influenced the content of the report.[7]Some of the information he jotted down can also be found scattered in the dozens of articles he wrote for the Asiatic Society as well as the *Agricultural Bulletin of the Straits and FMS*, yet the ethnographic details of these expeditions have never been published. The handwritten notes found in the second half of the "Book of Travels" were also not for immediate presentation in late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century journals. They were to be the basis for Ridley's autobiography, on which he worked in the 1940s and 1950s but never finished.

The seven trips Ridley describes in the journal vary greatly in detail. His notes grow increasingly concise as his focus moved from being a young botanist recording his detailed observations of everything encountered to short notes in a journal. By the last entry in the journal – when Ridley hikes to Gunung Pulai in Johor over the Christmas break in 1904 – much of the attention to detail that is found in the earlier entries has now passed. For example, the expedition to Pahang, during which the party went to Gunung Tahan and interacted with Sakai, takes up 75 pages of the journal and is the only expedition in which the details are published elsewhere, while the trip to Perak covers only four pages. Some of this is related to the nature of the expeditions. The Pahang expedition was one in which he was trying to obtain new botanical specimens, and at least three other botanists accompanied Ridley on the trip. This account is filled with descriptions of plants discovered, their milieu as well as tales of dynamiting fish and bumping into Sakai. In contrast, the Perak and Johor

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[6] H. N. Ridley, "Notes on the Botany of Fernando Noronha" *Journal of the Linnean Society, Botany* 27, (1890): 1-94.

[7] H. J. Kelsall, "Account of a Trip up the Pahang, Tembeling, and Tahan Rivers, and an Attempt to Reach Gunong Tahan," *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* [hereafter *JSBRAS*], 25 (Jan 1894): 33-65.

trips were vacations. The trip to Perak, for example, entailed simple hikes from a cabin while staying at a plantation (and eventually Lady Weld's bungalow) for a few days. During these journeys to surrounding polities, usually outside of centers where the British administration could exert control, Ridley would list the plants that he saw, record his encounters with a variety of aboriginal peoples (*Orang Asli*), and describe the day-to-day activities of a European on an expedition.

Ridley initially only wrote notes on the right folio page in his journal. These notes – in a handwritten script that one scholar kindly describes as "never easy to decipher" – describe the basic components of the journey, and often devolve into lists of plants found with only an occasional mention of where he was at the time.[8] Many years later, mainly during the 1940s, as he was writing his autobiography, he returned to the journal, which triggered memories and anecdotes. When going over the notes he jotted down new memories and reflections upon his time in the Malay World and these later notes are usually found on the left folio page. Thus, while the jottings on the right reflect his original thoughts, these new notes allow insight into Ridley's memories and perspectives as well as our understanding. An example would be a note Ridley jotted down next to an observation made on 1 July 1891 that the people in the upper reaches of the Pahang River did not grow wet rice, however on the left folio page he notes many years later that "Hill rice is a variety which grows on perfectly dry soil. Its cultivation was forbidden by the Government to prevent natives neglecting swampy rice in favor of the easier grown food."[9] Thus, the accounts of these expeditions first allowed Ridley to note the natural features of the region, particularly the flora, so greatly contributing to his most important botanical publication, his five-volume *The flora of the Malay Peninsula.* The later notes then allowed for him to think back on his observations with an emphasis on the larger context, so clarifying something that may not have been explained well in the initial notes or that he considered unusual.[10] The story about the cigars and the future sultan of Siak was among those noted on the left folio page.

While Ridley remained in Singapore until 1911, and visited the region again for brief trips in 1917 and 1921, he did not write any accounts of expeditions in the journal after 1904.[11] With the exception of the Pahang

[8] Holthum, "Obituary", 107.
[9] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 184-5.
[10] Henry Nicholas Ridley, *The Flora of the Malay Peninsula*, (London: L. Reeve and Co., 1922-5).
[11] Some of these other expeditions did appear in the various incarnations of the Royal Asiatic Society journal. H. N. Ridley, "A Botanical Excursion to Gunung

expedition, the journal usually includes quick observations of surroundings, occasionally a sketch of a unique natural formation or of a river's route and then long lists of plants encountered on the journey. After 1904 he had been in the region for fifteen years. His work was so full with research, publications and overseeing the Botanic Gardens that he may have had little time to devote to the journal or have taken notes in a different manner. It is also possible that his observations of "occurrences of everyday life" had become so mundane to the botanist that they were no longer worth noting down. During his thirteen years of note taking in his journal, however, he reveals the extensive ideas, understandings and concerns of a British official in the Malay World.

