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Turning the Pahang colonial page: narratives of definition in three phases

Muhammad Haji Salleh

Abstract: **This article compares the colonial and post-colonial narratives of writers of Pahang. It begins with Hugh Clifford who, in *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya* (1926), demeans the English-educated Malay hero who resists colonial domination. On the next narrative page, in the early post-colonial work *The Prince of Gunung Tahan* (1934) by Ishak Haji Muhammad, the colonial plot is reversed when British explorers are deceived and a Malay hero 'conquers' an English woman. Finally, in *Jungle of Hope* (1986), Keris Mas refutes the British view that Malays were lazy, without ambition and disorganized as his characters struggle to cultivate new land and explore their identity and life's meaning.**

Keywords: **fiction; Pahang; Hugh Clifford; Ishak Haji Muhammad; Keris Mas**

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This article proposes a reading of the narratives of Pahang through three literary phases, moving from the colonial period, through the early post-colonial years, to the post-colonial period in an independent Malaysia. The narratives reflect not only the times but also the minds of the authors, particularly their personal and official outlooks and attitudes, which in turn were determined by the colonial or independent state. The first work, Hugh Clifford's *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*, was published in 1926 and depicts an age of rebellion against the British from 1891–95; the second, Ishak Haji Muhammad's *The Prince of Mount Tahan*, was first published in Malay in 1937 during high colonial times, and contains a subplot of that same end-of-century uprising; and finally, Keris Mas's *Jungle of Hope*, first published in Malaysia 31 years after the 1957 Independence, is one of Malaysia's

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first truly post-colonial novels. While the colonial or independent state and the times do influence the works, it is argued that the ideological aspects of each author's political beliefs contribute to the colour, the slant of the plot, and the meaning of the works themselves.

Chapter One: Hugh Clifford, *A Prince of Malaya*

'Empire is itself the strangest of all political anomalies. That a handful of adventurers from an island in the Atlantic should have subjected a vast country divided from the place of their birth by half a globe ... these are prodigies to which the world has seen nothing similar. Reason is confounded', states Thomas Babington Macaulay in his nineteenth-century speech 'Government of India' (2004, p 163). Hugh Clifford's case might even be stranger, for almost single-handedly he wrested power from the Sultan of Pahang and handed it over to the British, and later became the British Resident in Pekan. He first went to Pahang at the incredibly young age of 21. While on the one hand Clifford physically claimed Pahang for the British through a series of negotiations, he also emotionally claimed Pahang for himself, a young white lad from England. Through his words, descriptions and writings, he proclaimed that it was Pahang 'that I love' (Clifford, 1928, p 40). His description of the territory, which he helped to wrestle from the Malays, defined the state for the readers in the mother country and those around the world in the 1920s. It was *his* Pahang, seen through *his* eyes as the British representative and serving their cause. But his readers only had his words and, as it were, the words of the white man against the silence of the Orang Asli (the first Malaysians) and Malays.

It was no mean feat to 'decipher unfamiliar spaces' that were all new to the young Clifford, but as Boehmer (2005, p 14) notes, 'travelers and colonizers relied on and scattered about them the stock descriptions and authoritative symbols that lay to hand.... Strangeness was made comprehensible by using everyday names, dependable textual conventions, both rhetorical and syntactic.' Clifford reduced Aslian and Malay realities to the colonial conventions of the English language, attitudes and approved subplots of native lives. He was writing to the British, to whom he was also indirectly boasting of his conquest over the natives, over their lives, and of how 'primitive' they were in comparison with the English. Thus when he gave names to Malay characters, the environment and society in English terminology – although that language, its nuances and metaphors grew from a

different people and environment – he was in effect fixing a (somewhat final) definition of what they were. Seen from another standpoint, he was also defining himself and his attitudes, for all writing grows from the person and is therefore a branch of the self.

This is also related to colonial power. As Boehmer (2005, p 17) writes, 'almost any act of colonial description, any effort to carry over meaning from the old country, worked to ascribed intention and dimensionality to unknown space'. This space is 'unknown' to the colonist, but this is not the case for the natives. This act of defining claims a knowledge over the people, and therefore claims a power over them too, just as the colonial administration claims political and economic power for Britain. Eventually, colonial officers, such as Clifford and Frank Swettenham, who became authors, would claim that their writings drew the 'true' picture. They wrote of the 'Real Malay' and the 'Modern Malay' without much reference to the narrative of Malays or their perspectives on the issues described. Today, especially for younger readers, we have only these texts to enable us to travel back into the past, bringing us back to another Pahang, another Malaya of the colonial mind and words.

