Sang Kanchil meets Sime Darby: Drawing new postcolonial boundaries in the Asia-Pacific

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Abstract
This paper has its origins in a request to think about postcolonial studies in the context of a literary conference in Malaysia, prompting the following review of the field and how it is changing, with thoughts on how it might apply to some of the social issues in what was generally set up as 'the Asia Pacific region'. In general, postcolonial studies has always been about analysis of 'difference management' within a utopian project of correcting prejudicial discriminations in the operations of power, grounded on a sense of the rights of groups of people to self determination and equity — not equality as uniformity, but rather the valued existence of a community in terms appropriate to its own as sense of self and its social context.
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This paper has its origins in a request to think about postcolonial studies in the context of a literary conference in Malaysia, prompting the following review of the field and how it is changing, with thoughts on how it might apply to some of the social issues in what was generally set up as ‘the Asia Pacific region’. In general, postcolonial studies has always been about analysis of ‘difference management’ within a utopian project of correcting prejudicial discriminations in the operations of power, grounded on a sense of the rights of groups of people to self determination and equity — not equality as uniformity, but rather the valued existence of a community in terms appropriate to its own as sense of self and its social context. From Hegel and then Freud onwards, this has been figured in terms of both ‘master-servant’ and ‘self-other’ relationships, with the progressive unpacking of just how one term is enmeshed in the other, and how both might be or, despite appearances, always are, unstable formations amenable to change. Robert Young expressed the project of postcolonial studies succinctly when he asked: ‘How can we know and respect the other?’ (14) or, how can we allow the other to be the other and still find ways of building community with it?

Difference management has been modelled in postcolonial theory in three ways, with a shift of critique from the first to the third item in the following list:
- imperialist/classical: assimilation/exclusion
- liberal/modernist: universalism/relativism
- ambiguous/postmodernist: interactive systems of differentials.

Of course, elements of each mode exist within the historical and social spaces corresponding to the dominance of any one item. In that mix, postcolonial theory splits according to whether it sees power operating as oppositional resistance (a largely materialist/ Marxist/ activist grouping) or as deconstructive subversion (mainly a textual/postmodern/theoretical position). Insofar as these are distinct camps (and there are always interactions and crossovers), one can think of the first as including Epifanio San Juan Jr, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus and Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the latter Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, R. Radhakrishnan and Wilson Harris, with Edward Said hovering across the two, and Spivak’s idea of ‘strategic essentialism’ as allowing an activist practice to cohabit with deconstructive theory.

In the particular area of literary studies, and in the proliferation from that into cultural studies, the focus of analysis has always been on the cultural politics of
production, of representation, and of reception — the politics of language, the
ways texts carry culture, the opening up of the traditional canon to difference
and critique of the values on which it has excluded the new and the non-
Eurocentric.

In speaking ‘truth to power’ as Foucault puts it, postcolonial critics also have
to be aware of the imbrication of power with truth, and, as Spivak points out,
examine who we are and where we stand to pronounce the critical word, and try
to see how that shapes what and how we speak about whom (‘Can the Subaltern
Speak?’). This is the profession of difference that postcolonial literary studies
brings to traditional cultural thinking: its knowledge is always situated; it is not a
disinterested appreciation and explication of supposedly universal truths. Cultural
production is historically and politically determined, as is analysis of it.

An Australian is able to attend a conference in Malaysia because: (a) the countries
share a common — but not identical — history as former colonies of Britain; and
because (b) they are part of a movement of globalising capital that converts higher
education into a market commodity and has everyone competing for international
market share and seeking alliances to empower our respective university systems
against historically dominant centres of cultural capital (the Sorbonne, Oxbridge,
the Ivy League) and emergent centres of economic power (China) (see Davis).
The Australian may also be attending because several governments in Australia
have under-funded higher education on the dubious premiss that students are
clients and should buy product that will enhance their ability to earn and thereby
pay back the value of what they learn, and that universities can sell such product
to the richer sections of overseas countries. There are some real neo-colonialist
assumptions here about a hierarchised global education system in which Australia
thinks it is better because it has closer historical connections to Oxbridge and
to the US by virtue of being an Anglo-Celtic settler colony, plus some cheap
pragmatism that says it can offer more or less the same product at less cost than
Britain and America. A postcolonial analysis would be looking at this situation
to question some Vice-Chancellors hell-bent on modelling their institutions on
American higher education, asking them what (and where) they mean by ‘the
best’ when they suggest that managerial commodity education administration in
Australia will bring it from some mediocre periphery to being equal to some other
superlative centre, and just how that is different from the old colonial cultural
cringe that marginalised Australian culture relative to Britain’s. Postcolonial
critics might also seek out how international collaborations might be genuinely
equitable dialogues for mutual learning rather than exploitative ventures carrying
vestiges of late-imperialist thinking.

This writer has to admit that he went to Penang because he is the colonial
great-grandchild of that city. I was born in Adelaide, South Australia under the
shadow of Colonel William Light. He planned my home city, renowned for its
belt of parkland, regular squared streets and five parkland squares (with Victoria
Square being the central one ruled over by a statue of Her Imperial majesty and a couple of settler explorers). This plan (whether Light knew it or not) is a model with a deep colonial history going back at least to the 1600s where it was used as a defensive grid for another colony in America, and that was in turn based on Roman imperial grids for military camps that later became a standard medieval plan for gardens. So I grew up in a town famous for being orderly and free (no convicts, many churches) whose civic order postcolonial analysis reveals to stem from imperial military systems and allegories of the perfect city with a garden of Eden enclosed at its heart (McLeod 197). William Light, as many readers will know — unless nationalist narrativising of the past has erased colonial traces — was the son of Francis Light, a minor functionary of Empire who thought Penang island would make a fine maritime trading centre on the global spice route, and unilaterally obliged Britain to make good his vision. Such common differences make us companions in an uneasy history of perceived power differentials that include a post-colonial relay of race policies, regional alliances and misalliances, economic trade, military involvements and global media imageries.

