

JOSEPH CONRAD'S MALAY WORLD:  
READING HISTORY, FICTION, AND EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

Of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

Jin Hee Yoo

May 2014

© 2014 Jin Hee Yoo

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Joseph Conrad's first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, from the perspective of history. It broadly argues that in order to understand Conrad's Malay novels, it is necessary to get a sense of the author's own experiences and memories of living and working in the Malay Archipelago in the late nineteenth century. Read against the background of Conrad's own experiences, the novels reveal as much about the author as it does about the history of the people and the place he writes about. Through several readings that trace the connections between history, fiction, and experience, I argue that it was Conrad's experiences in the Malay Archipelago that impelled the writing of his Malay world in the English language.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Jin Hee (Genie) Yoo received her B.A. in “Music & Culture” from the University of California at Riverside, where she studied traditional Javanese gamelan music and modern Indonesian language and literature. She then began her graduate studies at Cornell University and will be earning her Master’s Degree in Southeast Asian Studies in 2014. In the future, she hopes to read, research, and write about the history of the Indian Ocean.

## **DEDICATION**

To my mom and my brother

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Influences are harder to trace in some works than others. In this one, however, it is fairly easy to see that the two teachers who have had the most influence on me are Henk Maier and Eric Tagliacozzo. I would like to thank them for inspiring me to write, read, and explore freely some of the ideas written in this thesis. Like all great teachers and advisors, they inspire by example. I would also like to thank friends and colleagues who have supported me during my time at Cornell University, especially Jack Chia and Josh Savala. Jack's smile always brightens my day and Josh's shoulders are the best to cry on. I would not have been able to survive in Ithaca without them. I am also thankful to Matt Joseph for his encouragement and emotional support during the final stages of the writing (and also for leaving me alone, gosh).

I am grateful to my thesis committee members, Eric Tagliacozzo and Natalie Melas, for their infinite patience and understanding throughout this process. I must admit that without their personal support, enthusiasm, and encouragements, I would not be in the privileged position of writing this final page.

Institutions will be institutions. But Cornell University, particularly the Southeast Asian Studies Program in the Asian Studies Department, has given me generous support and, more importantly, a home away from home.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family. I am grateful to my appa for supporting me even when we live on the opposite sides of the Pacific. But of course, my greatest thanks goes to my umma, Geul Young Kim, and my brother, Paul Yoo. We have been through a lot together since arriving in southern California. I would not be who I am today without my mom's constant reminder that experience is much more important in life than knowledge alone.

And of course, they were the ones to teach me that tears and laughter are two sides of the same coin. That's been enough to get me through most things so far. This thesis is dedicated to them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vi
List of Figures	ix
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Tracing Figures of <i>Dagang</i>	13
Chapter Three: A History of Borneo, Berau, and Communities	21
Chapter Four: Conrad and his Malay World	29
Chapter Five: Conclusion	39
Bibliography	45



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: <i>An Outcast of the Islands</i>	44
Figure 2: <i>Almayer's Folly</i>	44

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This short thesis is an attempt to explore one of the many possible ways of reading Joseph Conrad's Malay novels. The parallels and intersections of fiction and history in Conrad's first novels, set as they are in the bustling world of nineteenth-century maritime Southeast Asia, raise several pertinent questions. What exactly is the relationship between Conrad's fictional renderings of the Malay world and the history of the Malay Archipelago itself? Are the acts of reading fiction through history and history through fiction entirely separable in the context of Conrad's earlier works? How might readers understand not only Conrad's use of language, but more specifically, his choice of the English language, to create the Malay world?

Perhaps it would be useful to begin by thinking about the act of reading itself. According to Jose Ortega y Gasset, the reading of a book, which he describes as a "petrified" text, that is, speech frozen in time, utterances and choice words picked from a constellation of innumerable other words, would be rather aptly described as a "utopian task."<sup>1</sup> Reading, he writes, begins with the reader's expectation of understanding what the author has meant by his words. This is a "utopian" task, he writes, because even though it is "possible with a great effort to extract a more or less important portion of what the text has tried to say, communicate, make known... there will always remain an 'illegible' residue."<sup>2</sup> This "'illegible' residue" is what personalizes the reading experience. It is what makes one person's reading, understanding, or interpretation of a text unique. One reads *into* a text, he writes, and regardless of whether or not the author has

---

<sup>1</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, "The Difficulty of Reading," *Diogenes* 7, no. 1 (1959): 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

meant to say what one understands, one proceeds, at times uncomfortably, with a sense that the author has indeed said, implied, or alluded to what we understand from his words.<sup>3</sup>

This point was driven home to me when I came across the following sentence in Indonesian: “*Karya-karya ini memecah kesunyian, tapi dengan cara sedemikian rupa sehingga kesunyian itu bisa menjadi bulat lagi.*”<sup>4</sup> For the sake of explaining the process through which I understood this sentence when I read it for the first time, I will hold off on the translation for now. This sentence was written in the context of explaining that Indonesian literary works bring a unique understanding to the history of the 1965-1966 killings in Indonesia, a time when there was a mass murder of hundreds of thousands of people alleged to be communists or suspected of being supporters or members of the PKI (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*). It has become common knowledge, especially with the release of Joshua Oppenheimer’s controversial and break-through documentary, “The Act of Killing” (2012), that the Suharto regime, for all of its noisy propaganda, and the Indonesian people, in general, have more or less kept silent about this tragedy. *Silence* is the key word here. One speaks of the silence of the tragedy, the silence of the government, the silence of the people. There is also the documentary, “40 Years of Silence: An Indonesian Tragedy” (2009), which is also about the 1965-1966 killings in Indonesia. To return to the original Indonesian sentence then, what stood out for me were the words “*memecah kesunyian.*” *Memecah* is a verb that means something like shatter, break, break down, split into pieces. One *memecah* proteins and carbohydrates; one *memecah* glass into pieces; waves *memecah* onto the beach; one can *memecah* an image for analysis. In the original Indonesian sentence, the object of “*memecah*” is “*kesunyian,*” a word that can mean loneliness, an airy emptiness, isolation, a reticent solitude, a space of aloneness, a quietude without peace or calm.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> John Roosa, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid, *Tahun yang tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65* (Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004), 12.