Before we become lost in the general discussion of the colonial writer, let us return to *A Prince of Malaya.* It is a story of a young prince named Saleh in the state of Pahang, whose royal father is persuaded by an English officer to let him be escorted to England, where he is introduced to the English way of life and the education system. In Winchester, the Le Mesurier family (the patriarch being a clergyman) act as hosts to Saleh, and his early days are ones of humiliation. While in Pahang he was Saleh, in London he is called 'Sally'. Clifford plays on this to feminize his protagonist, a common metaphor for conquered peoples to be found in many similar texts. From the metaphor of the female, Clifford continues his description further with the metaphor of the jungle – that of a wild animal, especially in Saleh's reactions to the family during his first days.

The project was to turn this Pahang prince into an Englishman. For this, Saleh has to be taught their values, which the author found were not possessed by him or his people. Clifford highlights the English values of time, discipline and duty, which Malays do not seem to have, and which therefore must be rigorously instilled in the young prince. Over time, Saleh grows to be a good sportsman and an accomplished dancer, but these talents appear to be inherent in his race. On the other hand, his intellectual development is stunted, and therefore he is not

able to enter into the world of upper class Britons, which seems to be ruled by ideas and abstractions, and for which he has little interest or inclination. As Clifford wrote:

> 'He was still "slack," incurably "slack", more especially whenever anything in the nature of an intellectual effort was demanded of him; but he was not alone in this, for the failing was shared by many of his English comrades. In games, however, this weakness did not show itself, for the sporting instincts of his race came to his rescue. He pulled a good oar, for one of his size and weight; he was a pretty bat and the neatest of fielders; his activity and dexterity stood him in good stead at Association football and at hockey; he was a beautiful gymnast, and as a swimmer no one in his set could touch him.' (1926, p 43)

Moreover, after a span of five years in England with the Le Mesuriers, Saleh became:

> 'a very different being from the little, scared, half-savage boy who had been thrust, like a trapped animal, into Mrs. Le Mesurier's drawing room. Regular hours, quantities of good, plain, English food, plenty of open air and violent exercise at all seasons and in all weathers, had wrought a great improvement in his physique.' (1926, p 42)

It was in this manner that he grew to be an enviable physical specimen, but was not able to fulfil the intellectual requirements demanded of him. Without this intellect, this measure of maturity of the mind, he would never be categorized as 'civilized'.

The experiment, though, was completed within five years, and was considered successful. His Malayness had been removed, as if by surgery, and English content had been put in its place:

> 'Thenceforth, till very near the end of his sojourn in England, the denationalization of Raja Saleh was a completed fact. The Malayan shell was there, more or less intact; a mist of nebulous memories, hovering somewhere in the background of his mind, told of a Malayan past; but within the lad the Malayan soul lay dead, or slumbering, and in its stead had been born the soul of a clean-minded, honest-thinking, self-respecting Englishman, possessed of many of the virtues and not a few of the limitations of its kind.' (1926, p 40)

In this section, Clifford used the term, ‘denationalized’, an interesting word to describe the process of ‘de-Malayanization’, for in fact it was more race than nation that was taken out of him: it was his soul, as the author rightfully points out.

Thus, schooled as a young Englishman, he is again tested – this time by a forgotten side of his colonized Malay self. Clifford puts him in the path of a Rajput princess, who has not only a historical axe to grind, but also personal one. During their initial meeting, she ambushes him intellectually:

> ‘“Have you learned no history, you little black boy?” she asked. Having been proudly tutored and brought up by the Mesuriers, he answered, “Oh yes,” said Saleh, with the ineradicable childishness of his race, and anxious, too, to display his knowledge.
>
> “I know a lot of history, about Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror, and Warren Hastings…”’ (1926, p 53)

This victim of colonialism’s machinations was allowed to have his say in this altercation with the princess. Saleh, the non-intellectual, could defend himself only childishly. The princess unleashes her understanding of history, which leads to an exchange between the two colonized people that reveals much about Clifford’s views of Malays. The princess explains:

> ‘The English robbed us!…. Everybody who knows any thing knows what bandits these English are. They talk a great deal about right and wrong, and about injustice and justice; they are always sending poor people to prison for little thefts; but they make me sick – these English – they are such robbers! They were running wild in their horrid wet woods, naked and shivering under their blue paint, when my ancestors were civilized men and mighty kings.’ (1926, p 54).

