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Abstract

This article advances the historiography on food and colonialism by using the categories of race, class and masculinity to highlight how social distinctions that were carefully maintained in the domestic sphere became blurred when colonials ventured into the field. South East Asian cooks, known as "Cookie," were responsible for food preparation in colonial households of Malaysia and Singapore. It was their culinary skills and knowledge of local food supplies that helped develop a hybrid colonial cuisine. Other male servants in British Borneo, called simply "boys" in household, acquired the role of "jungle boys" when accompanying their colonial employers on travel in the hinterland. The servants' food preparation skills and local knowledge helped sustain the British when they ventured into remote regions of British North Borneo and Sarawak. The hardship of jungle travel along with the lack of food supplies and home comforts made the master-servant relationship in the jungle very different from that of the mistress-servant in the colonial home. In the jungle, the private and public spheres of the master-servant relationship merged as the colonial and his servant negotiated means of protection, food preparation and security for the colonial. Using colonial memoirs and cookbooks, this paper looks at the relationship between the British mistress and Cookie and between the colonial master and the field servants in British Borneo. In both cases it was through foodways that a unique relationship developed between the colonizer and the colonized.

Keywords

1850, ca, asia, southeast, colonial, british, 1960, folks, cookie, cooks, different, sketch, historical, boy, jungle

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“Cookie” and “Jungle Boy”: A Historical Sketch of the Different Cooks for Different Folks in British Colonial Southeast Asia c. 1850-1960

Cecilia Leong-Salobir

While historians have increasingly taken up the cudgels to study food history, research on the British colonial hybrid cuisine remains scant. This article examines two categories of cooks who prepared food for the British in colonial Malaysia and Singapore. These are the domestic cook in the colonial family home and the **servants** who added on responsibilities as cook in the jungle when travelling with colonial employers in the hinterland. I explore what foods the colonials ate, who prepared the food and how food practices inform us about colonialism. Using a range of colonial cookbooks and colonial memoirs, this paper looks at the ways in which the Asian cook functioned, in the different households and colonial settings. The roles and duties of the cooks depended on the make-up of the colonial setting; on whether the *memsahib* (**an English woman in the colonies**) held a supervisory role over the cook or whether the cook was wholly responsible for feeding the colonial and the retinue of **servants while traveling. This essay advances the historiography on food and colonialism by using the categories of race, class, and masculinity to highlight how social distinctions that were carefully maintained in the domestic sphere became blurred when colonials ventured into the field.**

Malaysia and Singapore are the successor states to the former British colonies and protectorates **in Southeast Asia.**¹ Malaysia today consists of thirteen states, eleven on

the Malay Peninsula and two in Borneo: Sabah and Sarawak. Sabah was known as British North Borneo during British rule. The Malay states became independent of British rule in 1957 and were known as the Federation of Malaya. Sabah and Sarawak joined the other states, forming the Federation of Malaysia in 1963.

The Asian servants who were employed as cooks to prepare meals for the colonials unwittingly became colonial agents from which colonizers readily stamped their authority and constructed instruments of colonial rule. Jonathan Robins goes as far as to say that “colonial rule was constructed and contested in the kitchen as much as it was on the battlefield”; **he concludes** that the study of the meal as social practice can reveal much about the politics and economics of colonialism.² However, I am a little ambivalent about Robins’ view, particularly in the context of Southeast Asian colonialism as more often **than** not there were no rigid rules in colonialism. Frequently, local practices were amalgamated with European ideas, in what would appear to be a great deal of collaboration between colonizer and colonized; much more than **many** colonial and postcolonial scholars would care to admit.

In colonial Malaysia and Singapore the cook was always known as “Cookie”; in British India, the cook was generally given the name Ramasamy and cooks answered to “kokki” to the Dutch colonizer.³ In British North Borneo “jungle boys” were part of the coterie of “boys” in the colonial household and performed general tasks when their employer was not travelling. His **work** became important when he became his master’s guide and cook when the colonial travelled to rural areas on reconnaissance trips or on administration business. **One of the roles assigned to the male servants was as “body servant” to the**

sahib (European man in British India) where he was responsible for laying out the *sahib's* clothes, assistance with dressing and care of clothing. These servants were crucial to the sustenance and survival of the travelling Briton, and occasionally his wife as well; they were a guard against the numerous dangers associated with jungle travel and also in the provisioning and preparation of food en route. The role of the “jungle boy” might also be maintained while the colonial was overseeing Southeast Asian rubber or tobacco plantations. **While scholars have begun to acknowledge the work of the “cookie” in the colonial home, that has not yet been the case for the “jungle boy”.**

Colonial memoirs, cook books and household management guides published in Britain and in the colonies provide evidence of the role played by domestic servants. These publications reiterate the prevailing view on tensions between European employers and their domestic servants, and paradoxically the colonizers' utter dependence on them.⁴ There were hundreds of Anglo-Indian cookbooks which the *memsahib* in South Asia could refer to but those written for Malaya, the Borneo states and Singapore numbered only a handful. **The colonial housewife in Southeast Asia could find Anglo-Indian cookbooks and household manuals not entirely relevant where servants were concerned. Many of these publications carried instructions for specific tasks for each category of servant. In colonial India large numbers of servants were engaged for ethnic and caste considerations as well as cheaper labor costs. It was not unusual for a household of two to have the services of twenty to thirty servants. In Southeast Asia, servants were in limited supply – the average colonial household comprised a cook, one or two “boys”, a water carrier, a gardener and a syce. Further, South Asian cookbooks did not feature many recipes for pork and beef as the cooks were**

either Muslim or Hindu. The majority of servants in Southeast Asia were Chinese and there was no restriction on the kinds of foods they were asked to cook.⁵ *The Malayan Cookery Book* of 1930 professes to provide “a serious attempt to aid the housewives (European) of Malaya the art of cooking ... a representative list of the recipes handed from generation to generation of Malayan (European) housewives ... There are first the dishes known to many generations of Indians.”⁶