Noting the Landscape

Ridley's journal primarily reflects the interests and desires of a botanist in Malaya. While he went on his expeditions for a variety of reasons, it is references to plants that dominate the journal. For example, Ridley begins his account of the trip to Pahang in 1891 with the following: "June 27th. Collecting at Pahang and Ayer Hitam. Plants seem Arthrophyllum n ovalifolium mix."[12] Annotations such as this make up a number of pages. This focus on botany is also apparent during his journey to North Borneo where he was to provide advice to a planter wanting to cultivate rubber. During the journey along the coast of Borneo to Sandakan, Ridley notes the existence of plantations of manila hemp and coffee scattered amongst the woods so dense he could "collect but little", something he regrets as "little botanizing has been done in this area". These notes on the landscape dominate the right folio pages – written at the time of observation – of the journal.[13]

Another example of Ridley's unsurprising focus on the flora of the region can be found in the notes following his visit to Perak in the vicinity of Kampar in the Kinta Valley where he collected botanical material with eight other men in 1898. The notes from this journey are almost exclusively about the flora encountered and there is little social commentary or even a mention of who the other eight men were. Even the

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Jerai (Kedah Perak)," *JSBRAS*, 34 (July 1900): 23-30; "A Botanical Excursion to Northern Sumatra," *JMBRAS* 1, 1 (1923): 46-113; "An Expedition to Christmas Island," *JSBRAS* 45 (June 1906): 137-55; Holtum, "Obituary", 107.

[12] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 177. As true with any handwritten journal there are numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. All of the quotes in this paper reflect the original, as Ridley wrote it.

[13] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 283, 289, 297.

annotations to the notes, written some fifty years later, are usually focused on the plants. This is only broken with a short comment, in the case of the Perak account written many years after the trip, when he remembered sighting a Sakai family in a village market and encountering some Buddhist images, "which consist mainly at least of small clay figures of Buddha found in the niches, and thus the Siamese claimed all that area."[14]

Ridley's descriptions of the landscape, however, provide a fascinating account of the Malay World and how a British botanist traveled through and perceived it at the dawn of the twentieth century. For example, during his journey to Pahang he describes the lowlands between Kuantan and the mountains that serve as a backbone of the Malay Peninsula as "a sandy plain with small woods as far as Kuala Tembeling. Elephant, tiger, seladang (wild ox) and or sambar, wild pig a large kind are common here." Ridley spent the days going up river as a "man poled the boats", only stopping at night when they camped next to the rivers. For food they would shoot pigeons or black and white hornbills ("which are excellent eating") but, even in these descriptions of Pahang, Ridley could not venture far from his botanical curiosity with notes such as "Helminthostachys grows in spots were buffalo had been and defecated much dung under bushes" and "Rambutan Rambi and Durian are common in these jungles".[15] Beyond such asides his journeys also allowed Ridley to compare and contrast various areas of the Malay World, which he concluded had much similarity in its rivers and landscape. During his trip to Siak, in Dutch-controlled Sumatra, he noted that the "flora on the whole resembled that of the Malay Peninsula… a good collecting ground which ought to be explored" and while his trek in Johor to climb Gunung Pulai provided excellent views of the surrounding countryside, it was unsatisfactory for Ridley as it was "rather a poor collecting ground but a few good plants found".[16]

The rise and fall of plantations (and the toll they took on lives) is also often the focus of later comments on the landscape in Ridley's "Book of Travels". During his trip to Johor in 1904 Ridley provides an interesting description of plantations prior to the emergence of rubber. His trek mainly involved walking upriver after being dropped off at the end of the road by a rickshaw and cart. On the Skudai River, which was "brackish until the 10th mile", the forest only began in the sixteenth mile. Prior to

[14] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 299, 308.
[15] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 178, 197.
[16] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 277, 319. Ridley publicly stated that he wanted to collect plants from all of the states in Malaya so that could compare them for variation. Burkill, Reel 5, Oral History Centre.