To Saleh, the perfectly colonized native, this is an unthinkable and blasphemous attack. Lost in his Englishness and limited in his intellectual grasp of the intricate workings of colonialism, her attacks put him on the defensive, and they reveal a new truth:

> ‘while it made the fool’s paradise in which he had been living so contentedly totter to its foundations, [it] outraged him by laying

> sacrilegious hands on much which he had learned to regard as holy. For the moment he … had no words at his command to oppose … the flood of the girl's rhetoric.' (1926, p 54)

Eventually, Saleh defends his hosts:

> '"I do not think like you," he said, hesitatingly, and even to his own ears his words sounded weak and stupid. "I like the English. They are my friends. They do a lot of good. They are kind people and are just in their dealings."' (1926, p 55)

Her reply was a shrill accusation:

> '"You like the English!" she cried. "You dare to say that you like them – you, an Asiatic, the son of one of the many whom they have despoiled! Only cowards like them, cowards who fawn, as dogs fawn ... upon the hand that beats them – thus!"'

Her continuing vehemence leaves Saleh a shaken man:

> 'Jarred to the very marrow, confused, humiliated, and beset by vague doubts. During the whole interview his own inferiority had been borne in upon him with the force of a new discovery, for throughout she had spoken to him, because he was not white, he ranked no higher in her estimation than if he were one of her hounds. Coming precisely at the moment when for the first time his colour was beginning to trouble him, the wound thus inflicted had eaten deep into his soul.' (1926, p 59)

Greatly troubled, Saleh wishes that he had known more history, had more education – real education that would have enabled him to reflect critically on his own predicament, and perhaps also on Pahang's. The princess is an agent of revelation, to bring him back from his illusion, to his miserable colonized situation – and present him with another perspective, other than the one he has been given. Soon the story turns to another test.

Saleh falls in love with Alice Fairfax, a white British lady. However, Alice merely likes him, as she prefers Englishmen as prospective husbands. The Malay boy was thought of in a different way: he was just a guest and friend, and she was nice to him out of pity, since to

'Alice, Saleh's nationality and colour made him to all intents and purposes sexless. In her estimation he was not a man like other marriageable men, and she accordingly admitted him behind that barrier of reserve which is the girl's natural entrenchment against the aggression of the male besieger' (1926, p 64). Again, the metaphor of the animal – the offensive swine – was used for the Muslim boy:

> '…but their attitude towards him resembled that of the great Dr. Johnson with regards to the pig. They were not greatly concerned with the excellence of his swinish calligraphy, all their admiration being claimed by the marvel that a pig should write at all.' (1926, p 64)

This is the wounded climax and the painful outcome of the first part of the tale:

> 'It was the stirring within him of the Malayan soul that had so long been lulled in anesthesia; a stirring made more violent by the truth so abruptly, so mercilessly revealed, that his transformation into a white man – a transformation he had fondly believed to be triumphantly complete – was only a mockery, a sham. The bitter realization of his racial inferiority was upon him now in its fullness, and while it inspired him with self-loathing, causing him to feel that, as he had phrased it, he was "made all wrong", it aroused in him a certain savage lust to give free play to his lower impulses.' (1926, p 84)

It was an unfolding nightmare, for now he was almost totally lost in an illusion – he belonged nowhere. As Clifford, still the spokesman for British intervention in a Malay state, writes:

> 'We white folk have done a lot of good in Pelesu, beyond a doubt, but it will take a world of it to wipe out the memory of the harm we have done to poor Saleh. From first to last we have made a pretty bad break with him.' (1926, p 97)

— * * * —

Saleh's return to Pahang in the second part of the novel is sorrowful and disturbing. Initially, his young brother symbolically rejects Saleh for his strange looks and clothes; his presence even disturbs the servants, since he enters the palace with his boots on. His return is

further complicated when Saleh is unable to see his mother, whom Clifford portrays as an opium addict and an old hag, forever complaining about her husband (his father) who has abandoned her for a young concubine. The father too is distant, and is described as a primitive, insensitive, gruff old man, who has more time for his fighting cocks than his sons. In comparison, the Le Mesuriers were upright, moral and proper. Furthermore, Baker, the British Resident in Pelesu, acts arrogantly towards the *raja* and other Malays; and although quite young, Baker considers his actions, without the least hesitation, as being morally just. In addition to the problems within his immediate family, the young prince must also deal with a group of old retainers, whose parasitic relationship with royalty creates further problems.

In the meantime, Saleh makes the acquaintance of two men. The first is a true-blue Malay warrior, Raja Pahlawan Indut, who is the model of a true nationalist, deeply aware of the state's history and his place in it; his goal is to overthrow the British. The second man, Raja Haji Abdullah, is also a rebel and a deeply religious man. He represents the character of the dissenter who opposes the British presence on religious grounds. Torn between these two possibilities, Saleh's situation deteriorates rapidly. Saleh's main task in working for the British is the collection of taxes in the upper reaches of the Pelesu River. He rows upriver to his destinations, accompanied by his retainers, who do whatever they desire with the local women and their properties.