Just as fiction, diaries and biographies do not totally mirror lived events, these genres when examined together, add nuances and significance to the historian’s understanding of the master-servant relationship. **There is no shortage of such texts; right** from the start when the British set foot on colonial outposts until the fall of empire, thousands of colonial officials and others published their memoirs and diaries. Written by both men and women the colonial memoirs described their experiences in the colonies as well as by those who spent their childhood there. The British colonial was a prolific writer; meticulous reports were written up of his travels, work and recreation. **Moreover, these texts often invoked specific tropes, for example, the traveller’s masculine skill in hunting game for the party or the lamentation about shortages of food or unmentionable dishes that were encountered in the jungle. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to reflect on the silences of these narratives. For example, colonial travellers omitted to mention the times when there were no shortage of supplies or when it was the servants who procured that jungle fowl or sweet potatoes for the whole contingent.**

As with travel guidebooks published on the British African colonies,⁷ many of **the** memoirs published on Borneo were written by colonial officials or with official endorsement. The autobiographical nature of the colonial experiences provided a showcase for imperial adventure. Srilata Ravi argues that adventure stories and geographical imagery can be seen as representation of authority, constructions of space and identity.⁸ She notes that it was in the cultural spaces mapped by adventures that ideologies of imperialism and masculinity were constructed. Indeed, the colonizers authority and identity is tied with his attitude and views of his servants who accompanied him on jungle travel.

One limitation in using cookbooks, colonial memoirs and travel guidebooks in this study is that those publications were written by colonials and the subaltern voice is necessarily absent. Written records by domestic servants today are rare and in the colonial era even rarer. **Yet memoirs by colonists, with their racist, classist, and sexist narratives, reveal how badly colonial society treated cooks and other household staff.**⁹ Another aspect which this paper does not explore but would merit further research is on relationships between employer and domestic servants in wealthy Asian households of the time.¹⁰

Although there is a substantial body of literature in tracing colonialism and food commodities¹¹ scant attention has been paid to the food practices of colonizers and those responsible for feeding empire builders.¹² The few scholars who engage imperialism with food practices tend to advance the notion that food consumption patterns became markers in differentiating between colonizers and the colonized. The prevailing view is that

British colonizers consumed only British types of food in order to separate themselves from the local people. E.M. Collingham states that Anglo-Indians' adherence to British food shows that they were unwilling to adapt to India and that this became an important element in prestige as it differentiated them from Indians.¹³ Nupur Chaudhuri makes the disputable point that to protect their status as rulers and defend British culture in nineteenth century India, the Anglo-Indians chose racial exclusiveness and rejected Indian goods and dishes but were actively promoting these items to people in England.¹⁴

Robert Launay's work on narratives of travel to Asia and the Americas, explore changes in how European travellers wrote about food.¹⁵ He observes that narratives of travel to distant places can tell us as much about the authors of such work as the people they describe. Launay states that descriptions of food are especially useful barometers of attitudes, on what kinds of food that can or cannot be eaten, how it is prepared, and with whom to share it. He notes that reactions to food "are manifestations of cultural dispositions that are not always consciously articulated, as opposed, for example to reactions to sexuality or to religion."¹⁶ In looking at food representations at the height of European imperialism, Kolleen M. Guy states that food signalled rank and rivalry, solidarity and community, identity and exclusion. She adds that it was "the combination of the plasticity of the representation and the affective capacity of food that made it a potent political tool. Food was power, especially imperial power."¹⁷ She further notes that this power came not just from control of consumption, production, or distribution, but also from the links between food and a sense of gastronomic *us* and *them*.¹⁸

As in India, cooks were crucially important for the maintenance of British households, and yet, according to Swapna M. Banerjee, as servants, they were seen as primitive, dirty, lazy, physically and mentally inferior.¹⁹ Similar elements of colonial culture, food consumption and patterns of domestic service were transplanted to, or replicated from South Asia to the other colonies in Asia. Thomas R. Metcalf points out that “ways of thinking formed during the Indian colonial experience found expression, as the British struggled to come to terms with their new colonial subjects, in comparable, if different forms of knowledge elsewhere”.²⁰

Cooks in colonial Malaysia and Singapore **were** instrumental in procuring, preparing and serving food on the colonial table. While British women arriving in India from the early 1800s would have “collaborated” with local servants **in** devising hybrid European and Asian meals, twentieth-century *memsahibs* played only a supervisory role in the kitchen.²¹ Indeed, as Mary Procida points out in her work on empire and women, British presence in the home and kitchen was one of symbolic and authoritative presence’.²² It was the colonial wife’s “civilizing mission” to provide “efficient and competent home management” and, in this connection, she was assisted by domestic servants.²³ Just as the Anglo-Indians in India were completely dependent on their native servants²⁴, so **were** the *mems* (***memsahib in India***) in Southeast Asia. Janice Brownfoot notes that “customs and circumstances (notably wood fires and kerosene tin ‘stoves’) meant that *mems* relied particularly on their servants’ assistance for cooking and budgeting” reinforces the proposition that domestic servants had significant input in the preparation of food in the colonial household.²⁵

In Malaysia and Singapore, *mem*'s supervisory duties consisted of pointing out dishes and meals to **servants** to be prepared that day from cookbooks, giving out money for food purchases from the markets and meting out spices and staples for the day's cooking.