that point he found many abandoned gambier and coffee plantations which were overgrown with scrub plants and poorly maintained. It was a place with only "a few still at work". As he reached the far boundaries of these plantations – the goal of the trek was to climb Gunung Pulai – he even noted that the seedlings appeared to be diseased. The estate was in such a condition due to a high number of deaths from fever which killed three managers of the plantation as well as "hundreds of coolies". As Ridley remembered later, "one of my Eurasians seduced by an offer of high wages in spite of my advice not to go went and died within a year. Native corpses were said to be lying about all over the woods at one time."[17]

The wilderness on the edges of this transformed and tenuous landscape also appears in his account of Siak. When sailing on this Sumatran river Ridley was taken aback by the poor condition of the state, observing that many houses were abandoned and former tobacco plantations were overgrown and often suffering from elephant damage. The hardships inherent in the landscape, and the difficulties this imposed on those who tried to tame it, was also a theme in many of his notes, which is not surprising for a botanist interested in promoting the development of plantations and profits. This harshness is also noted decades later. The timber concession he investigated in Siak, for example,

> "though rich in first class timber, was extremely unhealthy for the woodsman. These Chinese were working and practically sleeping in water… many had died. Coming back from the concession in the launch, we saw one of them sitting in a pandan bush that we were unable to rescue him from the launch but sent a boat back for him and brought him to camp where he sat down and didn't speak. We gave him some food and he presently recovered enough to tell us he had run away from the concession three days before".[18]

The concession was so problematic due to access and health of workers that it was abandoned soon afterwards.

Tigers were also a concern in Siak. Ridley reported that near the capital there "is a graveyard full of people killed by tigers. 300 were killed in one year, but the tigers have apparently now left." He also came across two abandoned villages while sailing up the Siak toward the Mandau River. In one village only one home was occupied. Ridley spoke with the owner who warned him not to go beyond the village, as he was "liable to be killed". "Later further up I saw the remains. Roofs of another

[17] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 315, 317-18.
[18] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 268.

abandoned village eaten up by tigers. No one remained." He also noted that he saw numerous tigers and large boars in this area and "the river swarms with crocodiles and tapak fish… which is very dangerous as it attacks swimmers and bites pieces off them, especially attacking the private parts". Ridley himself attempted to bath between the boat and the shore one night, but locals warned him to get out of the water.[19]

The core of H. N. Ridley's "Book of Travels" is descriptions of plants and their environment, providing great insight into the Malay landscape. This is not surprising considering that Ridley was the chief botanist in British Malaya and had an interest in collecting and cataloguing plants in a very systematic fashion. Alongside these botanical notes, and his vivid descriptions of the landscapes and its hazards, Ridley would not examine the fauna he saw during his treks but also usually explain where he stayed for the night. In comments jotted down while re-reading the journal, Ridley also provides a description of the state of plantations prior to the introduction of rubber. However, he rarely describes any people he met and instead the focus is on the flora, fauna and surrounding landscape. When he needed to remember the actions of the people he encountered, Ridley usually focused on differences.

Noting People, Remembering Difference

The instances in which Ridley moves beyond the landscape to describe the people he encountered fit into three distinct categories: that of Orang Asli, royalty, and Europeans. Malays and other residents of the region hardly merit a note. The only mentions of Chinese workers in the text regard a man he rescued in Siak and a "towkay" who helped him hire coolies to carry his equipment during the trek to Gunung Pulai in Johor. Any mention of Chinese influence is also rare, such as when Ridley saw mine shafts in Perak that were "said to be traces of Chinese work". This lack of focus on the people who populated Malaya is perhaps best seen in his visit in 1896 to the Batu Caves, the site of an important Hindu temple. Ridley does not mention the presence of any worshipers or even the temple itself, even though K. Thamboosamy Pillay had installed the initial shrine in the caves by 1890. Ridley's main interest was the presence of such a large limestone formation so far south in the Peninsula. He describes the caves as "crystalline" and "light or blue", and the largest one

[19] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 264-6. In addition, the nephew of the Dutch Controlleur of Siak was present during Ridley's visit. The nephew was hoping to go on a tiger hunt.

as being like a "Cathedral, dark, high and roomy." He goes on to list the various features of the caves, and he names the main three caves "Quarry", "Dark" and "High", and the types of animals – such as cricks and lizards – that he found in the various caves.[20] The presence of any people, or their activities, is not worth noting, unless it involves the elite or aboriginal peoples.