Eventually, Raja Pahlawan Indut and Raja Haji Abdullah unite in their desire to rid Pelesu of the British. They attack a police station manned by Sikh soldiers. Trapped in the conflict, Saleh unwillingly becomes a nominal leader – as he can be seen as a strong, royal rallying point against the colonial infidels. In response, the British send Jack Norris, Saleh's friend (a persona of Clifford himself, as he too was present during the rebellion on which the novel is based) to meet the rebellious prince. Before the meeting can take place, Saleh is mistakenly shot by one of his own men. Norris's last words to Saleh are, 'May God forgive us for our sorry deeds and for our glorious intentions' (1926, p 160) – an apology, perhaps, for imperialism? But it is an apology only in words – for there are deeds that follow upon the regret. The rebels are dispersed; some, we learn, escape into the jungle.

Saleh's death is a non-ideological closing of a troubled and pathetic life – the product of a failed experiment to mix two very different cultures that could never find common ground. Clifford killed him

because he was a failure as an English-educated young man, and because he furtively supported the rebellion of Raja Pahlawan Indut and Raja Abdullah. Saleh is no hero – he is weak and unable to find strength – although he is given the opportunity to fight the British who have humiliated him. Boehmer (2005, p 62) writes, 'The white man rejects the natives, but he requires the native's presence in order to experience to the full his own being as a white colonialist'. An English author describes and determines the natives in *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*, thus providing their limits. Nothing is right in the state of Pelesu: the king is described as an idle man, chronically addicted to gambling and opium, as well as inaccessible to his subjects, all qualities that re-confirm colonial prejudices or imagined wrongs among Malays.

On the other hand, if we refer to Malay narratives in *Hikayat Pahang* [*The Story of Pahang*] (Kalthum, 1986), which seems to be the official Pahang document of the rebellion that Clifford used as the basis for the second half of the novel, events appear to be quite different – the Sultan was quite resolute and knew what he was doing. His various trips (and those of his representatives) up the Pahang River to meet the chiefs were not the political and administrative actions of an idle sultan. The historical leader of the rebels, Dato' Bahaman, fought for his right to receive fair compensation, and he rebelled only when his rights were not respected. Interestingly, *Hikayat Pahang*, while continuing the narrative of British colonial interests and influence, described Clifford as being 'like a rope, stiff, we understand, the ways of a young man' [Tetapi laksana tali, ada seringnya, terlebih maklum orang muda] (Kalthum, 1986, p 114).

Further depictions of the rebellion on which Clifford based the climax of his story, such as Aruna Gopinath's *Pahang 1880–1933* (1991), follow the account from the perspective laid out in *Hikayat Pahang*. Aruna describes the rebellion of 1891–95, led by Dato' Bahaman, a proud traditional chief, as a popular one with the support of both Malays and Aslians, including (indirectly) the Sultan, which is in great contrast to the depiction of Saleh and his father. Moreover, the Sultan (Ahmad) was seen to be very shrewd, even in British records, acting in his own interests, but simultaneously playing the game of the British. Hence he was no weakling; nor was he out of touch with the world, or lulled by opium and cockfights. As Aruna writes:

> 'Up to this point, Sultan Ahmad's role in aiding the British had been negative. He made no attempt to suppress the dissidents. He

> constantly looked for excuses to avoid assisting the British. He used trivial reasons to convince them that he was not in favour of quelling the rebellion on his own. ...On one occasion it was observed that Sultan Ahmad refused to cooperate because of the interference of foreigners.' (1991, p 137)

Clifford was among the group that was sent to Semantan. What appeared in his novel was a very sad and gross simplification (or even manipulation) of the events and characters involved. In his account, no Malay lived a meaningful life, with the exception of Raja Pahlawan Indut and Raja Abdullah; apart from them, all were sunk in decadent feudal filth. Poetic licence may enrich reality, but if it overturns the real for colonialist interests, then it goes against the veracity and the social function of the writer. Even the name of the state itself, 'Pelesu', rings loud with nuances of 'falseness', for the word *pelesu* or *palsu* means 'not real, fictional', and therefore is not a real state (as an English nation would be). In fact, it is not the real Pahang, as Clifford moved the state a little further north so that it was opposite Pulau Kapas, in Terengganu, but his characters were reduced to being silent protagonists.