Postcolonial critique has over time turned its attention from one topic to another as decolonisation and then globalisation have taken hold, again without completely replacing the dynamics they move through and past:

- empire/colony
- nation/community
- globe/nation
- humanity/globe.

Although the field developed largely out of the post-World War Two period of decolonisation and national formation, it does not confine itself to a definition of post-colonial as meaning ‘after independence’, since the dynamics of national opposition to external imperialism do not cease with the raising of a flag. On the one hand, economic modes of transnational imperial power survive political change; on the other, nations tend to reproduce the centre-periphery structures, elite interests and assimilationist goals of colonial systems, so that postcolonial analysis still has a role in critiquing internal inequities and suppressions of difference.

One suppression I am particularly interested in is the geo-political formation of the Asia-Pacific Region. Whether it is the UN, the Australian government or an English Department in Malaysia using the term, ‘Asia-Pacific’ generally means ‘Pacific Rim’, and most often means ‘Asia’. At least in terms of a sense of literary-cultural community, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia might be part of the broad region, but they are not really part of the Pacific. Mohammad Haji Salleh has made an excellent study of ‘the binding threads that have been woven to make the common textile of races and cultures in the region’ (3), but these threads do not tie in the Pacific further than Flores and the Philippines. Australia itself is both connected to and distant from the Pacific, depending on which coast
one lives on and whether the government is looking east, west or north according to the winds of political and economic convenience. The Asia-Pacific boundary is also constantly redrawn depending on regional interests.

There are, of course, Asia-Pacific contacts going back into pre-modernity: the transmission of proto-Malay language eastwards through Polynesia; the transmission of indigenous Taiwanese DNA southwards through Polynesia; ancient cycles of trepang gathering linking Makasar and northern Australia; the colonial movements of labour from Indonesia to New Caledonia, from Japan to pearling sites in northern Australia, from China to small trade stores right through the Pacific. But if we look for a genuine Asia-Pacific of contemporary relations, we are faced with new challenges for postcolonial studies. On the one hand, there is the erasure of the Pacific ‘Basin’ from the largely economic-based Asia-Pacific ‘Rim’, and on the other, there is the imperialist exploitation of the Pacific Islands by Asia. In fact, the two apparent opposites go together in the logic of colonialist discourse. The psychoanalytic and discourse analysis studies stemming from Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon and running through Homi Bhabha and others, point to denial and disparaging stereotypes as means of covering and justifying what is done to maintain privilege and take advantage of marginal spaces by those with more power. In modern times, there are new sites of postcolonial struggle in Polynesia, where Taiwan and Japan sign development deals that cover their depletion of fish stocks, and in Melanesia, where Asia meets Pacific in the exploitative extraction of timber.

If we look at writing from the Pacific, we find Islanders lamenting the depredations on natural resources in the same oral-based declamatory voice as they protested against colonial discriminations and labour exploitations earlier. Alfred Ghere Liligeto, for example, has several poems about the rape of his Solomon Islands natural resources (‘Intrusion’, We the Villagers 30) and the need to ‘be good stewards/ let us not poison the earth’ (We the Villagers 59). The focus for his complaint is clear:

Logging

They came in great numbers
Like the gold rushes of old
People from everywhere
They came by boats and planes
With money and machinery
To cut down our trees
And extract our timber

Some applied, accepted and came.
Some applied, refused but came.
Some came by the back door:
Some came by the front door
With promises of ‘development’
To cut down our trees
And extract our timber
Landowners were excited
Government willing support
Said ‘yes!’ to ‘development’
For children’s future guaranteed.
But what future is there
When they cut down our trees
And extract our future?

They cut our trees down
And extract our timber
Leaving habitat clear and bare.
They cut our trees down
And dozer our lands free
To make themselves rich
From what little we have.

Man of the land!
Government of the day!
Think not only for today!
But think also of tomorrow!
Your future.
Your security…
Lie in your trees and forests. (We the Villagers 28–29).

And here is Willie Tekahota about a decade later:

Loggers
For only
a carton of beer,
we give away
our lives
our trees
our soil
our water
our ecology.

Bulldozers
interesting to watch:
fast, heavy, noisy.
But truth lies
behind the back wheels:
packed soil
felled trees
polluted water
limited oxygen
dead animals.

Will we be rich?
Two per cent
is ours.
Ninety-eight percent
is theirs.
Beware of the loggers
who come in yellow skin.
They are cheating deceivers,
selfish and bloodthirsty. (*Raetemaot, 64*)

It is not just the land, but the ocean and the local population as well that is
being encroached upon, as Jully Sipolo (Makini) records:

Okinawa Fishermen

There’s a strange ship at Labete
Weird music blares across
Raucous laughter
Who are they?
Foreigners.

Short stunted pygmy-like
Black stiff sea-urchin hair
Sickly yellow skin
Half moon eyes
Okinawa fishermen.

Strolling through the village
Looking out of place
Clad in woollen jerseys
And track-suit trousers
Expensive radios
To impress the local lasses
Okinawa fishermen.