Together “*memecah kesunyian*” means something like “shatter the emptiness.” An oft-used phrase in Indonesian, it is comparable to the English idiom, “break the silence.” If the first part of the sentence is to be read in these contexts and usages in mind, then the most likely translation for “*Karya-karya ini memecah kesunyian...*” would be “These works break the silence...” The second part of the Indonesian sentence can be interpreted as “...but in such a way that the silence is made whole again,” which is to say that while the literary works in question talk openly about the mass killings, the stories are told in such a way as to sustain the silence about the killings, evading crucial questions that are important to understanding its history. The stories “*memecah*” or break the silence yet make it “*bulat*” or round again. The stories talk, but they do not speak. And the issues regarding the killings of 1965-1966 remain silent, unspoken, and empty: *sunyi*.

The Indonesian word for “silent” or “quiet,” however, is usually learned as *diam*. When ordering rowdy children to be quiet, one yells, “*Diam!*”; a man is *diam* when he is silent but *sunyi* (from which we get the word “*kesunyian*”) when he is lonely; the student is *diam* when he doesn’t know the answer. Reading “*memecah kesunyian*” triggers other words in its orbit, like *bungkam* and *bisu*, both of which can mean mute, and unlike the word *sunyi*, describe a purposeful or dumb silence.<sup>5</sup> In Javanese society, the husband often remains *bungkam*, but so does the wife, sometimes. One remains *bungkam* to avoid revealing what he or she knows. *Bungkus* is a bundle, a wrapped thing, and *membungkus* can mean keeping something under wraps. From there, one is prompted onto other orbits in the constellation. One that deserves particular mention here is the title of Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s later work, *Nyanyi Sunyi Seorang Bisu*, which has been translated to “*The Mute’s Soliloquy*.” *Sunyi*, *bisu*, *bungkam*, *diam*. The opposites of silence would be *bunyi* (roughly, sound, noise), *suara* (sound, voice), *ribut*

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibu Jolanda Pandin, the Senior Lecturer in Indonesian at Cornell, mentioned the difference between *kesunyian* and *kebungkaman*.

(noisy, troublesome, hassling, busy), *kacao* (chaotic, busy, a lot going on, mixed). Making associations is a common process of reading. They are there in the text and not there. It is what the text offers and what the readers bring to it, a combination of which can energize the reading process. It is the “‘illegible’ residue” that brings out the proverbial spark.<sup>6</sup> So one might ask, what are some of the “‘illegible’ residues” of reading Conrad’s Malay novels?

### “Languaging” as Historical

The “difficulty of reading” any text, according to Ortega y Gasset, hinges on language itself. What is unspoken, misspoken, plainly spoken, or outspoken when something is said? The late Alton L. Becker, a key thinker and proponent of “modern philology” of Southeast Asian languages and literature, expands on Ortega’s “*una nueva filologia*” and applies it to the everyday life experiences of a person working across different languages. He highlights his reading of Ortega y Gasset as he reflects on his experiences of learning Burmese in Burma:

Everyday misunderstandings in languaging come down to a paradox, according again to Ortega:

Two apparently contradictory laws are involved in all uttering. One says, “Every utterance is deficient”—it says less than it wishes to say. The other law, the opposite, declares, “Every utterance is exuberant”—it conveys more than it plans and includes not a few things we would wish left silent.

[...]

They are not conditions first to be understood and then overcome but a basic necessity of all human languaging. In Burma, unlike at home, the scale of misunderstanding was vast, and coping with it seemed to require very complex rhetorical moves of repair, politeness, and explanation. Everything was wildly and unforeseeably deficient and exuberant at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

Every utterance has its deficiencies and exuberances. So does every language. According to Becker, to work across languages, for instance, in textual translation, in learning a new language, in returning to an old language, is to encounter silences—the missing context, the recalling of

---

<sup>6</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, “The Difficulty of Reading,” *Diogenes* 7, no. 1 (1959): 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> A.L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 5.

half-forgotten memories of prior texts and experiences.<sup>8</sup> For instance, returning to our previous example, to read “*Karya-karya ini memecah kesunyian, tapi dengan cara sedemikian rupa sehingga kesunyian itu bisa menjadi bulat lagi*” as “These works break the silence, but in such a way that the silence becomes whole again” is not only to miss the exuberances and deficiencies of the original (as explained above) but to add new exuberances and deficiencies, the overtones and undertones, of another language.

Becker’s next point is perhaps even more crucial to understanding the beginning of the process through which Conrad became a writer in the English language. Becker writes that as language is central to the ways we experience and understand the world, ourselves, and others around us, the contradictory laws of exuberances and deficiencies also apply to the level of the individual as well as the culture.<sup>9</sup> He expands Alfred Kroeber’s more textual definition of philology (“an accumulation of texts plus the equipment to get at them” i.e. dictionaries, grammars, commentaries) so as to include individuals and cultures:<sup>10</sup>

I think we can extend the term [philology] to include in a culture’s philology at least those unwritten texts that are remembered and passed on, the shared memories in minds as well as in books. We might go further and say that each individual has a philology in Kroeber’s sense, a unique set of remembered prior texts, accessible in varying degrees.<sup>11</sup>

Learning a language, in Becker’s sense, is to learn the rules of a language, the stuff of dictionaries and grammar books. Linguaging, however, is what he means by entering another’s philology.<sup>12</sup> It is “context shaping... [It] can be understood as taking old texts from memory and reshaping them into present contexts... Most current theories of language have no place for