What is unfortunate is that the novel was almost on its way to being a post-colonial one, with space for ideas of freedom and change. In Clifford's telling, the plot turned out to be another gross misrepresentation of one of the most important rebellions in Malaya. William Roff (Clifford, 1966, p xvi) defends the approach of the colonial officer-cum-novelist, in his introduction to Clifford's stories:

> 'He began to have serious doubts about part at least of the very ideology of Imperialism which explained and justified his own presence in Malaya. Though he remained convinced, as he wrote in the preface to *Court and Kampong*, that "the only salvation for the Malay lies in the increase of British influence in the Peninsula", he could not suppress the fear that by reducing the land "to a dead monotony of order and peace" the British had helped to destroy much that was good and valuable in Malay life.'

But Clifford also blundered and acted as the white god to alter the lives of not only the people of Pahang, but also of those in other states of Malaya when he later became Governor. His claim that he represented the viewpoint of the natives cannot be true, especially when he was the

one who had robbed them and their raja of a state and independence. In these days of high post-colonial studies, the opinions or values of another people are not represented (and certainly not by a colonial officer); and, as later proved by historians, he wilfully manipulated the plot and the characters to give victory to the British. If Clifford 'loved' the people as much as he claimed, the logical path was not to continue serving as an agent of conquest and intervention – and therefore of subjugation – but instead to help them in his own capacity and then leave them to their own administration. In reality, he brought them into the expanding British Empire for its glory and his own personal conquest. One wonders whether the novel was an answer or dialogue (conscious or unconscious) to Conrad's *An Outcast of the Islands* (originally 1896), where the natives were strong and aware of their situation while fighting for their independence. In *Prince of Malaya*, their situation, as we are well aware, is weak, without the capacity for self-rule, and disgustingly primitive.

Chapter Two: Ishak Haji Muhammad, *The Prince of Mount Tahan*

For most Malaysians, Pahang was and is a state of many renowned warriors. Stories, mostly oral, abound of Dato' Bahaman, Mat Kilau and Tok Gajah who fought against the British – a fact that is given some tangential reference in *Saleh: Prince of Malaya*. The stories are still told, and recorded in books and articles in the popular press, celebrating their cause. In the early twentieth century, the British penetrated deeper into the hinterland of Pahang, where there was gold, tin and iron ore, in addition to the vast forests that could be turned into rubber estates. If some Pahang Malays were not able to decipher the early intentions of the British, reality soon rushed in on them, as they gasped for their pride and *negeri* [state]. By the 1930s, more young people, especially from the middle and upper middle classes, had gone to English schools, and had therefore been exposed to the colonizer's language, logic, knowledge and set of values.

One of these youngsters was Ishak Haji Muhammad from Temerloh, a town in the upper reaches of the Pahang River, quite close to the location of the rebellion of Dato' Bahaman. After some years at a local school, he was chosen to continue his schooling at the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, which had been specially built to prepare and train young men for the British colonial administration, and no doubt to train

them in thinking and acting like their British masters, so they would readily understand the system and loyally administer it on their behalf. Ishak was a good candidate for such a position as he was intelligent; upon graduation, he worked in the British administration. However, he was not a loyal servant of the system. He soon left the service, as doubts began to crowd his mind and he embarked on a criticism of the ways in which colonial officers treated the locals. Ishak grew to be an active political writer, becoming involved quite early in politics through the influence of Ibrahim Yaacob, who at that time taught at a school in Bentong where Ishak lived.

Ishak Haji Muhammad came to believe that Malaya could achieve its independence. But he also realized that the British were well established and strong, and consequently reminded his readers of this reality. These are the 'new stirrings' of consciousness and nationalism in the mind of young men and women, as Boehmer notes (2005, p 17) and consequently, 'it also followed almost automatically that the resistance to imperial domination – especially on the part of those who lacked guns and money – frequently assumed textual form . . . in the written word, in histories and epic re-creations of the past, early nationalists found a compelling medium to counter colonialism's self-representation, to write a self-defining story'.

There was a new realization of what the colonizers were doing. Their real intentions brought forth a painful sense of doubt, suspicion – a new anger that bloomed into nationalism. It is interesting to note that although Ishak went to an English school, which in effect made English his intellectual language, he chose to write his works – novels, stories, reports, and later satirical pieces for popular magazines – in Malay. This was a post-colonial choice, a rejection of the language of his colonizers, and it allowed him to communicate his ideas more effectively. No doubt Malay has its literature, but at the Malay College at Kuala Kangsar, it was a language mainly spoken in between the English classes. English penetrated deep into the students' idea of proper language, the superior medium that became the vehicle for Western knowledge, the one and only acceptable knowledge, for the rest are silenced through their absence from the classroom. Malay, as a language, was relegated to the marketplace, the village and the primary school.