Are they accepted?
There is division among the people
Some for — some against
Many more on the fence
But there are half-castes now
Planted by
Okinawa fishermen. (*Civilized Girl 5*)

The racial representations here are of interest as a kind of reversal of colonialist
imagery, and it is perhaps worth noting the yellow skin is not specifically associated
with East Asians; any skin tone lighter than the blue black of a Solomons or
Vanuatu islander is either red or yellow. More recently, Celo Kulagoe creates an
allegory in which the totemic eagle is threatened by the rapacity of an unspecified
vulture:

Beware, O eagle,
the vulture is no young chick
dim-eyed
weak-beaked
slow feathered
to tether to your nest.
Beware that silent poise
of flight
that death-wish stare
the screeching tongue
and greedy claws
clutching all in sight
for her own brood.

Noble eagle
perch higher on your true mountain
vigilant over the valleys
soaring the plains.

Your air is no longer free
but full of crossing flights
by the defiant poaching vulture.

Beware, O eagle.
Beware the vulture. (‘Beware the Vulture’, *Raindrops*, 39)

Jully Makinis like many others, shows critical awareness that vultures are often invited in by unthinking self-interest. Her poem ‘Boeing — Going, Gone’ attacks the small-island Pacific nations’ rush to acquire international airlines. They deplete inter-island shipping ‘too remote to go where the dollar is’, bring in tourists who turn local traditions into curiosities, drain local talent who get access to bigger neighbouring countries, and ‘provide … ego trips for the elite’ (*Flotsam & Jetsam* 4). Nonetheless, the overall criticism of neo-imperialist exploitation of the natural resources of the Pacific by outsiders and globalised commerce is clear.

Some of that outside commerce of extraction is based in Malaysia. Rimbunan Hijau, for example, plays a major role in PNG and Vanuatu where, despite evident improvements in civil infrastructure in some places and national income generally, tribal cooperatives return 4 to 10 times the royalties paid by international corporations whose presence has propelled a rapacious extraction of timbers, 70% of which according to the World Bank is illegal. Accusations of human rights abuse, pollution and political corruption have been levelled at the logging industry, and even Rimbunan Hijau’s own records show 2.7 million Kina as ‘miscellaneous payments’. Postcolonial critique might investigate cultural vectors behind this phenomenon: whether this means corruption or whether it reflects a local practice of gift exchange; whether the competitive ‘big man’ culture of Melanesia inclines some villagers to sell off communal capital in a generally accepted ethos of get-rich-quick, or whether they are alienated from traditions of collectivity and sustainable relations with their natural environment by manipulative outside influence (Firth et al, Friends of the Earth PNG, Rimbunan Hijau).

A postcolonial critique might ask to what extent this inter-regional dynamic of erasure and exploitation is a result of the ongoing legacy of colonial discourses, in the hope that dismantling (that is, exposing and de-constructing) them might correct impositions and inequities. There has been a long contest over the boundary of the
hyphen in post-colonial which works to corral scholarly attention into historical ‘before’ and ‘after’ camps and national state cultural spaces, but it is not unknown for countries fighting free of colonialism to internalise and then project onto others the dynamic they have become part of through resistance and nationalist assertion: the Israeli state is a case in point in relation to displacing its history of resistance to Britain and Europe onto oppression of the Palestinian people. And the history of self-determination blinds those involved to how they have turned into what they once opposed. Equally, being confined by the boundary of the nation obscures inequities and impositions within and beyond national borders. There is opportunity for critical engagement here by writers and scholars. To what extent has a postcolonial nationalist opposition to Western imperialism in Southeast Asia allowed the recuperation of colonial attitudes towards other less developed parts of the region? Has the binary of ‘corrupt West versus pure Islam’ that is a product of postcolonial histories resulted in a racist attitude towards dark-skinned, non-Islamic peoples? Do the two desert-based cultures of Judeo-Christianity and Islam share a romanticised attitude to forests grounded in deep-rooted distrust such that their cultural legatees seek to possess it and destroy it as they create their ‘garden’ plantations? And again, are the attitudes and policies of new nations born of the attitudes and discourses of colonial forebears, even when their citizens try to distance themselves from them?

It is an uncomfortable question and maybe one that only a crude outsider can ask, but outsiders too are complicit in their own question. Colonisation is the displacement and/or dispossession of a pre-existing population by the incursion of another group. Imperialism is the subordination of a number of peoples and locations to the interests of another power. In Australian history, both modes can be seen in operation: the colonial dispossession of Aborigines by British settlement and the subordination of white colonists to the interests of the British Empire. White Australians, treated as second-class citizens of Empire, learned in their turn how to disparage and dominate the indigenous inhabitants with that greater degree of intensity born of shame and anger. They also looked at the Pacific as a place of savage otherness that confirmed their superiority as whites, sent out missionaries, grabbed island labour for Queensland sugar plantations and took over rule of Papua New Guinea as second-level imperialists, extracting profits from copra plantations, eventually, coffee and cacao, and mining. The only saving grace historically was that there were not many people available or willing to colonise the harsh terrain, so contact was not completely devastating, and that the UN forced local development towards independence in a relatively productive and peaceful manner.