Although **the kitchen servant** was wholly responsible for turning out food on the table he, like other household servants were seen dishonest, lazy and unreliable and therefore could not be entrusted with access to ingredients.²⁶ Authors of cookbooks and household manuals frequently wrote about keeping food ingredients under lock and key and to give out small sums of money for daily purchases in the markets. **At the start of each day the cook would meet with the *mem* and discuss the day's meals and staples from the food safes would be allocated.**²⁷

Different kinds of curries, mulligatawny, kedgerree, country captain, pish pash and sago pudding appeared daily on the colonial table in India, Malaysia and Singapore in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. **Cooks** played no small part in deciding what ingredients were appropriate for the rulers, omitting many "lowly" food items that were consumed by the local inhabitants.²⁸ Curry stood out as the single most important dish that defined the culinary history of British imperialism and it became the mainstay of the colonial cuisine, travelling from India back to Britain via British colonials and spread throughout the colonies. Hybrid dishes did not replace entirely British food practices as roast beef, saddles of mutton, European style desserts and other dishes were often consumed in tandem; demonstrating that previous food tastes and preferences are resistant to change.

Tiffin in India refers to light lunch or snacks but in Malaysia and Singapore it is a

substantial meal. Sunday tiffin or curry tiffin as it was also known in the colonial era was long lunch on a Sunday afternoon and became a colonial institution. When served at home for friends and colleagues²⁹, **the cook** and his assistants would lay out the buffet-style meal by the verandah. European-style hotels also served tiffin, a practice still surviving today. Similar to the Dutch colonial *rijsttafel* (or “rice table”) from the Indies, the platter of rice as the centrepiece was complemented by main dishes of chicken, beef, mutton, prawn, fish or vegetable curry. Side dishes, known as *sambals*, could number as many as twenty.³⁰

George L. Peet, in his memoirs of his time in Malaya and Singapore, recounted a visit to a rubber estate carved from “virgin jungle” in the Kluang district of Johore. On Sundays, planters from D.V. Byles’ estate and a neighbouring estate would gather in Byles’ bungalow for a curry tiffin. Peet wrote that there were four kinds of curry – pigeon, chicken, beef and hardboiled eggs, all prepared by his Indian cook.³¹ Julian Davison remembers the Sunday curry tiffin in 1950s Singapore as “a grand feast” with many guests.³² Davison recalls feasting on chicken in coconut cream with potatoes, beef *rendang*, *assam* fish, a spicy fish Mornay, curried hardboiled eggs, ladies’ fingers, beansprouts with salted fish, coconut vegetable stew and long beans. The dessert most often mentioned was sago pudding, or *Gula Melaka*, a local sweet, being a combination of sago and the sugar syrup.³³

It is highly probable that the curry tiffin evolved from the *rijsttafel* as Indonesian cooks were recruited to work for British colonizers in Malaysia and Singapore.³⁴ This leads to the intriguing idea that there were cross-exchanges of domestic service between the two

European colonial powers. Indeed, Tony Lamb, one of the last technical officers to be recruited by the Colonial Government in North Borneo, stated that the curries prepared by his cooks were of the Javanese style.³⁵ What is certain is that the sheer variety of local dishes assembled for the curry tiffin was representative of how the British took to local foodways. This was possible only through the efforts of **the skilled knowledge of servants.**

From dishing up the daily fare for the family table³⁶ **the local cook** was also called upon to create elaborate and formal **European-style** dinners for Christmas, New Year or royal birthday celebrations. The latter were held at Government House where formal dinners never featured local dishes. At a banquet for Governor E.W. Birch in 1904 at the Sandakan Club in British North Borneo, the menu for sixty-eight diners offered caviar, turtle soup, fish mayonnaise, salmi of pigeon, stuffed duck, asparagus, roast turkey and ham, Singaleila cake, meringues, anchovy toast, dessert and coffee. This would have involved the joint efforts of several **trained servants** from the various European households. Sources suggest the majority of the cooks were Hainanese from the island of Hainan. These Hainanese cooks were famed for their skills and well-connected to a broad network of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.³⁷ Servants of well-to-do Chinese families in colonial Malaysia and Singapore were also Hainanese. In a Nonya **(a person of Malay and Chinese descent)** memoir of the early twentieth century, the author described her family employing nine domestic servants, all of whom were Hainanese.³⁸ The Hainanese cooks had to prepare elaborate Nonya meals on a daily basis.

Other servants in the house, generally all male, with the exception of the child carer were

generally known as “boys”. These boys were fully grown men, their duties ranged from looking after the garden (garden boys), looking after the dogs (dog boys), responsible for the laundry (wash boy). Martinez and Lowrie point out that the term “house-boy” or “boy” in a various colonial settings is an apt example of trans-colonial culture.³⁹ Indeed, other scholars have noted that the “houseboy” was a term used in North America, referring to African men who worked as domestic servants and in colonial homes throughout Africa and Indochina.⁴⁰ Houseboy or boy was used to denigrate colonized men in denying them adulthood, **thus refusing to acknowledge their masculinity**.

The study of “jungle boys” remains largely unwritten in historical analyses of Asian domestic servants under colonial rule. The dual-role of **these servants in the domestic space and while traveling in the field** not only inform us of their versatility and adaptability in their duties and skills but is also telling of the huge demands the British placed on local employees. **Such servants** were also recruited to accompany hunters, explorers and missionaries who travelled to the interior of Borneo.

American zoologist William Hornady on his two-year travel to India, Ceylon, Malaya and Borneo in 1876, wrote

Nothing could be more arduous and full of risk to life and limb than overland travel in the interior of Borneo, where the traveller is confronted by dense, dark forests and rugged mountains from the beginning to the end of his journey. The interior is practically an uninhabited wilderness, destitute of nearly everything fit for human food, and he who would explore it must carry on his back, through

forests and rivers, and over mountains, sufficient food, clothing and medicines, to last to the end of the journey. The heart of Africa is not nearly so inaccessible as the heart of Borneo. The difficulties of overland travel in the interior are almost beyond belief.⁴¹

Hornady was part of a growing number of intrepid explorers, adventurers, missionaries and entrepreneurs to British Borneo. The number of servants employed in British Borneo were relatively fewer than in India, **in part because** the sparsely-populated Borneo states **had** no ready supply of domestic service. It was known in Borneo colonial circles that indigenous servants would work for Europeans they liked and if unhappy with their employment conditions they would “resign” and returned to their villages.⁴² **Such a reluctant acknowledgement of the autonomy of their subjects was no doubt disquieting to colonials who depended on them in the field.**