It soon became imprinted on their minds that all knowledge – useful knowledge – was in English. In using Malay, Ishak Haji Muhammad was rejecting English, the language of the colonizer that marginalized

the native. In so doing, he helped reinstate it as the language of significant and meaningful literature. On this point, Ngungi wa Thiong'o was later to write, 'Individual writers must use whatever language best suits their particular situation.…The real language one is looking for is the language of struggle, the language of transformation of our various societies' (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, 1992, pp 27–28).

Most post-colonial writers have their own special histories. Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar notes in his book *Ishak Hj Muhammad, Penulis dan Ahli Politik hingga 1948* [*Ishak Hj Muhammad, Author and Political Figure since 1948*] (1997, p 2) that Ishak's literary background has been coloured quite heroically by stories of Malay warriors and rebels, by his parents and grandparents and the villagers at large. This can be seen in Ishak's most important post-colonial work – *Putera Gunung Tahan* [*Prince of Mount Tahan*].[1] We do not know whether Ishak had read Clifford's story of the other prince, but in Temerloh, Clifford's name was ever present, including in the very name of the oldest secondary school, Clifford School. In this novel, there seems to be a strange echo of that rebellion, as it is based on a true uprising against the British, and one that he also uses, albeit tangentially.

Ishak's story echoes those of Dato' Bahaman and his compatriots, here transposed into a kingdom in the jungle, where a young prince rules. It is here that two Englishmen, William and Robert, in an attempt to evaluate Mount Tahan as a hill resort and discover gold and other precious jewels, become lost and separated. A group of Aslians finds Robert and brings him to their settlement. Unlike the Malays of Clifford's novel, these Aslians are extremely civilized and respectful of the one who has lost his way. Robert is eventually appointed the Great White Chief. Soon Robert is taken to meet an old lady, who turns out to be the mother of the prince. Her story is that of a victim. The British had killed her husband, a nobleman and a compatriot of Bahaman. When they could not face the fire of the English guns they escaped into the jungle. She was pregnant at that time, and gave birth to a son some time later. At 10 years of age, this son was taken to Mount Tahan to be taught the 'esoteric arts' and he became the ruling prince or king.

In her wisdom, the old lady sees through the schemes of the British, even though she lives in the jungle. To avenge her husband's death and her present predicament, she arranges for a love potion be given to

[1] See also Jan van der Putten's contribution to this collection for an alternative discussion of this novella.

Robert, which results in him falling in love with one of the Aslian girls. As Robert is unable to resist his new potion-driven lust, he marries the girl in the local style, which also dictates that he must chase her around a certain ritual mound and physically catch her – which he is initially unable to do. During a second ceremony, he climbs a tree on which she is to be found. This, unfortunately, is his undoing. As he climbs 'like a pig-tailed monkey with a broken foot' (Ishak, 1980, p 45) – note the reverse animal imagery, now for the white man – Robert falls to his death.

William, on the other hand, gives up waiting for his friend and wanders into the jungle where a magical people, the Bunians, live. At a waterfall he meets Kusina, an attendant to the Crown Prince. William is taken to a beautiful location, where the Prince greets him. The idea of a British hill station being constructed on his land disgusts the Prince, who introduces William to a magic telescope that enables him to see into people's houses. As he looks through the telescope, William discovers that his wife is involved in an affair with a young man. In the meantime, he sends a message via a magic dove, instructing that the place should be bombed so as to facilitate his rescue. When the two bombers come as planned, one crashes into the jungle, while the other completes its mission. However, William is killed in the attack. Incredibly, his wife is on the plane that has crashed. She is stranded for months, and then years, only to attract the Crown Prince, who declares his love for her. The story ends with a compromise – their marriage. Harry Aveling, the translator of the novella (Ishak, 1980, pp xv–xvi) notes in his preface, 'Superficially, perhaps, Ishak was writing another "boy's story", but the whole business is reversed, and it is the British who are now cast in the role of comic fools.... It is still amusing today for its attack on pompous self-righteousness.'

The genre chosen by Ishak is not a clear one – there are elements of oral legends, magical stories of the Bunian people, often told among both Aslian and Malay peoples, as well as a simple tale in the form of a *kias*, or allegory. The meaning does not come from reality, although it echoes the reader's present predicament. Ishak lets the conquered re-conquer. The native is king in his own state, and in the end is able to outwit the colonizer. The story is said to happen in Bunian – a fairyland – with its special magical reality, perhaps a little too hasty in its progress, but quite honest in its post-colonial anger. The location of the tale, Gunung Tahan – Mount Tahan, a symbol of Pahang – is referred to by the Malays as the 'loyal

guardian of everything to be found in this rich tract of land' (Ishak, 1980, p 5).