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> A.L. Becker, “Introduction,” in *Writing on the Tongue* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), 1-10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> A.L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 9.

memory. But building a new memory, a new past, a new *ensimismamiento*, is, it seems to me, the hardest part of learning a new way of languaging.”<sup>13</sup>

Learning a new language and eventually languaging in a new way is crucial to the way we understand ourselves and others. One becomes self-conscious not only within the sphere of a new philology but also within our own. “It makes the explorer, to paraphrase a great Javanese poet, not feel at home in his or her own languaging, feeling, rather, an uneasy irony about languaging when it ought to be unselfconscious.”<sup>14</sup> Languaging is built on memory, experience, sounds and silences, as well as texts, prior and current. It shapes the way we view others and ourselves. It is a long process through which we negotiate new and old exuberances and deficiencies with our current ones. How, for instance, does one understand or read “*Karya-karya ini memecah kesunyian, tapi dengan cara sedemikian rupa sehingga kesunyian itu bisa menjadi bulat lagi*” without understanding both its lingual, literary, and historical connections? Can one understand “*memecah kesunyian*” without knowing the history of the 1965-66 killings in Indonesia and without being constantly reminded of Pramoedya, his experiences and writings? Furthermore, does it change the way I think about historical and literary “silences”? Can silences be broken then be made round again through literary and historical works? Can one speak and simultaneously add to the silences that have been accumulating through the ages? According to Becker, languaging is a long process because it is built on repeated learnings and unlearnings, gradual accumulations and dispersions, comparisons and connections. It is about building a different past.<sup>15</sup> In other words, languaging, the negotiating of exuberances and deficiencies, is a process that is, in essence, deeply *historical*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> A.L. Becker, “Introduction,” in *Writing on the Tongue* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>15</sup> A.L. Becker, *Beyond Translation: Essays toward a Modern Philology* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1-20.

## Conrad's "Inner Linguaging"

Alton Becker wrote about "inner linguaging" in the context of learning and thinking about Burmese, Malay, and Javanese as a native English speaker, and Jose Ortega y Gasset, in the context of reading and thinking about Plato's *Symposium* as a native Spanish speaker. How might we think about "inner linguaging" for multilingual authors like Joseph Conrad, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Franz Kafka, and Kwee Thiam Tjing? What do we need to know? How do we go about it exactly? How does one measure or understand these authors' cultural, historical, and literary philologies, the layered constellations of their words and worlds? I don't have the answers, but this thesis is an attempt at a first step.

This thesis focuses on Joseph Conrad and his first two novels, *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*. I argue that the first step in trying to understand Joseph Conrad and his "inner linguaging," particularly when it comes to his early works, is to uncover some of the "prior texts," the experiences, memories, and histories of a place and people, that he came to know and that inspired him to begin writing in the first place. I am convinced that it is impossible to understand Conrad's exuberances and deficiencies, his "wordspere," the "illegible residue" of his texts, his unique personal philology as shown in these novels, without knowing the history of the place he himself called the Malay Archipelago. However, the point of exploring Conrad's philology from a historical perspective is two-fold. It reveals as much about the author and his novels as it does about the history of the people and the place he writes about. The historical exuberances of his novels fill some of the deficiencies in the general historiography of what we have come to know as Indonesia. The action does not take place in nineteenth-century Java but in the watery regions of the outer islands of the archipelago with an emphasis on a small riverside town on the east coast of Borneo. As is well known, Conrad's



stories were based on his experiences of traveling and working in this region in the late nineteenth century. He sought the frontier and made it the fulcrum of everything that swirled around it. So the usually marginalized history of seafaring, piracy, and smuggling in this already marginalized part of the world becomes the center of his world, the world of his first novels, and one can argue, the center of multiple, simultaneously existing Malay worlds. And unlike his better known works, like *The Heart of Darkness*, the history of colonialism, the role of colonial officials, their actions and policies, are made relatively distant though not wholly irrelevant to the world he describes.

One of the many “Malay worlds” that has become part of Conrad’s memory and experiences, his unique philology, in Becker’s sense of the term, is one that is multiethnic and multiracial, involving Arab and Chinese traders, private merchants from different parts of Europe, Eurasian actors, Bugis migrants, the ethnic Malays, the Dayak people, the Taosug people of Sulu, the Balinese, and a few minor British and Dutch colonials. Through the writing of this Malay world in English, a language not wholly his own at the time of the writing, Conrad built a past, a past that is not unfounded in historical sources, one that is vastly different from what we generally imagine “Indonesia” to have been in the late nineteenth century. His writing of the Malay world was not based on a strict sense of who was ethnically Malay and who wasn’t. He himself was part of this world and so were many other ethnic groups. And what mattered was not so much that so many different ethnic groups spoke Malay but that the Malay world embraced so many languages and peoples. The wordscape of the Malay world, just like its seascapes, landscapes, soundscapes, and ethnoscapescapes, embraced not only different kinds of Malay and its surface inflections but also Arabic, English, Chinese, and Dutch. Words and greetings from different languages flowed in and out of speech, and the flexibility, the very porousness of these

scapes, is what is described in his novels. Conrad might not have been fluent in Malay, but it would not have been difficult for him to notice the easiness with which the diversity of languages and peoples slipped in and out of that world. And when he himself left that world, he carried the experience and memory of it with him, leaving much of it in the first stories he wrote in English.