Frank Hatton made several expeditions to North Borneo as “Scientific Explorer” in the Services of the British North Borneo Company in the early 1880s. When Hatton was recruiting boys for his mineral exploration in the interior, he lamented that

Up to the present time the greatest difficulty has been to get guides. The Dusuns always make some poor excuses; and, indeed, the only aim of Dyaks, Dusuns, Sulus, and Labuk men, whom I have met up to the present, is to get as much as possible out of one. I tried to persuade a Mentapok Dusun to go up the mountains with me, but he said there were man-eating ghosts, rhinoceros, snakes, &c., and he was afraid.⁴³

Thus, colonial travellers often attributed the reluctance of local subjects to work in terms of fear and superstition, thereby questioning their maturity.

There was no question of racial difference, for many of the **servants** recruited to work for the British Borneo colonials **in the field** came from several of the indigenous groups of Borneo, such as the Dusuns or Muruts in British North Borneo and Dayaks or Ibans from Sarawak. **Indeed, their** knowledge of the jungle made them indispensable to the colonial on his travels to the hinterland. They knew the terrain, the wildlife, dangers of the jungle, and where to procure food supplies. They were fit young men and could carry loads for the *tuan*. They would slash a clearing in the jungle to set up camp, build fires to cook meals and so on. Just as the colonial household could not have existed in its well-orderliness without the domestic servants, it is doubtful if the hinterland in Borneo could have been surveyed as efficiently without the presence of the **field servants**. Huge swathes of the hinterland were **surveyed** in the early years of British presence in Borneo. In the Preface for *North Borneo: Explorations and Adventures on the Equator*, Sir Walter Medhurst, Commissioner of Emigration to the British North Borneo Company Company wrote in 1885 (four years after British rule commenced),

The new territory covers an area of 28,000 square miles, and over 600 miles of sea-coast....A complete administrative apparatus has been set on foot: whole tribes, once addicted to head-hunting and such like savage practices, have been won over to agricultural and other peaceful pursuits ...⁴⁴

One of these “peaceful pursuits” would have been recruitment into domestic service for

the British. What Medhurst neglected to say was that these “tribes” were the guides and cooks who led expeditions to the hinterland to set up the “administrative apparatus”.

As in Africa in the first half of the nineteenth century, the nature of the colonial master/servant relationship in Borneo was one of colonial power. Libbie Freed observes that there was “no presumption or pretense making friends or living like the natives ... the relationship between Europeans and Africans was always marked by a strong and overt power differential”.⁴⁵ While the skills and knowledge of the “jungle boy” was superior on their travels he was still the servant, the boy. He still had to cook and fetch for the *tuan*. His role could be compared to the butler, valet or man servant in the aristocratic home in the metropole or even in the colonial home. **This provided de facto acknowledgment of the servants’ masculinity, notwithstanding the derogatory term “boy.” Hierarchy provided a crucial situational difference, for** the man servant of the aristocratic home **stood at the head of** a large number of servants. In the **field**, the “jungle boy” was often the **colonial traveller’s** only companion in the jungle for long stretches of time.

Ann Laura Stoler has explored the premise that imperial authority and racial distinctions were structured in gendered terms, arguing that colonial elites were not homogenous communities.⁴⁶ As more European women arrived to the colonies however it was widely-held that women required more metropolitan amenities, had more delicate sensibilities and therefore required suitable accommodation and more servants for household chores.⁴⁷ White women, Stoler maintained, needed to be maintained at “elevated standards of living, in insulated social spaces”⁴⁸ At the same time, it became clear that the colonial mistress’ role was to maintain this haven of superior and civilized sanctuary.

Jungle travel in Borneo was a venue for displaying masculinity and imperialism. While countless memoirs were written by colonial women (wives, missionaries, travellers) men provided the bulk of adventure travel narratives in the hinterland, reinforcing the notion that colonization was a masculine undertaking. In any case colonial officers were exclusively male and they commanded the convoys of native men marching across the colonial landscape. Hunters, explorers, adventurers, scientists and missionaries traversed the wilds of the colonies, to bring home trophies, civilize the indigenous peoples, discover “new” fauna and flora, as part of the colonial project. Many of these memoirs were published from travellers and explorers’ diaries or letters written home and added to the growing popularity of travel narratives in the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ The memoirs illustrate colonial attitudes towards the guides and cooks who sustained the travellers and ranged from being paternalistic, condescending to downright dislike and mistrust. By articulating the **supposed incompetence** of the “boys” the colonials reiterate the rhetoric that the natives needed to be managed and led.

Various European explorers, entrepreneurs, missionaries and adventurers had descended on Borneo before the British had established control there. Charles Bruce spent twenty years in North Borneo and in his positions as aide-de-camp to the Governor and district officer (the equivalent of district commissioner in colonial India), travelled extensively, among a host of duties to oversee infrastructure and maintain law and order. In his memoirs he wrote that he relished the chance to get away from the routine of the “office-wallah” and acknowledged the merit of having a jungle-boy.⁵⁰ Bruce described the **servant’s** sole role was to ensure “the comfort of his employer, who has then only to see

that his boy knows a certain amount about plain cooking and that he learns and panders to his employer's pet fads in the details of camp and jungle life". He admitted that in hindsight, writing about the actual daily duties of a boy on trek and putting it "into cold print it looks appallingly cruel".⁵¹ Bruce gave an account of the typical day in jungle travel. At four in the morning the **servant** started the fire going. Half an hour later, **when** he called his "lord," **he** would have set out the day's kit in some accessible place, **sheltered from any** rain or mist. He then retired to the kitchen, that is, a tripod of stones in the lee of the hut where he started to prepare and serve breakfast. Together with **any other servants, he** then would strip and pack up his employer's bed, clothing and kitchen equipment. On completion of the jungle trek and on arriving at the colonial's home the role of the **field servant** reverts to being **another domestic in** the household. Bruce wrote,