Interestingly, Ishak's story begins where Clifford's left off, as an unconscious dialogue with it and an act of 'writing back' to the Empire. Although the initial inspiration for the story might have been the anger of a victim of the British, Ishak was too much of a satirist and comic writer to continue directly with tirades against them. The desire to correct the image of Malays, especially after the Japanese occupation, seems to have been (partly) satisfied. So the story continues, albeit quite loosely and (to me) quite unsatisfactorily. In the 1930s, perhaps a more direct path would not have been possible, at least not if a writer wished his work to be published. Thus, the choice of an analogical narrative was a logical one, although the oversimplified quality of ideas and execution weakens the piece as a literary work of art.

Chapter Three: Keris Mas, *Jungle of Hope [Rimba Harapan]*

Clifford wrote of his Pekan, Temerloh and Lipis experience, while Ishak, the local young man of Temerloh, concentrated on the area close to Mount Tahan, not far from his own home town. On the other hand, Keris Mas hailed from Bentong, about 100 kilometres from Kuala Lumpur, on the other side of the Titiwangsa Mountain Range. Each of these authors gives us perspectives and landscapes from a different part of Pahang, and from all of them we catch a glimpse of a cross-section of life in the different periods and corners of this large state. Like Ishak, Keris Mas too had some grounding in English, which he later juxtaposed with Indonesian and Arabic in a religious college in Sumatra. Perhaps for him, the return to Malay was more natural, as Indonesian was among the last two languages he studied. There is no doubt that language is an important element in the choice of a medium, especially in a country still being administered by a colonial government. Keris Mas wrote *Rimba Harapan* – originally published in 1986 – in independent Malaysia, a nation that was more sure of itself, and as a writer he played an important role in the nation's path to independence, holding at that time an important post in the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka [Language and Literature Institute]. In his secure later years, Keris Mas reflected on his village and people, and also the choices before them. In the end he was able to define them in their essence as they pitted themselves against the jungle. If Ishak

symbolically introduces the ownership of ancestral land through Mount Tahan, Keris Mas throws us directly into the fray, from the perspective of an independent Malaysia, and therefore with a hindsight that was coupled with his left-of-centre political views.

The novel takes place in the 1920s and 30s in the regions of Bentong and Janda Baik in western Pahang, and focuses on the destruction of the land and livelihood of Ketari farmers when the progress of British tin mines slowly swallows up their agricultural land. These difficult years also coincided with the introduction of rubber, which quickly took root in and around their village. The new economic alternatives – tin and rubber – split the community into two: those who want to stay with their rice land and those who want to go into rubber and tin. For the second group, the transition – to clear their orchards or open up new lands and plant them with rubber – is easy. This is also the group that accepts *Kaum Muda* [Younger Group, or Reformist] teachings of Islam. In this modernist–capitalistic group, Keris Mas includes Zaidi, its leader, Cikgu Ibrahim, Pendekar Atan and Maidin (the last two as opportunists and economic parasites) who prosper (for some time) and are quite happy with their profits. Zaidi, for example, sets up a shop and buys more land for expansion. For those who choose to remain as rice farmers, fate, or *takdir*, is not so kind as they face numerous problems. But rice farming is intimately linked to their culture and identity; it is not undertaken for money, and members of this group merely have enough food to feed their families. Zaidi's elder brother, Pak Kia, leads the rice farmers.

The arrival of modernization, the introduction of a new non-subsistence economy, and the (quiet but relentless) greed of Europeans – represented by Tuan Pekok, who has the support of the colonial government – form the novel's background. As Rahimah Hamid (2004, p 366) points out in her dissertation, Cikgu Ibrahim may be read as the voice, and also the reaction, of a native from the working or non-dominant class, who rejects the domination and manipulative economic policies of British colonialists and their agents. Much as they did not want to sell their ancestral lands, they had little choice as the expanding mines also diverted much needed irrigation water. During this time period, Abdul Rahman Aziz (2001, pp 174–183) sees Malaya as venturing into a universal system based on capitalism. For Malays it is a rude and uninvited arrival. Eventually, having no other alternative, Kia's friends and neighbours sell their land to Tuan Pekok through his broker, Pendekar Atan. With

the onset of drought, these farmers are forced into forest areas near Lebu, Asap and Janda Baik.