The historical aspects of Conrad's first two novels have been commented on by historians of Southeast Asia. They tend to highlight the potentials of Conrad's first publications for their spirited portrayals of nineteenth-century port life in the outer islands of the Malay Archipelago. G.J. Resink may be credited as the first historian of Southeast Asia to engage seriously in the historiographical study of Conrad's first novels. In his analysis, Resink sheds light on the international nature of nineteenth-century law, politics, and economies of the archipelago, and supplements the historical aspects of the novels with biographical details of Joseph Conrad's, or rather, Jozef Korzeniowski's travels in the region.<sup>16</sup> James Francis Warren has focused his interpretations of Conrad based on the dynamic multiethnic milieu of maritime trade that once connected the islands of Singapore, Borneo, Sulawesi, and the Sulu archipelago to global networks of trade. He reads Conrad's early fictions as a realistic drama that highlights Borneo's transition from traditional Asian forms of trade to a global capitalist one, supplementing his analysis with a careful archival tracing of William Lingard's commercial activities in the region.<sup>17</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo has been the most recent historian of Southeast Asia to write about Conrad from a historical perspective. Tagliacozzo, in his research on the Southeast Asian hajj, reappraises the text of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* within multiple, overlapping contextual

---

<sup>16</sup> G.J. Resink, "The Eastern Archipelago under Joseph Conrad's Western Eyes," in *Indonesia's History Between the Myths* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968), 307-308.

<sup>17</sup> James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007). James Francis Warren, "Joseph Conrad's Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 8-20.

domains of fiction and history. In the process, he illustrates the different ways people in both Asia and Europe have interpreted the Southeast Asian hajj at the turn of the century.<sup>18</sup> Through the various examples set by these scholars of Southeast Asia, from Resink and Warren to Tagliacozzo, one sees how a detailed look at the imbrications of different texts—fictional, biographical, documentary, historical—has the potential to deepen our understanding of the dynamic history of communities in this part of the world.

The work presented here will be slightly different though much of it is built on the work of Resink, Warren, and Tagliacozzo. It is a tentative first step to exploring how one might understand Conrad, his first novels, and his “inner languaging” from a historical perspective and how one might come to understand the history of the Malay world through Conrad. The second chapter of the thesis looks closely at the parallels of fiction and history through a tracing of fictional and historical figures in Conrad’s first two novels. As is well known, many of the characters were based on real persons Conrad had met or read about during his time in the Malay world. These figures have in a sense become part of his “prior texts.” And although he does not insert himself into his novels, the self as wanderer and a trader can be read through the different figures he presents to his readers in the fictional mode. The third chapter looks at the history of the island of Borneo where much of Conrad’s first two novels take place, the town of Berau itself on the east coast of that island, and its diverse inhabitants. The “community” represented in the novels come together and quickly fall apart. However, this speaks to a larger circulation of people coming in and out in the Malay world for a long time. One gets the sense that the cycle of community formation and diffusion in the Malay world happens so quickly and so often that it achieves, like a moving picture, a certain constant, a stability that depends on continued

---

<sup>18</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 109-132.

movement. One might understand this as what makes the Malay world so characteristically “porous” and flexible. The fourth chapter focuses on Conrad’s own languaging of the Malay world in English. What are his exuberances and deficiencies, the “‘illegible’ residues” of his text? What does he say and what does he not say? What might have he himself have known or understood about this part of the world? What evidence of the past does he leave us with and in what ways can we check this against other sources?

It is worth asking, I think, if it was his experience in the Malay world that compelled him to write in the first place. To encounter difference in the embrace of the Malay world, to see difference as a normal and natural part of human existence, to be able to think relationally so that a European and a Malay figure can at moments meet on more or less equal terms, is all part of his text. Conrad described his idea for the story that was eventually turned into his second novel in a letter he wrote to his aunt in French, from Geneva, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, 1894:

I have begun to write—only the day before yesterday. I want to make this thing very short—let us say twenty to twenty-five pages, like those in the *Revue*. I am calling it ‘Two Vagabonds’, and I want to describe in broad strokes, without shading or details, two human outcasts such as one finds in the lost corners of the world. A white man and a Malay. You see how Malays cling to me! I am devoted to Borneo. What bothers me most is that my characters are so true. I know them so well that they shackle the imagination. The white is a friend of Almayer—the Malay is our old friend Babalatchi before he arrived at the dignity of prime minister and confidential adviser to the Rajah. There they are.<sup>19</sup>

This second writing project was to be a slight extension of his first novel, *Almayer’s Folly*, which was at the time in the final stages of publication, and it was to use some of the same settings and characters. It would be set on the same island of Borneo, which Conrad had visited while working on the steamer, *S.S. Vidar*, and its characters were to be from the same motley community he had described in *Almayer’s Folly*. The protagonists were to be “a white man and a

---

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume I 1861-1897*, ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies, Gene M. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 171.

Malay,” two figures of difference who nevertheless would share the status of “vagabond” and “outcast.”

Why was the figure of the vagabond so important to Conrad’s conception of a nineteenth-century community on the east coast of Borneo? There is a connection to be made here between the English words, vagabond, outcast, trader, and the Indonesian word *dagang*, which can mean both merchant and wanderer. Conrad, too, was a *dagang* in all sense of that word. And as he had traveled and conducted inter-island trade in the Malay world, he would have known the word *dagang* which was and continues to be one of more common words in the Malay language. Again, the process through which he conceived of his stories in English was built on prior and current texts, personal memories and experiences, and can be read as attempts to create a new past. They reveal “petrified” moments of his experiences in the Malay Archipelago as well as his more personal, open-ended “inner languaging” of the Malay world.