To my mind an ever-continuing miracle is the "jungle-boy," the composite cook, butler and valet who attends on the peripatetic European in his trips through the wild lands of the East. He is always a native, because practically no Chinese have a jungle "sense," ... The native, on the other hand, is country-bred; he has probably been in the jungle in his youth, and so has a certain amount of jungle "craft", he probably knows something of cattle and ponies; he can probably speak one or more of the native dialects, ...and he can subsist on rations at which a Chinese will usually turn up his nose."⁵²

Thus a single paragraph on the description of a category of servant in a colonial memoir sums up British attitudes towards domestic service in the colonies. **Precisely because he**

was placed at the bottom of nineteenth-century British racial hierarchies, as a “primitive native” rather than a “semi-civilized” Chinese, for a brief period in the field, he can assume the role of a gentleman’s gentleman. Frank Hatton also noted that

The Chinese do the greater portion of the trade in Labuan, and nine out of ten of them are not too honest especially the boys, who come to be engaged as servants. They have a kind of “trades’ **union**” or secret society, whose orders they must obey. If the society forbids a boy to accept a certain sum per month, he cannot choose but obey, as any boy who fights against the society is very soon worried into submission.⁵³

Oscar Cook who joined the North Borneo Civil Service in 1912 as a cadet and rising through the ranks to district officer and served in many remote districts.⁵⁴ On a typical jungle trek Cook had with him the cook, two boys, a policeman, twelve coolies with luggage on three pack-bullocks. He echoed Bruce’s question of the worth of a Chinese cook in the jungle, noting that “[T]here is little a good Chinese cook cannot turn out when he wants to” but stated that “I rarely took him on up-country trips, generally preferring to leave him in charge of the house, asserting that in the jungle a Chinaman was more bother than he was worth”.⁵⁵

Hornady, on the other hand, was positive about his Chinese servant who accompanied him on one of his journeys, saying, “I embarked myself, a first-class Chinese servant named Ah Kee, a half-caste Portuguese lad named Perara to assist in hunting and

preparing specimens, and a complete jungle outfit, with provisions for three months.” In another instance he also described Ah Kee as his “servant and best man”.⁵⁶

Similarly, Ada Pryer, wife of the founder of Sandakan described her Chinese boy and cook, Lam Chong, on accompanying them on up-country journeys thus,

“Our boy and cook, Lam Chong, ... has accompanied us on many an up country journey and behaved most loyally, surmounting all obstacles. When making these long journeys up rivers to the far interior, he has provided us with our meals quite regularly, and prepared as well, and in almost as great variety as though we had been at home, yet the only fire he had, was a very primitive arrangement; a clay fire-basket made in a turned up box filled with sand”.⁵⁷

Pryer also wrote, “[there was with us Mr A., a naturalist, whose cook was provided with a camp oven; so he and our cook used to have great baking matches, preparing and subsequently baking bread on a sandbank”.⁵⁸

In travelling to the hinterland of Borneo, the “jungle boy” and other boys doubled up as cook, valet, “body-servant” – a composite role constructed for the well-being of the travelling Briton. While some narratives extolled the virtues of the “jungle boy” others like Boyle, whose aim was to traverse Borneo from Sarawak to Pontianak, complained about his “body-servant” who “exhibited his usual incompetence” on their trip to Gasing and lamented about “the carelessness and stupidity of our servants were the greatest annoyance we had to endure ...”.⁵⁹

Henri Fauconnier's novel, *The Soul of Malaya*,⁶⁰ was based on the author's experiences as a rubber planter in British Malaya. His protagonist had "inherited" a departing colleague's "boy". It was the practice to hand over a servant from one departing colonial family to a newly arrived one, not unlike a commodity. Fauconnier accurately represented relationships between colonial master and **servant** and the total dependence **of the former** on the **latter** for food preparation and personal care. He wrote,

Ngah's cookery was rather monotonous, but he made an excellent curry, savagely spiced, the fires of which were extinguished in a gula malaka, the Malay dessert, sago diluted with coconut milk, and sweetened with sugar cane caramel. ... When I undressed, I flung my clothes on to the floor. Ngah picked them up, and, as though by magic, I found clean things waiting for me on a chair, ... I now had a house steward who never asked me what he had to do. I could thus reserve all my power of initiative for the plantation, and rule my subjects with a will intact.⁶¹

Their willingness to "make do" in roughing it out in jungle travel in Borneo was part of the physical hardship and dangers to be endured and these experiences were to be recounted and disseminated. All the comforts of the colonial home, carefully constructed by the colonial wife were sacrificed for the good of conquering the wild and exotic environment. In jungle travel, ideas of using social distance to demarcate the lines between colonizer and colonized were relaxed in several areas. The hardship of jungle travel together with its attendant lack of food supplies and home comforts meant that the master-servant relationship in the jungle was different to the mistress-servant in the

colonial home. **Masculinity thus served as an important determinant of the colonial experience, around food as so much else.**

In the jungle the private and public **spaces** merged as the colonial and his **servants** negotiated **the demands of living arrangements**, food preparation and security. There were accounts of colonials sleeping in close proximity to their servants on jungle travel. This would not happen in the colonial home as servants' quarters were built away from the European home. Writing of his years in Sarawak, Charles Brooke wrote, "my one boy had gone fast asleep over his cocked musket, requiring nudging as his snores gradually became more resonant".⁶² Hornady also reported sleeping among half a dozen men on a trip.⁶³