The point here is that the various modes of postcolonial studies are not confined to assessing the workings and outcomes of nineteenth-century European imperial expansion across the globe. Nor are they confined to simplistic labelling of good and bad. Increasingly, they also have to redraw the literary boundary and
the nation boundary in order to continue the kind of analysis of power and cultural politics postcolonial studies take as their raison d’être. Postcolonial critics have to analyse the investments, conflicts, often unintended effects and relative merits of all parties interested in any situation. This has led to critiques of racial and ethnic difference being redirected to analysis of the border between humans and nature, a border that carries traces of colonialist and neo-imperialist discourses, and an ecocritical space that until recently, as Rob Nixon has noted, was dominated by an un-self-reflective First World scholarship. Nixon was writing in 2005 and mainly from a US context, but his model of differences between postcolonial and ecocritical focuses is a fair summation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Postcolonial</th>
<th>Ecocritical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hybridity (culture)</td>
<td>purity (nature)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>displacement</td>
<td>place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national</td>
<td>transnational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>border histories</td>
<td>timeless communion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of these contrasts are overstating the case and no longer valid. Postcolonial studies, for example, although it has been mainly a field of comparative national literatures centred around deconstructing the Western canon and its hegemonic epistemologies, has always been aware of the transnational dynamic of imperial power. It is true, however, that while it has examined discourses of the natural, it has treated them as a tool within a human-centred apparatus of representational controls. Ecocriticism challenges the postcolonial to redraw its boundaries by focusing more on the natural world and to recuperate some of the universalism jettisoned under rubrics of incommensurable cultural difference, while postcolonial studies calls ecocriticism to account for its perpetuation of romantic transcendentalism and ‘spatial amnesia’ (Nixon 236) that carry cultural ethnocentrism and colonial legacies. As Nixon notes: ‘[o]nce cultures have been discursively assimilated to nature (not least through the settler tradition of viewing the United States as “nature’s nation”), they have been left more vulnerable to dispossession — whether in the name of virgin wilderness preservation or the creation of nuclear test zones’ (235). The last point connects very clearly to the use and misuse of the Pacific; the first to the treatment of indigenous peoples, whether in Australia, the Solomon Islands or Borneo. If environmental critique looks for an ‘ethics of place’ (Nixon 236), postcolonialism seeks an ‘ethics of community’ and if one invokes Derrida’s binaries and the Self/Other formulations of Said and Bhabha, then the two terms are mutually constitutive and full understanding of one requires examination of the other.

For example, a well meaning photo compilation of pristine nature across the globe distributed by Greenpeace as a reward to its regular supporters features the panoramic beauty of forests and the stirring appeal of furry creatures like bears and orang-utans, but the only humans it shows are Africans, Mongolian-Siberians and Amazonian natives being traditional and unspoiled. The photographers are
European and the presumed audience is a well-off global middle class who are being told to look upon certain indigenous minorities as quaint and colourful and one with nature and nature as something sublime that has to be fenced off for pleasurable touristic contemplation. There is no reflective examination of the producers’ world and the commodity culture that enmeshes its readers in the destruction implied, and no interest in modernising sustainability that might offer the people depicted better living conditions and put them in a position to engage the world in equitable dialogue rather than being looked at from afar (Mauthe & Henningsen). The intent is clearly honourable; the discursive effects are at least open to question. Nixon calls for a postcolonial rethinking of pastoral in ‘writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies’ (239) and postcolonial critics like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment, 2009) have begun to redraw the boundaries of what is already a pluri-disciplinary field to incorporate ecocritical awareness.

There are as well interesting analyses still to be done of some of the disregarded corners of colonial textual history. I am not sure adequate consideration has yet been given to the particularities of British relations with and representations of Malaya. Australian colonial-era literary connections have been mostly as a result of contacts during war, but it is interesting to note that two novels depict the country as a place of romance: Nora Barry’s 1940’s Love in Malaya, and G.M. Glaskin’s The Beach of Passionate Love: Pantai Cinta Berahi (1961). These fall into a generic potboiler formula, but readings of colonialism, at least in literary studies, are still very much dominated by scholarship on India and Africa, and this may have the effect of distorting the way in which national discourses since have been configured. The emphasis on cultural difference that has energised postcolonial literary studies has also kept our attention (for very good reasons) on communal relations across and within nations, ethnicities and languages, with critical focus, but focus nonetheless, on English. But there are also important ongoing effects and spin-offs to attend to. We can ask ourselves how the sub-discipline of postcolonial studies has developed and how we might further apply its critical apparatus today in our own region.

One criticism levelled at postcolonial studies is that its origins in departments of English under the rubric of Commonwealth Literature has perpetuated a limiting focus on Anglophone expression (the basis of Amitav Ghosh’s refusal of his nomination for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize). This boundary does need to be broken open, but that does not entirely do away with language-based challenges to work more effectively. Agnes Yeow notes that scholars working in the field of Malaysian literature tend to categorise and segregate their pursuits along linguistic lines (Yeow 124). It would be interesting to know the kinds of discussions that occur amongst writers and critics across all the areas of expression in Malaysia and in particular between English Departments and colleagues in
Bahasa and Islamic studies. Prof. Haji Salleh has made cogent critiques of the global hegemony of English but has also done valuable work in promoting local writing by translating Malay texts into English. Given the postcolonial debates over the use of English as a colonial supplanter of vernaculars (see, for example, Harry Aveling’s discussion of translation internationally), one may wonder about the repeated phrase in the Koran where the narrator says (I paraphrase) ‘I give you these words in your own tongue so that you may readily understand’. How does this, and the attitudes it presumably has induced in native speakers of Arabic towards people far away who do not speak it as a matter of course, relate to cultural production in Malaysia or Indonesia? Is a postcolonial critical apparatus of any use in such a context?