## Chapter 2

### Tracing Figures of *Dagang*

There are two entries for the word *dagang* in Echol and Shadily's modern Indonesian dictionary. The first is "from outside the region" and the second "trade, commerce."<sup>20</sup> Under the first definition, students are given an example of what *orang dagang* and *anak dagang* means: "a person not originally from a certain place." Under the second definition of trade and commerce, there is a list of other words built out of *dagang*: *berdagang* means "trade, deal, barter"; *memperdagangkan* or *mendagangkan* means "trade in s.t."; *dagangan* is "merchandise, wares"; *pedangan* "trader, merchant"; and *perdagangan* "trade, commerce." The second definition also comes with interesting examples like *dagang gelap* which means "smuggling trade," and *dagang sapi* which interestingly means "horse trade" (although *sapi* means cow) and "make a political deal (in apportioning cabinet seats, etc.)."<sup>21</sup> In William Marsden's dictionary of Malay (or "Malayan"), which was published in London in 1812 and then translated into Dutch for official use, the entry for *dagang* is worth quoting here in full:<sup>22</sup>

داڠڠ *dāgang* a stranger, sojourner; a merchant or trader (distinguished from a native or resident trader) who brings goods from foreign countries. *Kārna amba ñni òrang dāgang sòrang ðĩrĩ amba dūduk dālam negrĩ òrang ñni* for your servant is a stranger, dwelling (as it were) alone in the country of these people. *Bhāsa òrang dāgang* the dialect or mixed language of trading people. *Anak dāgang ñang māsuk ka-lūar ñang dating deri bārat dan deri tĩmor* merchants arriving and departing, who come from the west and from the east.

*Berdāgang* to arrive and trade at a place. دڠاڠن *dagāng-an* trade, merchandise, commodities. *Jenis-jenis dagāng-an ñang de lārang* the sorts of goods that are prohibited.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> John M. Echols and Hassan Shadily, *An Indonesian-English Dictionary* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 127.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Henk Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004), 10.

<sup>23</sup> William Marsden, *A Dictionary of the Malayan Language in Two Parts, Malayan and English and English and Malayan* (London: Cox and Baylis, 1812), 129.

Two separate entries were not necessary. Although this is a mere dictionary entry, it speaks to the idea of “stranger, sojourner; merchant, trader” all circling within the orbit of *dagang* in the nineteenth century. And *orang* or *anak dagang* (literally a person or child of *dagang*) meant both stranger and merchant.<sup>24</sup>

Who are some of the fictional and historical *dagang* in Conrad’s first two novels?

Certainly there has been a long history of searching for the real people of Conrad’s fictions. The tracing of close links between Conrad’s fictional characters and their historical counterparts, who were once part of the bustling world of maritime Southeast Asia, have consumed scholars from multiple disciplines. One might say that many of these scholars have spilled more ink tracing the historical linkages of Tom Lingard than any other character in Conrad’s books. The character of Tom Lingard was based on the historical figure of William Lingard, the intrepid adventurer and trader from England who, by the middle of the 19th century, had actively started working for trading houses in the archipelago.<sup>25</sup> Lingard was mythologized through Conrad’s early writings as the first “white man” to trade in Berau, a riverside town some forty miles west from the

---

<sup>24</sup> According to Maier, Marsden divided the Malay language into four categories: *bahasa dalam* (“court language”), *bahasa bangsawan* (“language of the higher classes”), *bahasa dagang* (“language of merchants”), and *bahasa katjoekan* (“mixed language of markets and harbours”). Maier then rightly asks what makes *bahasa dagang* (“language of merchants”) different from *bahasa katjoekan* (“mixed language of markets and harbours”). Why differentiate the two? Maier quotes R.J. Wilkinson’s definition of *katjoekan* or “Kachokan” from Wilkinson’s Malay-English dictionary, published in 1901: “Bastard Malay, bazaar Malay. Etym. (in Kawi), = ignorance of the niceties of speech, vulgarity of speech. Later: = impure and unidiomatic Malay. Cf. (Hg. Tuah 200) the statement: *Ragam orang Inderapura ini bukan Melayu; sunggoh-pun beta Melayu kachok-kachokan, bukan seperti Melayu Melaka sunggoh* (our Siak songs are not Malay songs; we are Malays indeed but speak a mongrel tongue not the true Malay spoken in Malacca) – to which Hang Tuah replied, *Orang Melaka gerangan Melayu kachokan berchampur dengan Jawa Majapahit itu* (it may well be that we Malacca Malays speak impure Malay, mixing as we do with the Javanese of Majapahit). Nowadays kachok is confused with kachau (mixed) [...] but the earlier meaning rather referred to the non-observance of the subtleties of Malay polite idiom. (Wilkinson 1959: 490) The distinction between *bahasa dagang* and *bahasa katjoekan* may have depended on who was speaking, not so much a decisive change in the language. See Henk Maier, *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writing* (Leiden: KITLV, 2004), 10-12.

<sup>25</sup> James Francis Warren, “Joseph Conrad’s Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 9.

coastal water of East Borneo.<sup>26</sup> The place of Berau itself is mythologized in Conrad's early tales as a secret location full of lucrative trade goods, a place that only Lingard and his trade partner, Almayer, know. So, in *An Outcast of the Islands*, when Lingard decides to reveal this secret to his friend and once protégé, Willems, he essentially changes the nature of the trade in the region.

You've never heard of the place, have you? Well, it's up that river of mine about which people talk so much and know so little. I've found out the entrance for a ship of Flash's size. You'll see. I will show you... I have no doubt my secret will be safe with you. Keep mum about my river when you get amongst the traders again. There's many would give their ears for the knowledge of it. I'll tell you something: that's where I get all my guttah and rattans. Simply inexhaustible, my boy.<sup>27</sup>

Of course, in the course of the story, Willems reveals this knowledge to none other than Lingard's fiercest competitor, a famous Arab trader from the Straits Settlements, Syed Abdulla bin Selim, who, by the end of the novel, settles in Berau and takes over a considerable portion of Lingard's trade. The character of Syed Abdulla also happens to be based on a real person, the son of Syed Mohsin bin Saleh Al Joofree, a wealthy Arab trader in Singapore, who owned the steamboat *S.S. Vidar* when Conrad signed up to be its first mate in 1887.<sup>28</sup> Historically, William Lingard was not the first European to trade in Berau, though he was the first to be able to navigate a large sailing vessel past the rough topography of the Berau estuary.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 120.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>28</sup> James Francis Warren, "Joseph Conrad's Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 14. Norman Sherry, "Conrad and the S.S. Vidar," *The Review of English Studies* 14, no. 54 (1963): 158. According to Sherry, "Syed Masin bin Saleh Al Joofree," once one of the wealthiest Arab traders in the region, was on the verge of bankruptcy by the time Conrad arrived in Singapore, raising questions as to Al Joofree's ownership of SS Vidar. Others have claimed that by 1887, the ship was owned by the Chartered Bank of India, Australia, and China. However, as Sherry shows, according to the ship's registration papers in Singapore, Al Joofree was able to maintain his ownership of SS Vidar during the year Conrad was in Southeast Asia.