The "relaxing" of colonial standards of behavior extended to consuming foods that **servants** or other local people offered. At times when in the homes of local dignitaries, etiquette and protocol demanded that the British traveller had to partake of local foods. In their hunting expedition to Sarawak, brothers Frederick and Arthur Boyle claimed that they "had visited every fort and station of the Sarawak territory, ...".⁶⁴ Frederick Boyle described visiting an old chief's home and while he and the host chatted and dozed, the chief's wife prepared the evening meal. He recounted,

The eatables which she produced consisted of a pig's leg, and a quantity of rice, boiled in bamboos, and then thrust out in a mass, like the roly-polly pudding of our infancy. The pig's leg was cured according to the Dyak fashion, ... the meat is exactly like gelatine, surrounded an inch thick envelope of coke. I had already

devoured the curry presented by the Tuan Mudah, and when Gasing invited me to partake of this dish I accepted with the greatest cordiality; the choice lay between this gelatined pork and a roast fowl in the Dyak manner;....⁶⁵

The founder of Sandakan, William Pryer, and his wife Ada Pryer while travelling in the Kinabatangan River area were served rhinoceros for dinner by the local Lamag people. William ate “a cut of steak, which he accepted and ordered to be cooked for dinner, to my disgust. He protested that it was very good eating, and was something like pork and venison, but I declined to try it”.⁶⁶ The Pryers however rejected crocodile meat when offered it, with Mrs Pryer remarking, “[t]his culinary delicacy we politely declined”.⁶⁷ On the same trip, when food supplies ran out, the Pryers and their “jungle boys” resorted to trapping animals, catching only mousedeer, civet cat and monitor lizard.⁶⁸ Mrs Pryer wrote,

“Our larder was so reduced that we were at last obliged to make our breakfast, tiffin, and dinner off sweet potatoes, and the men were almost as badly off as ourselves, for their rice was almost all finished”.⁶⁹

When supplies from town ran out the **servant** would gather whatever was available locally. Ever most present in the **servant's** mind must be the notion that the European's palate was different to the local person and efforts were made to adjust to this. **In** catering to the colonizer's meals, **these valets of the field** were not passive agents but **rather** active in **securing** and cooking the European traveller's meals. At the same time **the servant had to be** mindful of what **were** acceptable or unacceptable ingredients for the

table. The jungle meals were to be as closely similar to the colonial table in the colonial home as possible. When ingredients were hard to come by there was negotiation and flexibility on both sides. In his hunting expedition to Sarawak, Boyle described **the** astonishment and disgust **that his servant, Paham, had expressed upon realizing** that Boyle had eaten the gelatined pork cooked Dyak style by his host's wife.

Both colonials and diligent servants such as Paham could rely on more assured provisions from the food canning industry.⁷⁰ In a diary entry of 20 April 1882 Hatton stated that on exploring the Labuk river and its thirty tributaries he needed to locate a place where he was certain of getting food supplies as “we had extreme difficulty in getting food”⁷¹. Indicating a diet of tinned food and local ingredients, he reported in an earlier entry the loss of a box of tinned provisions, half a bag of rice (to feed twenty men) and all the biscuit when their boat capsized. As with other travellers, the practice was to exist on tinned foods and when these ran out, to eat local foods as the boys and guides did. A month earlier Hatton wrote of his two men bringing “potatoes, kaladis (‘keladis’ or yam), and a little rice”⁷². On his travels up the Labuk River and overland to Kudat he reported

... food is getting shorter and shorter. I ate my last biscuit yesterday; milk and sugar have long since been finished; fowls, salt, and potatoes form my food, with tea, of which there is a little left. Half a bottle of brandy is all I have in the shape of liquor,⁷³

The ubiquitous chicken on the jungle travel menu prompted Hatton to write this to a family member in Britain, “I shall be with you, my dear – so expect me and order anything for dinner except fowl!”⁷⁴ Almost always available, chicken was usually the standby source of protein when the traveller’s European supplies ran out. In a letter to his mother from Labuan, Hatton wrote,

When in the bush, my dinner generally consists of American meat (when there is any), a biscuit (cabin H. & P.), sweet potatoes, and a pickle, the whole followed by a bottle of beer. Sometimes we get a fowl, to the Dusun fowl Mark Twain's remark on carving, “use a club, and avoid the joints,” would very much apply.⁷⁵

Hatton also described on reaching an area inhabited by the Bajau people they managed to obtain

some fowls and cooked a breakfast – luckily having a tin of cocoa and milk left. I never relished a meal more, being desperately hungry -- our dinner the evening before consisting of half a tin of sweet biscuits, washed down by some Hollands strong waters – not the sort of dinner one would order as a rule.⁷⁶

Charles Brooke, in recounting his experiences in jungle travel to stamp out “insurgencies” in Sarawak noted, “[w]e were not well supplied with food, and the single fowl daily was scarce enough to keep four lusty Christians in condition”.⁷⁷ On another occasion he wrote, “[w]e cooked and dined in a tumble-down place, but it was better than a confined boat. Our dinner consisted of stew and vegetables, ...”. Brooke chose to say “we” when obviously it was the **servants** who cooked.⁷⁸

In my earlier work on British foodways in the Asian colonies I established that the colonials ate a combination of European and indigenous foods as well as several peculiarly hybrid dishes that were not found outside the colonial cuisine.⁷⁹ Where possible some of these dishes were replicated on jungle travel. Frederick Boyle berated his boy, Paham, who had failed to organize meals for a two to three day journey among the Dayaks in Sarawak. Boyle stated, “I made frantic inquiries about the ‘country captains’ (a chicken dish), and the curries, and the savoury meats, which should have been provided to alleviate our sojourn.”⁸⁰

On long travels in the interior however the magnificent colonial table could not be replicated and the British traveller had to eat what was available. At bleak times when even the ever present jungle fowl was not to be found, travellers resorted to eating sago. Charles Brook wrote, “[w]e had some wild sago-plant cooked for dinner; the taste is too bitter to be pleasant”.⁸¹ European travellers recognized the importance of rice as the staple food of the indigenous people in the jungle trek, both for their sustenance each day and also as a standby that Europeans could fall back on when their own supplies ran out. It was the single most important food item to be included for jungle travel; it was relatively non-perishable, portable and easily cooked by local guides and boys. Eaten several times a day by the locals Hatton reported on one boat travel trip they stopped three times to cook rice.⁸²