In a post-national world of global flows of knowledge, capital and labour, postcolonial studies has necessarily had to grapple with the dynamics of globalisation. From one perspective, the decentred postmodern network of global movements seems to make postcolonial models outmoded, and yet, nations and nationalisms still drive much of people’s social and cultural lives, and societies are not just colonised by people and politics; nor has globalisation suddenly leapt upon us in the 1980s. From Vasco DaGama and even Marco Polo, and indeed, from the *bunga emas* in exchange for China’s porcelain and token protection, and the exchange of Hindu-Buddhist culture for pepper, global movements of money and produce have been part of imperial outreach. This has involved colonisation by plants as well as people. In a recent paper I looked at the export of Australia’s gum trees and wattles across the globe mentioned in Murray Bail’s novel, *Eucalyptus* (Sharrad 2007), and we can think of other commodities — indigo, subject of the first protest play in India, *Nil Darpan*, tea, coffee, the breadfruit of the Pacific to the Caribbean, sugar, not to mention rubber, and the topic of Amitav Ghosh’s latest novel *Sea of Poppies*, opium.

Consideration of the sources of Malaysia’s economic interests in the Pacific, leads to thinking about how its own landscape has been colonised by plants and how its indigenous fauna and tribes have been displaced as a result. First under colonialism, rubber replaced the varied species of the tropical forest and tin mines made holes in the ground and damaged waterways. One of the boundaries being redrawn in the ecology movement is that between the humanities and geography. Lesley Head notes that ‘human–plant geographies have been less commented on than human-animal geographies’ (236) and looks at how plants, like animals, can evoke affective responses from humans, and how some plants are categorised as having ‘charisma’ (ancient trees, colourful flowering bushes, orchids) as opposed to other taken for granted species (237). Some are considered ‘alien’ and invasive, and others ‘native’ and ‘good’, even when they are invasive (240).

In colonial Malaya, the young resident in Pahang, Hugh Clifford, recorded his adventures and yarns gleaned from locals. In doing so he established a literary world of human relations to nature in which the tiger features as a physical and
magical danger, elephants and wild buffalo get mentions too. Plants abound, but are a largely unspecified backdrop labelled simply ‘forest’ or ‘jungle’. The jungle can shelter those who submit to its rules, it can provide sporadic trade products, and it can be a major obstacle to human endeavour. In general plant nature and rivers are represented as a romantic realm of silence housing ‘Sakai’ and other aboriginal tribes. The stories celebrate the natural world but record the increasing incursions on its space by Malay traders and Chinese and European miners and indeed by colonial officers such as the author himself. Philip Holden has made a detailed study of Clifford’s writing, tracing modern national discourses of self-regulation and masculinist discipline in Singapore and Malaysia (138) back to Victorian values and British colonial education. There is much to criticise in the racist representations of Clifford’s writing, which still stands as a useful working model of colonialist discourse, but Holden has concentrated on race and gender, British and Malay, and recent shifts in the focus of postcolonial studies, also allow inspection of the colonial archive to see how it has sedimented attitudes to animals and nature that perhaps influence how people behave today.

Holden clearly shows how Clifford’s writing depicts the Malay as lazy, dreamy (latah) and prone to run amok (95–106); the male is a dandy within a medieval code of chivalry/honour (53–64); women are objects of exchange, victims of the harem, domestic drudges, venal opportunists (81–84). There is a racial/class hierarchy of white colonial officers, white traders, rajahs, ordinary Malays, Chinese, orang asli, the last seen as barely human but even then divided between Sakai and negrito (‘The Flight of Chep the Bird’ 175). Depending on the behaviour of white traders (unscrupulous or going native) and rajahs (despotic and venal) these could change places in the pecking order, as could Chinese and ordinary Malays. Clifford allows criticism of British scientific curiosity as imperialist intrusiveness: ‘Juggins was forever talking about human knowledge, as though he and it were partners in a business firm’ and has to be dissuaded from exhuming a recently buried Sakai baby and alienating all the local labour on a jungle expedition (‘The Ghoul’ 124). Nonetheless, Western reason is held above Eastern superstition: Clifford’s ‘old hand’ narrator says, ‘I always take books with me into the jungle, and the more completely incongruous they are to my immediate surroundings the more refreshing I find them’ (126). The real boundary, however, if one pursues this contrast, is between all of these and the orang asli tribals, and that dividing line is defined in terms of civilisation versus nature.

In the title story of Clifford’s *The Further Side of Silence*, Kria, a young Malay man, goes up river to establish a trade store:

Kria sat lordly in the stern, steering the little craft with a heavy wooden paddle, while two sweating and straining Sakai punted her forward against the rush of the current. He wore the loose blouse, serviceable short pants, huddled, many-coloured waistcloth, and the variegated cotton headkerchief which constitute the costume of the average up-country Malay; but judged by debased, local standards, Solomon in all his glory could hardly be held to owe a heavier debt to his tailor. The two men who worked
the boat, for example, wore nothing save a dirty strip of bark cloth twisted carelessly about their loins... Their bodies were scaly with leprous-looking skin disease, and the shaggy locks of their hair stood out around their heads in regrettable halos. They were smeared with the gray dust of wood ashes. (5)

Kria falls for a 15-year-old Sakai girl whose name (‘Breeze of the Forest’) and appearance amongst jungle foliage place her as a child of nature. The jungle, in fact, gives her power over Kria, since it is her freedom and his prison: ‘he was subtly conscious that she was, in some strange fashion, an integral part of the forest that surrounded them; that she was a stranger to the life of mankind, as he understood it — the life of folk of his own race — who, at best, are only trespassers upon Nature’s vast domain’ (9). Pi-Noi is flighty (‘liar’), merely mimics Malay ways as a game and, easily bored, throws off her new clothes and domestic confinement and disappears into the jungle.