Orang Asli fascinated Ripley.[21] They are the only people who merit long comments in both the original notes and those written down fifty years later. In the original notes, he often marvels at the uses these groups make of the fauna, with comments such as "Pogosteman heyneanus is carried about the woods by the Sakai girls for its perfume", or that he saw "a fisherman using pounded Kepayang fruit to attract fish", notes that are typical from the botanist on his journey through Pahang.[22] These accounts of Orang Asli life occasionally venture into ethnographic reportage about their lifestyles, which he found unique enough to write down. In Pahang, Ridley encountered an abandoned Sakai hut in the upstream areas of the Tahan River. He described the hut as a pile of sticks and palm leaves, resembling "a large mouse nest" or a "beehive". He then went on to describe how the Sakai would sit in the hut with a smoky fire, summarizing his account with "Smoke is the garment of the Sakais". Ridley finally claimed that he encountered this tribe again in a later expedition: "These wildmen again hung about the jungle at night and picked up what they could". Again in 1916 "the tribe was discovered in an adjoining valley."[23]

While his trip to Pahang contains the majority of his comments on Orang Asli life, these diverse aboriginal peoples also appear in his accounts of Perak, Siak, Johor and North Borneo. In Perak in 1898 he reports "a family of Sakais came into the village with jungle produce. There are many here. As usual they were some really light colored compared with the Malays." In Siak, Ridley was fascinated with the Akit, who "spend their whole life on their rafts and only go ashore for firewood

[20] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 316, 309, 259.

[21] While "Orang Asal" is the preferred nomenclature today for all aboriginal peoples in Malaysia, I will use "Orang Asli" as the vast majority of his descriptions of Orang Asal are from Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, and Orang Asli is the common nomenclature used in both places.

[22] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 208, 197, 202-3. Ridley notes that the fruit attracted the fish, and shortly thereafter the fisherman – described as an "aborigine" – threw a dynamite cartridge in the water. "When it exploded we certainly got a lot of fish".

[23] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 214-16, 228.

and timber for repairs. Indeed for a mile or so inland [on the Siak River] on "land", the river flows through the woods. These waterwoods are very difficult to penetrate." Ridley tried to get out of the boat and walk through these woods but was only able to "get about 100 yards", having to give up due to the combination of undergrowth, unstable ground and water inundation. At the timber concession in Siak, Ridley observed that the only occupants were Akit, who are "evidently Malay". "They live on rafts, rough homes of bark or wooden logs in the river, and catch fish which are kept in cane baskets under water till it is time to send to Siak. They had there large Tapa fish." In this area "the woods are full of water". He tried to find some high ground to survey the area but was unable to and eventually had to "push the boat through the woods for some way."[24]

The combination of both landscape description and commentary on Orang Asli lifestyles continues in his description of his trip to North Borneo, where Ridley stopped at Tetabuan, a pearling station, to meet the Penghulu and hire a guide. He describes Tetabuan as:

> "a large village built on piles in the sea on a submerged sandbank and there is no dry land on it. Pearl oyster shells are collected here and immense piles of these shells lie under the houses. The natives are Bajaus, a pirate race. The only dry land was Lincabu Island, used by them as a graveyard where the corpses were so shallow-buried that they exhaled a distinctive cadaverine odor."

Finally by 1904 during his trip to Johor, Ridley commented that the Sakai in the area were rumored to be the descendents of "Orang Selitar", originally from Singapore, who had been exiled to the region following the British annexation of the island port.[25]

While the Orang Asli and their seemingly exotic lifestyle and history would have merited particular attention to the British botanist, it is the unusual aspects – from a British perspective – that attract Ridley's attention in notes scribbled on the left folio page and written some forty to fifty years after the events described. In these asides Ridley often emphasizes behavior that is contrary to British norms or ones that fit British hubris. For example, during the trip to Pahang, Ridley found the sprouts of a durian and a rambutan tree outside of Sakai huts. He claimed "both their seeds had passed through the Sakai being clearly mixed up with the excreta. The durian seed is certainly large for this." The role of hubris in memory can be seen when he notes in original jottings about

[24] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 266-7, 299.
[25] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 326, 339.