The colonial differentiation between domestic and field servants existed not only in British Southeast Asia but in other locations as well. In Australia, for example,

Aboriginal servants were treated in much the same fashion, as suitable for food preparation in the Outback but not in domestic spaces. Martinez and Lowrie highlighted a report in a **Darwin** newspaper **by** a Mrs Finis **who** advised against employing Aboriginal men as cooks. **This unsuitability was attributed not to but rather** the belief that “traditional” Aboriginal culture “was incompatible with modern cooking techniques. Cooking meat over an open fire was a normal activity for Aboriginal men, while dealing with modern ovens were not”.⁸³ **Although skillful in dealing with the dangerous natural environment,** Aboriginal men were often portrayed as being “out of their element surrounded by the modern technologies of the domestic sphere.”

The **history of the** “jungle boy” has never been written but his role as support staff on the travelling colonial’s retinue **was** more than merely supportive. He was responsible for preparing and carrying the food supplies for part of the journey. When the provisions ran out for longer journeys he had to source for ingredients to feed the colonial and the rest of the group. Frequently he had to catch that jungle fowl for dinner or purchase chickens from nearby villagers. He had to look for vegetables and rice from surrounding areas. Colonial memoirs, travelogues, diaries and other publications painted a picture of daring and innovation of colonists traversing across Borneo. They depicted colonial men being taken out of their comfort zone of the colonial home and roughing it out in the jungle, eating whatever foods the **servant** could procure when food supplies from “home” ran out.

The availability of Asian domestic service meant that the *memsahibs* did not have to labour in the kitchen, but, more importantly, it helped to shape colonial culture. The roles

and representations of “cookie” in the colonial home and of “jungle boy” in cookbooks and colonial memoirs inform us the different ways in which colonial private life was part and parcel of the colonial project. Individually, colonizers thrived guarded their privileged positions and collectively they helped consolidate their colonial presence. The fraught **relationship between *mem* and domestic cook** was found in the tone and content of cookbooks, diaries and travelogues. **By contrast, the colonial man – and occasionally his wife as well – had a far different relationship with the servant in the field, who was responsible for the safety of his employer. Without** the physical environs of the colonial home, **the “jungle boy” was of necessity entrusted with the responsibilities of a gentleman’s gentleman.**

¹ C. Mary Turnbull, *A History of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1989), xv.

² Jonathan Robins, “Colonial Cuisine: Food in British Nigeria, 1900-1914,” *Cultural Studies <-> Critical Methodologies*, 10 no. 6 (2010): 457-466, 458 here; <http://csc.sagepub.com/content/10/6/457.refs.html>, **cited**, 14 September 2013.

³ Cecilia Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 81.

⁴ Leong-Salobir: *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, 60-86.

⁵ Leong-Salobir: *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, 66-67.

⁶ J. Hubbard, *The Malayan Cookery Book* (Singapore: Rickard Limited, 1930)

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⁷ Libbie Freed, ““Every European Becomes a Chief”: Travel Guides to Colonial Equatorial Africa, 1900-1958”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 12, no. 2, accessed July 25, 2013, http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v012/12.2.freed.html.

⁸ Srilata Ravi, “Adventure in Malaya: Henri Fauconnier and French Orientalism”, *Asia Europe Journal* 1(2003): 419-432, 424 here.

⁹ See Rosalía Baena, “Of Missess and Tuan Kechils: Colonial Childhood Memoirs as Cultural Mediation in British Malaya”, *Ariel. A Review of International English Literature* (Special Issue on Life Writing. Ed. Marlene Kadar, Linda Warley and Jeanne Perreault) 39, (2008): 89-112. See also Ethel (Maud Cookson) Colquhoun, *Two on Their Travels* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1902): 15-16.

¹⁰ See Gwee Thian Hock, *A Nyonya Mosaic: Memoirs of A Peranakan Childhood*, (Singapore: The Times Book International, 1985) 24-25 on servants in an Asian household.

¹¹ See for example, Sydney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).

¹² Notable exceptions being: Susie Protschky, “The Colonial Table: Food, Culture and Dutch Identity in Colonial Indonesia,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 54, no. 3 (2008): 350-352; Shannon Lee Dawdy, ““A Wild Taste””: Food and Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Louisiana.” *Ethnohistory*, 57, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 389-414.

¹³ E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c.1800-1947*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2001): 158-159.

¹⁴ Nupur Chaudhuri, “Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain”, in Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and*

Resistance (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 232.

¹⁵ Robert Launay, "Tasting the World: Food in Early European Travel Narratives," *Food & Foodways*, 11, (2003): 27-47.

¹⁶ Launay, "Tasting the World," 27-28.

¹⁷ Kolleen M. Guy, 'Food Representations' in (ed. Martin Bruegel) *A Cultural History of Food: in the Age of Empire*, Vol 5 (London: Berg, 2012)190.

¹⁸ Guy, "Food Representations," 190.

¹⁹ Swapna M. Banerjee, *Men, Women, and Domesticity Articulating Middle-Class Identity in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 47.

²¹ Leong-Salobir: *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, 61-69.

²² Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 82.

²³ Janice Brownfoot, "Memsahibs in Colonial Malaya: A Study of European Wives in a British Colony and Protectorate, 1900-1940", in Hilary Callan & Shirley Ardener (eds), *The Incorporated Wife* (London: Croom Helm, 1984) 196.

²⁴ Fae Dussart, "To Glut a Menial's Grudge": Domestic servants and the Ilbert Bill controversy of 1883," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 14, no. 1 (2013) <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed May 2, 2014).

²⁵ Brownfoot, "Memsahibs in Colonial Malaya," 196.