<sup>29</sup> James Francis Warren, "Joseph Conrad's Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 9. The first European to set up temporary trade in Berau, as Warren tells us, was an English trader from Bengal by the name of George Peacock King. However, King, unlike Lingard, used small, light sea vessels rather than a large sailing boat. By the time Conrad was trading in the region, steamships were in regular use. It is not clear whether or not Conrad actually met Lingard when he was in Singapore; however, he did meet Lingard's nephew in Berau. Archipelagic trade in the region was a family business for many European and Asian merchants alike, and extended



Another important connection between the fictional and the historical Lingard is his famous title of “Rajah Laut.” In *Almayer’s Folly*, Conrad introduces Tom Lingard for the first time from the perspective of both the Dutch and the Malays in the region:

At that time Macassar was teeming with life and commerce. It was the point in the islands where tended all those bold spirits who, fitting out schooners on the Australian coast, invaded the Malay Archipelago in search of money and adventure... The Dutch merchants called those men English pedlars; some of them were undoubtedly gentlemen for whom that kind of life had a charm; most were seamen; the acknowledged king of them all was Tom Lingard, he whom the Malays, honest or dishonest, quiet fishermen or desperate cut-throats, recognized as “the Rajah-Laut”—the King of the Sea.<sup>30</sup>

The real Lingard purposefully sought the native title of Raja Laut Kapitan de Berau (Admiral of Berau) from the Sultan of Gunung Tabur in 1862, so as to avoid having to get Dutch permission to settle and establish a trade port in the region.<sup>31</sup> However, in 1863, Dutch authorities got wind of this other English “Rajah” on the island of Borneo—the first being James Brooke, the “White Rajah” or “Rajah of Sarawak”—and sent a Dutch war vessel to East Borneo to investigate.<sup>32</sup>

These tracings of the historical in Conrad’s fictions continue with William Lingard’s trade partner and son-in-law in Berau, William Charles Olmeijer, who was the historical counterpart for the character of Kasper Almayer, the protagonist of Conrad’s first novel. Olmeijer himself was a Dutch Eurasian man who was in Berau to manage the trade post there in Lingard’s stead.

It may be useful to look at where these tracings of truth in fiction have failed. Which characters have not been traceable? One might say that the two characters who have received the

---

family members were placed strategically in different trade ports throughout the islands to insure a tight trade network for the family business. As Conrad’s novels show, this also affected marriage choices for merchant families.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921), 6-7.

<sup>31</sup> James Francis Warren, “Joseph Conrad’s Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 10. Other scholars have suggested that Lingard was officially conferred this royal title by the Sultan of Gunung Tabur for taking his side in a war against a rival sultan in the region. However, Warren’s argument that Lingard sought the title himself for trade benefits is more likely. This is discussed in the second section of the paper. For a history of diplomacy between Dutch colonials and the sultans of Borneo, see Graham Irwin, *Nineteenth-Century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry* (S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Upon arriving in Berau, Dutch authorities found the historical Lingard donned in native regalia.

least attention among Conrad scholars are, coincidentally, the “Two Vagabonds” mentioned earlier in Conrad’s letter. In his initial formulation of the short story, a “white man” and a “Malay,” Willems and Babalatchi, were to share the same position of the vagabond and outcast in the same riverside town of Berau. In the “Author’s Note” to *An Outcast of the Islands*, written 35 years after the first publication of the novel, Conrad describes his impressions of a wandering European man in Berau, who, Conrad wanted his readers to believe, inspired the character of Willems:

The man who suggested Willems to me was not particularly interesting himself. My interest was aroused by his dependent position, his strange, dubious status of a mistrusted, disliked, worn-out European living on the reluctant toleration of that Settlement hidden in the heart of the forest-land, up that somber stream... he wandered silently amongst the houses in daylight, almost as dumb as an animal and apparently much more homeless... and yet the very first time we dined with Almayer there was Willems sitting at the table with us in the manner of the skeleton at the feast, obviously shunned by everybody, never addressed by any one, and for all recognition of his existence getting now and then from Almayer a venomous glance which I observed with great surprise.<sup>33</sup>

This is the only account of a “Willems” in Berau, and with the absence of corroboration from other accounts, scholars have been in serious doubt as to the historicity of this person. Some have

---

<sup>33</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 282-283. The wording of this passage is inconsistent. It is not clear whether the homeless man was merely “a man who suggested Willems” or was actually a man named Willems, sitting next to Almayer at the dinner table. However, Conrad’s description of Almayer’s disdain is a detail that suggests a certain truth to the existence of a European man who may have inspired the fictional Willems, as in the course of the story, Willems turns out to be Almayer’s main competitor for Lingard’s fatherly affections. In the same “Author’s Note,” Conrad admits, “As to my feeling for Willems it was but the regard one cannot help having for one’s own creation. Obviously I could not be indifferent to a man on whose head I had brought so much evil simply by imagining him such as he appears in the novel—and that, too, on a very slight foundation.” In general, Conrad’s belated “Author’s Note” was written in response to book reviews that characterized Conrad as an “exotic writer,” comparable to French writers publishing about Indochina, Polynesia, and Africa at the time. In his own defense, Conrad writes, “I don’t think the charge was at all justified. For the life of me I don’t see that there is the slightest exotic spirit in the conception or style of that novel. It is certainly the most tropical of my eastern tales.” The need for authorial justification for the veracity of these tales may suggest that there were specific readerly expectations for fictional renderings of Asia and Africa.