Pahang that, when exploring near Gunung Tahan, "he started to cut a path" through the jungle. In his memories, Ridley recalls, "I did most of the track-cutting as I was rather good at it and they were rather slack." Ridley's hacking-at-jungle-undergrowth skills were so good in his estimation that he "one morning starting early almost overtook a wild man. He was clearly just in front of me as a branch he had cut was just falling to the ground. But, though I hastened, I did not catch a glimpse of him."[26]

These perceptions of superiority with regard to his jungle skills also are reflected in Ridley's comments about royalty. For example, in account written in 1944, he describes a prince of Perak whom he met in 1898 as "very petulant and attended by a very quiet and pleasing little girl". Remembering the same trip, Ridley also recounts seeing, "a detachment of the Sultan of Perak's harem… returning from a circus at Thaiping. They consisted of a half a dozen girls; the eldest who was engaged to be married was about 13".[27] Descriptions of the "petulant" behavior of the sultan – who Ridley incorrectly thought was the ruler of Perak in the 1940s – and the noting of the age of marriage in the royal household merited comment as they were considered 'beyond the pale' and were also written long after the initial observations. This is in contrast to behavior that was considered the norm at the time of writing. The only comment in the journal's original notes about meeting Malay royalty occurs on the visit to Siak – "a miserable spot which has fallen from its former high estate when tobacco planting was going on here". The Sultan, who was in the process of building a European-style palace, was "a stout, pleasant Malay rather light coloured" who joined Ridley at the "local club" where they had "whisky and soda and cigars" together.[28] While such a comment would be scandalous in a Malay state of the early twenty-first century it was considered normal behaviour a hundred years earlier. The naughty behavior of the crown prince, who purloined cigars for his friends, was also noted later.

The fact that Ridley points out such behavior long after the events occurred reflects the power of remembering the unusual. This is also particularly apparent if such behavior is perceived as threatening the British presence in the region. An instance of this occurs during his trip to Pahang in 1891. Ridley remembers his meeting with the Sultan Ahmad of Pahang in Pulau Tawar in Jerantut. He begins his account with "His palace was a barn-like building in a village" and then proceeds to describe the

[26] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 218-19, 229-30.
[27] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 254, 256.
[28] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 265.

difficulty in bringing the boat close enough to the muddy banks to allow disembarkation. Ridley and his crew were then shown into a "very ordinary room" that contained an empty birdcage, a large clock and wooden boxes "believed to contain gold dust". The Sultan did not provide chairs – Ridley believed later – because "he liked to see Europeans sitting uncomfortably on the floor". When the Sultan arrived they ate chicken pastries and drank aromatic coffee while he proudly showed Ridley a "gun ornate with colours of Dutch origin". Finally, Ridley writes, "he was actually then arranging for the attack on the Europeans, which took place next year, having been postponed from this year! He gave us a letter to the Penghulu of Tembeling which… was to warn all natives not to assist us as he took us for spies".[29]

This concern over Malay subterfuge in an atmosphere of unrest also appears in Ridley's remembrances of how he treated his coolies in Pahang. Written fifty years after the events of 1891, Ridley mentions that when he returned from Gunung Tahan "the country was on the verge of revolt". Ridley did not trust his coolies in such a situation (particularly after one of them dropped rifle cartridges in the water as they neared the downstream settlements) feeling that he could only rely on two Dayaks who had accompanied him. Tensions developed further when Ridley had a coolie from Trengganu caned – "twelve strokes to the bare bottom" – over the theft of "a lot of tobacco and some pencils" and another coolie went into Pekan and caused a disturbance – "nearly caused a riot" – after drinking a bottle of brandy Ridley had given to him.[30]

While the lack of trust with his Malay assistants, and the Sultan of Pahang, may have been real, later accounts most likely colored much of Ridley's memories. In the publication about the expedition, published in 1892, there is no hint of these tensions or problems. The meeting with the Sultan went well and any problems with coolies are attributed to their reluctance in approaching Gunung Tahan due the harshness of the journey and its association with Sakai groups.[31] Ridley's original account focused on the plants of the region; it is only in his memories that problems relating to Malay artifice appear. The accounts of events in Pahang in 1891 therefore raise questions about memory and facts in British accounts of the Malay World.

The Pahang Rebellion was a series of disturbances which, although often portrayed as nationalistic struggles against British colonialism, were closely rooted in tensions between the sultan and other officials in the

[29] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 192.
[30] Ridley, "Book of Travels", 250.
[31] Kelsall, "Account of a Trip Up the Pahang".