²⁶ Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, 62.

²⁷ For primary sources on descriptions of dishonest servants, see: (Mrs) John Gilpin, *Memsahib's Guide to Cookery in India* (Bombay: A.J. Combridge & Co., 1914) 2;

Eleanor, *Gems from the Culinary Art and a Ready Help to Every Wife in India* (Madras: Premier Press, 1916) 10; and Anonymous, *The Indian House-Keeper: Being a Complete Set of Accounts of Domestic Expenditure for the Year* (Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1894) Preface.

²⁸ Meat was added to original vegetarian-type dishes; rabbit and small fish were seen as unsuitable for European consumption by servants. For discussion on this see Leong-Salobir: *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, pages 21-22.

²⁹ Questionnaire response by T. Rimmer, 4 January 2007. As part of my broader project on the food culture of colonial Asia I sent out forty questionnaires in 2007 to Britons who lived in Malaysia and Singapore during the colonial era, eliciting responses on the types of foods consumed when they lived in the colonies.

³⁰ Questionnaire response by W. Stuart.

³¹ George L. Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press Sdn Bhd, 1985) 172.

³² Questionnaire response by J. Davison on 15 February 2008.

³³ Peet, *Rickshaw Reporter*, 51.

³⁴ For a discussion on the *rijsttafel* in the Indies, see Protschky, “The Colonial Table, 350-352 and <http://www.sriowen.com/rijsttafel-to-go/>.

³⁵ Author’s interview with T. Lamb in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, on 5 December 2006.

³⁶ A column in an Australian newspaper described how “Cookie” produced “extraordinary dishes” from the crude and rudimentary kitchen in up-country districts in Malaya: “Malayan Cooking: Extraordinary Dishes” in *The Nambour Chronicle* (Friday 6 September 1940), p. 9, online at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/78037864>.

³⁷ M.T. Yap, ‘Hainanese in the Restaurant and Catering Business’, in Thomas T.W. Tan (ed.), *Chinese Dialect Groups: Traits and Trades*, (Singapore: Opinion

Books, 1990).

³⁸ Gwee Thian Hock, *A Nyonya Mosaic: Memoirs of A Peranakan Childhood*, (Singapore: The Times Book International, 1985) 24.

³⁹ Julia Martinez and Claire Lowrie, “Colonial Constructions of Masculinity: Transforming Aboriginal Australian Men into ‘Houseboys’”, *Gender & History* 21 no. 2, (August 2009): 305-323, 307 here.

⁴⁰ See Jeremy Martens, “‘Settler Homes, Manhood and ‘Houseboys’: An analysis of Natal’s rape scare of 1886”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28 no. 2 (2002) 379-400; Robert Morrell, “Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24 (1998) 605–630.

⁴¹ William T. Hornady, *Two Years in the Jungle: The Experiences of a Hunter and Naturalist in India, Ceylon, the Malay Peninsula and Borneo* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1885) 335.

⁴² Agnes Keith, *Land Below the Wind*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939) 34.

⁴³ Frank Hatton and Joseph Hatton, *North Borneo: Explorations and Adventures in the Equator* (London: Scribner and Welford, 1886) 195.

⁴⁴ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, iv.

⁴⁵ Freed, “‘Every European Becomes a Chief’”

⁴⁶ Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 42-43.

⁴⁷ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 55.

⁴⁸ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 55.

⁴⁹ Freed, “‘Every European Becomes a Chief’”.

⁵⁰ Charles Bruce, *Twenty years in Borneo* (Kota Kinabalu: Natural History Publications, 1999) (Reprint from 1924).

⁵¹ Bruce, *Twenty years in Borneo*, 129.

⁵² Bruce, *Twenty years in Borneo*, 129.

⁵³ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 124.

⁵⁴ Oscar Cook, *Borneo: The Stealer of Hearts* (London: Selwyn & Blount Ltd, 1927) 130.

⁵⁵ Cook, *Borneo*, 149.

⁵⁶ Hornady, *Two Years in the Jungle*, 336-354.

⁵⁷ Ada (W.B.) Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1894) 157.

⁵⁸ Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo*, 69.

⁵⁹ Frederick Boyle, *Adventures Among the Dyaks of Borneo* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1865) 257.

⁶⁰ Henri Fauconnier, *The Soul of Malaya* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁶¹ Fauconnier, *The Soul of Malaya*, 180-5.

⁶² Charles Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1866) 88.

⁶³ Hornady, *Two Years in the Jungle*, 220.

⁶⁴ Boyle, *Adventures Among the Dyaks of Borneo*, 262.

⁶⁵ Boyle, *Adventures Among the Dyaks of Borneo*, 262-264.

⁶⁶ Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo*, 69.

⁶⁷ Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo*, 70.

⁶⁸ Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo*, 74-75.

⁶⁹ Pryer, *A Decade in Borneo*, 75.

⁷⁰ In the Dutch Indies too, in the first half of the twentieth century, imported tinned food and increased cultivation of European types of vegetables in the highlands meant that the Dutch changed from a rice based diet to more Europeans meals, see Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, 'Summer Dresses and Canned Food, European Women and Western Lifestyles

in the Indies, 1900-1942', in *Outward Appearances: Dressing State and Society in Indonesia* ed. Henk Schulte Nordholt, (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1997).

⁷¹ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 223.

⁷² Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 195.

⁷³ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 211.

⁷⁴ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 91.

⁷⁵ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 91.

⁷⁶ Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 126.

⁷⁷ Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak*, 48.

⁷⁸ Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak*, 160.

⁷⁹ Leong-Salobir, *Food Culture in Colonial Asia*, 134.

⁸⁰ Boyle, *Adventures Among the Dyaks of Borneo*, 259.

⁸¹ Brooke, *Ten Years in Sarawak*, 297.

⁸² Hatton and Hatton, *North Borneo*, 289.

⁸³ Martinez and Lowrie, "Colonial Constructions of Masculinity," 314.

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