ventured to guess that perhaps Willems is William Lingard's nephew, Jim Lingard, who happened to be in Berau with Olmeijer when Conrad was there.<sup>34</sup>

Information on the historical Babalatchi, the second of the two vagabonds in Conrad's fiction, does exist. There is one document, a bill of lading, showing that a trader by the same name was, at the time, stationed in Donggala, a trade post on the western coast of central Sulawesi.<sup>35</sup> Under the name of Babalatchi, 58 bags of dammar were loaded onto *S.S. Vidar*, which left Donggala on August 12th 1887.<sup>36</sup> The *Vidar* arrived in Singapore eight days later and left again in two days' time with Conrad on board as its first mate.<sup>37</sup> Conrad visited Donggala several times on board the *Vidar* from 1887 to 1888. Elsewhere, he retraced the vessel's archipelagic trade route as follows:

...from Singapore through the Carimata Strait, from South Borneo to Benjarmassim, then between the Isle of Pulo Laut and the coast of Borneo. [The *Vidar*] coaled at Pulo Laut, touched at Donggala on the western coast of Celebes, returned to Coti Berau, and finally reached Bulungan [returning by] the same route to Singapore.<sup>38</sup>

The round trip would have taken about three weeks supposing the *Vidar* stopped for a day or two at each trade post.<sup>39</sup> Conrad traveled this route four times in the year he stayed in Southeast Asia, which suggests that he and his crew visited the Donggala port a total of eight times.<sup>40</sup> Curiously,

---

<sup>34</sup> Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 132. One should also add that Willems is missing from Conrad's later account of Almayer in Berau. See Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Norman Sherry, *Conrad and his world* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1972), 45. By 1895, the Dutch shipping association Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (which had a capital of \$3,750,000 at the turn of the century) was using the same trade route: "From Singapore, every four weeks, to Benjermassin direct and farther, via Pulo-Laut, Passir, Kutei, and Donggala, to Berau and Bulongan, two sultanates under Dutch suzerainty, south of the British North Borneo Company's territory." United States Bureau of Foreign Commerce, *Highways of commerce: the ocean lines, railways, canals, and other trade routes of foreign countries Vol. XII* (The Bureau of Statistics, Department of State. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895.), 602-603.

<sup>39</sup> James Francis Warren, "Joseph Conrad's Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Eastern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 165.

in his *A Personal Record*, published 22 years after his experience on the *Vidar* and eight years after the first publication of his second novel, Conrad wrote of a rare meeting with a “Rajah” of Donggala and his two attendants:

...in a place called Donggala, in the island of Celebes... the Rajah of that little-known seaport (you can get no anchorage there in less than fifteen fathom, which is extremely inconvenient) came on board in a friendly way with only two attendants and drank bottle after bottle of soda-water on the after-skylight with my good friend and commander, Captain C-. At least I heard [Almayer’s] name distinctly pronounced several times in a lot of talk in Malay language. Oh yes, I heard it quite distinctly—Almayer, Almayer—and saw Captain C- smile while the fat dingy Rajah laughed audibly. To hear a Malay Rajah laugh outright is a rare experience I can assure you.<sup>41</sup>

Although this account is somewhat exaggerated, Resink notes that the ruler of Donggala was, legally speaking, still independent of the Dutch at the time (“still rajahs pure and simple”), a fact which Conrad would have been aware of on board the *Vidar*.<sup>42</sup> The mention of the rajah’s two attendants is perhaps more significant for our purposes as one of them would have been a Sabanara, better known as *Shahbandar* (or literally “Harbormaster”), for the Donggala port.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps it is not a coincidence that Babalatchi, the fictional character, is also presented to the readers as a *shahbandar* in *Almayer’s Folly*. Conrad describes the character as the sultan’s “prime minister, harbor master, financial adviser, and general factotum,” a “gentleman—of Sulu origin—[who] was certainly endowed with statesmenlike qualities, although he was totally

---

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>42</sup> G.J. Resink, “The Eastern Archipelago under Joseph Conrad’s Western Eyes,” in *Indonesia’s History Between the Myths* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968), 311.

<sup>43</sup> The title and role of shahbandar could be found in most major and minor ports throughout the archipelago. For a preliminary list, see Purnadi Purbatjaraka, “Shahbandars in the Archipelago,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 4. The role, station, and responsibilities of the shahbandar, however, were not uniform throughout the archipelago. Resink notes that the job of the shahbandar in Aceh, Sumatra, was to give docking permits and levy tolls on foreign ships; in Makassar, Sulawesi, they also assumed the jurisprudential role of arbiter for settling disputes between foreigners and natives. However, generally speaking, shahbandar were the first diplomats to greet and lead foreigners from their ships to the rajah or sultan in the region, and shahbandar were often themselves “foreigners” who were fluent in multiple languages. In Aceh, there were five different shahbandar at one point, each speaking a different language (Arabic, Persian, Dutch, etc.); in Makassar, the shahbandar was Bugis. It would be interesting to conduct historical research on the shahbandar as harbormaster, diplomat, as well as translator. For more, see G.J. Resink, “The Law of Nations in Early Macassar,” in *Indonesia’s History Between the Myths* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968), 41-58. And G.J. Resink, “Centuries of International Law in Indonesia,” in *Indonesia’s History Between the Myths* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968), 191-223.

devoid of personal charms.”<sup>44</sup> Although these textual connections do not necessarily provide proof of a meeting between Conrad and a real person named Babalatchi, if parts of Conrad’s *A Personal Account* are to be trusted with the addition of the bill of lading and the curious accuracy with which the role of *shahbandar* is described above, then one could safely assume that the fictional Babalatchi was at least partly based on the people Conrad had met at the Donggala port en route to Berau.