In contrast to his brother, Zaidi prospers. Not only does he have property, but also a shop, and he is quite well-to-do. This matches well with the new religious and social philosophy – of the Kaum Muda – which desired to combat conservatism among Malays, especially in their practice of religion. He is thus also a part of the new system – he is a capitalist. While Zaidi takes risks in his business, his brother desires the old, shared economy and a communal philosophy, which he believes is nobler as it is centred on the stable promise and culture of rice, as opposed to rubber with its fickle fluctuations in price (Keris Mas, 1990, p 37). Throughout the novel, however, it is often repeated that rubber prices are 'moody', 'unstable' and 'fluctuating'. Consequently, those who choose this new way of life also find their existence becoming equally fragile and dependent on temperamental markets, while rice – a traditional staple – is steady.

Although Kia has sold his land, and has been pushed to the edge of society, to the forest, he learns new lessons concerning how Malays can live in this new capitalist world. They have chosen to become new pioneers, resourceful and hardworking, who know the land and work with each other for the greater good, for a community rather than for individual profit. These new pioneers work as though they are establishing their very own state, away from the British. It is with this (and the general background of the country) in mind that the steadfast and diligent Kia and his comrades finally to decide to move to Janda Baik, an area to the east of Bentong, which is still virgin jungle. This is where they will open up new land for *padi* [rice], fruits and vegetables. Kia is sure of his choice; it symbolically illustrates how the British and their capitalistic ways have poisoned Ketari, leaving behind new and aggressive indentured labourers, whom British capitalists use for their own profit, as Malays are none too interested in such work.

In the concluding part of the novel, we must contrast Zaidi's choice, when he is no longer prosperous, and is broken by the fickle price of rubber, with that of his brother, who chooses the land and the old and certain ways. No doubt Keris Mas agreed with this path into the hills and jungle. At least he saw – like Kia and his comrades – that hope could be realized there. In the final chapters, he describes them as tough, resourceful, hardworking and wise. (Again, contrast this with Clifford's Malays.) It is here that they are made anew and their land is refreshed with the cool air of the hills. The remainder of the novel tells of their

struggle with the agents of nature, wild animals, early problems of transportation, education and the future of their children.

One of the main excuses for British intervention and colonialism in the Malay States was that the natives were not able to rule themselves, and the white man therefore had to intervene to help them. However, through Keris Mas's description of the economy of Bentong, we realize that it has nothing to do with the betterment of the natives – all profits are for the British. Keris Mas compares the flood of immigrants who worked in the mines and the rubber estates to floods in Bentong that inundate the *padi* fields, washing away Malays. This is in contrast to *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*, in which Malays are indolent, weak and without hope. In *Jungle of Hope*, however, the characters are extremely hardy and stubborn, and have an intimate knowledge of the land, which they work together for the greater good, for a community, rather than merely for themselves. It is as though they are establishing their own state, away from the British. The last lines of the novel describe Kia as 'a man coming home from his plantation, his face serene, his body strong and tough, leaning slightly forward' (Keris Mas, 1990, p 269). It is not a closed ending, but one that leaves the door open for the reader to glimpse the achievements of Pak Kia, his companions and their families. Land is the very source of their life, culture and identity, and it is to this that they cling for as long as possible. (We also see its symbolic nuances in Ishak Haji Muhammad's *Mount Tahan*.) Their choice is later shown to be the wiser one, for it preserves a certain pride and independence and a traditional farming culture, while those who choose rubber sink into economic difficulties caused by falling prices. We are told in no uncertain terms that they choose the noble, the communal and the untainted. Land, the symbol of place, ownership and then identity and culture, is the central theme of *Jungle of Hope*. It is the core of life and meaning for a colonized people, in a colonial–capitalist economy, especially when physical ownership of the land is slowly pulled from under their feet. This meaning, to be considered in its past, present and future contexts, must be defined and redefined if they are to survive meaningfully.

Conclusion

In these three novels, which cover the phases of the earlier intrusion of the British in Pahang from 1891 to 1895, the undated decades after that, and the 1920s to 30s, we are presented with a variety of different

views of Pahang life. The first work, written with a British pen, draws darker shades for Malay and Aslian characters, which are derogatory and emphatically colonial. However, in the second novel, Ishak takes over the thread of the narrative after the rebellion, and we see an unconquered and unfettered people, far away from the centres of white domination, where life is ordered and quite idyllic. Finally, Keris Mas, who was born and lived in Ketari during the 1920s and 30s, amends the picture with his post-colonial pen. Here again, for victims of colonialism, dreams of an ideal life in the jungle are replaced with real toil to build a new homestead, which also symbolically refers to the *negeri*. This time, however, the characters work with nature, through their intimate knowledge of it and with wisdom in their choice. They are exemplary, uncomplaining and strong, and are eventually successful in building a new world with their hands and their vision of society, although this is not what the colonialists or the capitalists had planned for them or pushed them to do.

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