Clifford uses an antiquated prose style to folklorise both Malay and Sakai, but here deploys the idea of Nature to privilege the orang asli and cast a critical eye over the Malay. In fact, it is Kria’s jealousy and wanting to control his wife, and his Malay colleagues’ prejudices that lead to the murder of the girl and her brother. She is seen as both worthlessly expendable and inherently immoral as well as a heathen linked to witchcraft, so there is no compunction about killing her, although Kria kills the killer and dies in the process. This is, of course, a colonial ploy to justify white rule by subtly making the romantic Western reader a pseudo child of the forest and un-naturalising the local population most likely to present opposition to the power with which reader and writer are aligned. It obscures what is obvious: that the Malay characters are also the closest to the British reader in terms of civilisational qualities, and the jungle even more hostile to the white colonist than the Malay; that the white reader is enmeshed in a romantic economy of passion even as he or she is being taught to feel superior to the Malay who is tragically subject to passion. In fact, Clifford presents the marvels of Malayan life as gothic romance from the ‘Middle Ages’ of superstition. He allows that all people share in the same stories of magic and the supernatural, but does so from a superior position of modern anthropological overview, admitting the colonial dilemma of having to both rely on and dismiss ‘masses of native evidence’ (‘The Were-Tiger’, 40–41).

It is the forest that is the site of adventure, of fear, of the supernatural: both Malay and European prefer village and town settled existence (46) to even a daylight trip through the jungle unless in company, although Clifford’s narrator confesses that British rule has reduced Malaya to ‘deplorably monotonous and insipid conditions’ such that Raja Haji Hamid accompanies him to an independent state in the hope of some excitement even though the outcome will be more ‘pacification’ (‘The Experiences of Raja Haji Hamid’ 56, 61). If white reason is modernity and Malay feudal society is the middle ages, then the forest is primeval night. Nature, as the river Telom ‘in the remote interior of Pahang’, fights, tears,
bites and wrestles furiously with its surroundings, swelling to ‘impetuous rage’ and ebbing into ‘a sullen wrath which is even more formidable and dangerous’ (‘In the Valley of the Telom’ 77). It dictates the pattern of Malay life, allowing tin sluicing in the dry and threatening leeches and fever in the wet (80–81). Its provision of durian in season to Sakai results in a fight for possession between man and beast (82) and its salt generates biological urges in both animal and orang asli alike (83–84).

What is of particular interest in the text is the likening of a rampaging elephant’s trumpeting to ‘the sound of a steam siren’ (88) — the only moment of modern industrial imagery in eighty pages. This machine of power demolishes other signs of civilisational power such as an iron cooking pot and brass sireh containers and reduces Malay and Sakai alike to abject simian tree climbers. Although Pandak Aris recovers quickly and berates his superstitious Sakai guides (figured as akin to ‘other lower animals’ and ‘terrified apes’ (88), they will not come down and he is benighted in all senses of the word, unable to locate his flint and steel to start a fire. There is here, an interesting exchange between nature and manufacture. Jungle insects sound a ‘toecsn’ (93) and humans are stripped of technology. Smell and hearing surpass sight at this point (95–97) and reason is suspended in a battle between man and beast that leaves little supremacy to either save for the buttress roots of a tree protecting the man. The Sakai, who ape-like take to the trees, are the survivors, and minister to the wounded man while they feast on the carcass of the marauding Selandang buffalo. Nature supplies danger and adventure, but humanity consists in successfully extracting oneself from the frontier between man and nature. The Sakai, however, complicate the equation by constantly crossing the boundary between the two while avoiding the drama entailed in the conflict of one technology versus another. Can it be, then, that white and brown are on the same side in the fight against the jungle? Have the orang asli been overlooked in this battle between technology of nature and technology of town? Can it also be that in resenting the impositions of British colonialism, the colonised Malay opted for an oppositional hyper-civilisational image resulting today in twin towers and the depletion of the natural world?

Clifford invokes the geographic determinism of colonial discourse that favours people from temperate climes who can ‘bend Nature … to their will’:

Nature has been very lavish to the Malay, and has provided him with a rich soil that produces a maximum of food in return for a minimum of grudging labour; but rightly viewed, he has suffered at her hands an eternal defeat. In the tropics no less than in the arctic regions, nature has proved too strong a competitor for mankind. In the latter she has forced men to hibernate … in the former she has rushed in to obliterate the works of human beings with so appalling a rapidity, if for a moment their efforts to withstand her have been relaxed, that here, too, they have abandoned an unequal contest. (‘He of the Hairy Face’ 151)

Apart from the obvious contradiction of the colonial myth of the lazy native contained in this, there is the image of nature as an implacable foe that, if
embedded in the colonised population as well as the culture of the coloniser, must result in a counter-attack once technology and economic drive make it possible.

Having spent the best part of his book referring to the jungle people as Sakai, Clifford somewhat amazingly notes:

If there be one thing that the jungle folk dislike more than another, it is to be called ‘Sakai’ to their faces, and they are never so addressed by a Malay unless he wishes to bully them. The word, which has long ago lost its original meaning, signifies a slave or a dog; but by the Aborigines it is regarded as the most offensive word in the Malayan vocabulary. In their own tongue they speak of themselves as sen-oi — which means a ‘man’ — as opposed to gob, which signifies ‘foreigner’…

(‘The Lone-hand Raid’ 227)

He continues to refer to the Senoi as Sakai, thereby implicating himself in the same arrogant disregard for the orang asli as he depicts in his Malay characters. This is so even as he creates the Senoi as innocent victims and children of nature against whom his relatively sophisticated but barbarous Malays appear as cruelly unscrupulous. It is part of Empire’s rhetoric of protection (Clifford patrols to protect Senoi against Malay and Malay villager against the oppression of despotic Rajas). But that paternalism hides an underlying indifference unless peasant or tribal supplies enough local colour as raw material tribute to process a story from (‘Flight of the Jungle-Folk’ 270; ‘One who had eaten my Rice’ 280). If we think of Philip Holden’s thesis of how emergent national elites schooled under Empire are interpellated into civilised citizens, does the Malay reader learn to identify with the narrating voice as an urbane onlooker to a jungle world, who nonetheless from that insulated, more liberal humanist position still perpetuates careless, discriminatory attitudes against ‘bush’ people and nature?

Clifford does indulge in some romantic awe of the forest and values ‘little glimpse vouchsafed to unworthy man of the vision of the true God’ (390) that he momentarily catches in its fastness. The up-country world he describes has all the freedom of ‘unrestrained savageness’ (398) — arbitrary fate, devious human contrivance, and rule by brute force; the order he is there to impose is the mechanical world of limiting regulated modernity, as he realises when he visits the Serempan Falls for a second time and finds the violence of the river harnessed to supply power to a nearby mine by ‘the tyrannous white men’ — in this case, a group of Australians (386, 402). The romance of his being amongst natural men and things comes about because he is the front runner of a system of unnatural controls the effect of which will be to push back and tame the natural world. And the modern Malaysian state is the direct inheritor of this contradictory celebration and denial of nature.

Nations claim their natural, organic identity from a spurious equation between people, national space and nature, but as nations also define themselves as civilised entities with some supposed organic identity (see Schama). Aboriginality is the point of authentication and separation; unity with nature is part of aboriginality.
So in Australia there is a celebration of the bushman: the British settler becoming Australian by learning to live close to the land, and sometimes close to the Aboriginal population. But we also find the accompanying need to differentiate the civilised white man from the stone-age creature of nature who at once authorises and challenges the right of the coloniser to become Australian. In similar vein, Clifford admires the Senoi for their ability to live in harmony with the jungle while dismissing them as merely upright animals: orang hutan, in fact, though their language is like bird cries even if their faces are simian (Clifford, ‘The Further Side of Silence’). The British of course were not threatened by orang asli, so could afford to adopt a paternalistic tolerance of them, and indeed, they recognised their bushcraft and put it to use when they recruited them into their anti-terrorist campaign, just as Malaysia maintains a special group within the police force for border security and jungle rescue operations (‘Senoi Praak’). From the perspective of environmental postcolonialism, we might ask to what extent Clifford’s colonial discourses of indigeneity and nature have been carried over into contemporary nationalist thought, and how they continue to influence general attitudes to nature and all life forms associated with it.

Clifford writes of an era before ‘such a product as plantation rubber had come into existence’ when trade was based on gathering by hand rattan, ‘wild gutta’ gum and forest product by hand (‘The Lone Hand Raid’ 223). His sense of a fallen world of industrial modernity that his administration ushers in is realised in the brutalising social effects of plantation labour colonies recorded by K.S. Maniam in The Return. In more recent times, urban development and the profits to be made from oil palm (a colonising plant introduced from West Africa) are completing the conversion of the autochthonous jungle into globalised monoculture. The point is not new, as is clear from artwork by people like Jalaini Abu Hassan who sounds a small gong in his 2008 exhibition Chanang against hypocrisy and abuses of power, whether gendered, political or environmental, and again, K.S. Maniam looks at some of the effects of this in Between Lives (2003). Considering the nature of Malaysia’s economic miracle, no wonder timber has to be taken from the Pacific: local forests have already been logged to make way for towns and plantations, now palm oil is the global successor to rubber. But external commodity imperialism rests on internal colonisation and that in turn is part of a transnational imperialism of corporate capital. Change is partly nationally driven, but one has to ask about the extent to which the moneyed elite are responding to or even caught within the demands of an imperialist global capitalism fuelled by the First World and China. Whatever the nature of the dynamic, and regardless of whether one is muslim, christian, hindu, buddhist, Western or Eastern, it rests on the ways in which societies think, behave and legislate in relation to nature.

This has always been part of colonialist discourse, but it has also become the leading edge of postcolonial research. Focus has shifted from questions of national identity and the expression and recognition of minority cultures to nature writing and ecocriticism. Arundhati Roy moved from The God of Small
Things, with its small-town claustrophobic dysfunctions mixed with diasporic movements across country and oceans, satellite TV, and IMF grants to rice farmers, to writing polemical essays on state corruption, multinational capitalism and the attack on environment and rural minorities represented by large-scale dam building on the Narmada river system. Postcolonial discourse analysts have followed suit, examining the new imperialism of economic rationalism, its displacement of humanist and civil society discourses, and the cultural patterns of representation (in the West from Enlightenment utilitarian Reason on the one hand and the Bible on the other) that make the degradation of the natural world seem a justifiable, sensible process. One part of this shift has been to extend the frontiers of difference from national, racial, and gender difference, to inspect the ‘species boundary’ between humans and nature. Helen Tiffin, one of the pioneers of postcolonial theory’s reshaping of Commonwealth Literature studies, has been one of the leaders of this change and some of the results can be seen in her editing with Graham Huggan of an edition of Interventions (2009).

Tiffin has spent time in Borneo, and postcolonial artists in the region are beginning to depict some of the world’s concerns about what is happening. At the popular end of the literary scale (where social issues often get an early airing, even if they are pretexts for formula adventure stories), Shamini Flint, former Malaysian lawyer and now Singaporean writer, has a down-at-heel Sikh policeman from Singapore investigate the murder of a society figure in Kuala Lumpur supposedly by his Singaporean wife. Her playboy husband Alan Lee has headed a logging company that his resentful businessman brother Kian Min wants to control and he is also resented by his other brother, Jasper, who is a nature-lover. Kian Min has been courting Chinese money to turn from logging to bio-fuel:

China’s need for wood products was inexhaustible. Ever since the severe flooding around the Yangtze River a few years back, the Chinese government had cracked down hard on excessive or illegal logging on the mainland. But this had not in any way dampened the demand for wood in the massive ongoing construction site that was China. And the authorities, so belatedly mindful of the degradation of their own environment, turned a blind eye to wood sourced from overseas. As a result, primary forests from across Asia, from Papua New Guinea to Borneo, were being denuded at a rate that would soon see the end of the great jungles of Asia. (94)

Kian Min has commanded gangs in Borneo to clear out Penan villages and open up protected forest tracts for palm oil (85, 113, 128, 265). Inspector Singh teams with Inspector Mohammad to expose the high-level corruption, which ends in Kian Min being killed by a British anthropologist in revenge for the death of his Penan wife and unborn child. It seems possible to make equivalences of postcolonial neo-imperialist dynamics between the tribal groups in the Pacific being dispossessed of land and traditional livelihoods by people from overseas and the Senoi or Penan losing territory to people from within their own nation space, both processes being moved along by local politics and global economics.
What is interesting in this detective yarn is that, in contrast to the Greenpeace photo-shoot, indigenous people are not presented as merely a colourful part of the natural scene to be preserved in the services of romantic idealism, but as part of a politised human network of contending interests. Flint suggests that the unprincipled rapacity of the loggers is owing to a deep-seated suspicion on their part that they are wrong (240) — something that finds an echo in the settler histories of ex-colonies like Australia. Also the jungle is not only set at a nostalgic distance from the world of the main characters; it is a dirty and dangerous place and yet has a strong appeal (42–43), and is linked to the life of the nation: an irate Malay policeman drags Kian Min into the smog-laden summer streets of the modern city to show him the effect of the burning off of felled vegetation across Borneo and Indonesia (164–65). This popular whodunit, then, is able to bring together ecocritical and postcolonial perspectives to produce what Rob Nixon argues for: a rethinking of the (tropical) pastoral that refuses transcendentalism in recognition of transnational cultural and political interests (236, 239). Let me quote Prof. Salleh: ‘[n]ature, says a Malay proverb, spreads before us as a teacher, to offer instruction — alam terkembang menjadi guru. Or as is suggested by a Riau proverb: We must go into the jungles to learn about human life’ (Salleh 4). That may well provide inspiration for a local sense of identity and a literary tradition, but it has not stopped modern Malaysians from taking directorships in ex-colonial corporations that go into the jungles in order to cut them down.

Postcolonial analysis of national and global systems might well consider the megacorporation of Sime Darby. What was a plantation founded by two Scots traders who went into rubber and later oil palm, amalgamated with another plantation set up by a British tea and cocoa trading company that expanded into rubber and then with other companies until it became a conglomerate with interests in engineering, Dunlopillo, Caterpillar machinery, BMW and Ford dealerships, hospitals and insurance. It is primarily a nationally owned corporation thanks to PM Mahathir, but gets about 60% of investment from overseas and owns huge tracts of land in Indonesia as well (Wikipedia). Indonesia and Malaysia account for around 85% of world production in palm oil (WWF). In the first half of 2010 it made 1.11 billion ringgit profit (APF). Although it now has a no-burn policy in deference to international concerns over global warming, its engineering wing is building a huge dam at Bakun in Borneo to irrigate its plantations that will displace something like 10,000 indigenous people and further reduce habitat for plants and animals. Such a phenomenon presents huge challenges to the postcolonial scholar and writer. Amitav Ghosh dramatises some of these in his novel The Hungry Tide in which international NGOs wrestle with state governments who battle with refugee populations and tribal groups over rights to land, animal protection, and ensuring basic amenities for as many people as possible. Most people have to consider too that palm oil is in 50% of the food products sold, so they are all part of the problem. The point here is not just to cast stones at targets that by and large
are impervious to anything the Humanities can throw, but to look for dialogue and values of sustainability and community that offer some hope of minimising if not redressing inequities, exploitations and irreparable damage. This is where the multi-disciplinary spread of postcolonial studies becomes significant: humanities are good for critically analysing patterns that lie behind social problems; other modes of understanding are better at devising solutions; we need each other.

Many years ago in teachers’ college, when Australia was making its turn towards Asia, I started to learn Malay. During my training I read Hikayat Sang Kanchil. There, without knowing it at the time, I found a fine example of the global movement of culture under expansionist trade regimes (Indian and Middle Eastern), and of the local appropriation of cultural symbols. Sang Kanchil is one of a host of postcolonial tricksters, subverting and mocking bigger, more powerful creatures. But he is also in our times a modern instance of the limits to postcolonial theories of textual and cultural politics: if the reality of imperialist power on a global scale achieves the total domination it is predicated on (the end of empire, as it is ironically worded by Fukuyama), no end of subversive play will provide a livelihood for small mousedeer: Sime Darby will have clear-felled his habitat. The challenge for postcolonial scholars, even those of us who know that there is still valuable work to be done within the small cultural spaces of regional literatures, is to push the boundaries of our discipline, continue to confront our own uneasy complicity with power, and link our activities to oppositional activism that operate across the complex intersections of minority, national and global spaces in dynamics that require our careful analytical attention to the plays and political effects of difference.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Ivan Grguritch, exacting teacher and linguistic citizen of the world. Thanks too to the University of Wollongong for an internationalisation grant enabling its initial conference presentation.

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