Where the fictional and historical parallels meet in these tracings is through Conrad himself. He, too, was a *dagang* like Olmeijer, Lingard, and Willems. Although he did not insert himself into his first two novels, the role of the *dagang* as “stranger, sojourner; merchant and trader” became part of the “prior texts,” the memories and experiences that came to make up his personal philology. He does not refer to his characters as *dagang*, but the figure of the *dagang* in all its multiple dimensions is contained in the main characters of his novels.

---

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Almayer’s Folly: A Story of an Eastern River* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921), 38.

### Chapter 3

#### **A History of Borneo, Berau, and Communities in Conrad's Malay World**

This chapter looks at the history of the island of Borneo where much of Conrad's first two novels take place and touch on some of the history of the town of Berau itself and of the diverse people who make up its community. Conrad's first two novels are not a blueprint for analyzing the binary of the white colonizer and the native colonized, nor is it about a marginalized group being corrupted by the intrusions of a foreign power or Western agent. Conrad gives a portrayal of a multiracial, multiethnic community with its own shifting struggles for power, very loosely tied to a small trade station in a realm outside of full colonial control. However, the Bornean "community" portrayed in the novels, a pre-nationalist community in the frontiers of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, is one that changes often, one that comes together momentarily then gradually falls apart. In Conrad's fiction, Berau is not so much a destination as it is an intersection that brings together characters of many different backgrounds with competing political and economic interests. If seen as a pattern, this speaks to the longer history of community formation in the Malay world. People have been coming in and out in the Malay world for a long time. Some have settled and others have moved on, returning to their homelands east, north, and west. One gets the sense that the cycle of community formation and disintegration in the Malay world happens so quickly and so often that it arrives at a certain constant, a stability that depends on continued movement. One might understand this as what makes the Malay world so characteristically "porous" and flexible.

The geographic reach of Conrad's mobile characters extends much farther than the east coast of Borneo. In the story, we have Willems, the Dutch-born, sea-bred "vagabond" of Conrad's original conception, who, after getting fired from a big trade company in Makassar,

follows Lingard to the hidden location of Berau. We also have Syed Abdulla, the son of the legendary Arab trader of the Straits, who, we are told, made the pilgrimage to Mecca in his youth then led a wandering life visiting Bombay and Calcutta, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Suez. He then finally comes back home to Penang to take over the huge family business, which encompasses every major and minor port in the archipelago, from Sumatra to New Guinea, even the north coast of Australia. We have Babalatchi, the second vagabond of Conrad's initial formulation, whose fictional background is a little less clear though we are at various times told that he may be a Malay of Sulu origin who had once traveled across the Indian Ocean, performed the hajj, and returned to the sea of his home to serve under the infamous rover of Brunei, Omar el Badavi. We also have Jim-Eng, a first-class Chinese merchant from the Straits Settlement, who deals in opium and identifies himself as an Englishman. There are the nameless Bugis settlers of Berau who side with the rival of the local sultan, an unscrupulous man by the name of Lakamba. The fictional Lingard is always on the go, never staying in one place for too long, appearing and disappearing as is his wont. These characters converge at Berau and while we do get a sweeping glance of the dynamics of a place where the lives of private traders and skilled vagabonds of diverse backgrounds came together, we also get the sense that it is momentary, that what ties them together will soon unravel, and that such convergences and interactions among different actors will cycle through again. Movement was key to the nature of community formation in this part of the world.

Perhaps this glimpse of a fictional multiethnic, multiracial community is not unlike the long history of Borneo itself. For centuries, traders, merchants, and migrants from different regions have been attracted to the island for the rich resources lying deep within its hinterlands. Discoveries of ancient ceramic ware, some which have been found wholly intact, have shown

that Chinese traders had been coming to the island since the eighth century.<sup>45</sup> One of the reasons for this early trade had to do with Borneo's geographic position. Situated as it was along maritime trade routes linking China to India, Borneo was noticed as a convenient (and lucrative) stopping point en route to large global trade ports across the Indian Ocean.<sup>46</sup> In successive centuries, evidence shows that Chinese merchants made regular commercial trips to Borneo, trading their ceramics and silks for the island's exotic jungle goods, like camphor, rattan, dammar, cloves, bird's nest, and rare intestinal stones.<sup>47</sup> But Chinese merchants were not the only ones to have noticed the richness of Borneo's resources. From the west came Malay migrants who settled at the mouths of rivers, linking the interior of the island to wider archipelagic networks of trade. For many years, they held commercial and political control over a large swath of the island, having settled at the mouths of rivers that penetrated the interior.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, the native Dayak people who depended on these rivers for trade came under Malay control and ended up providing them with forest goods for export.<sup>49</sup> From the southeast came Bugis migrants, especially the Wajo, who, at the end of the Dutch-Makassar Wars in the late seventeenth century, were forced to flee their home island of Sulawesi and settle on other shores.<sup>50</sup> By the end of the eighteenth century, parts of Borneo had become part of the Sulu Zone with the Taosug and the Samal Bajau Laut coming from the east to procure exotic marine goods, like trepang and bird's nest, for their trade with China and Britain.<sup>51</sup> The Berau region in

---

<sup>45</sup> Daniel Chew, *Chinese Pioneers on the Sarawak Frontier 1841-1941* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50-55.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>49</sup> Muhammad Gade Ismail, "Trade and State Power: Sambas (West Borneo) in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *State and Trade in the Indonesian Archipelago*, ed. G.J. Schutte (Leiden: KITLV Working Paper #13, 1994), 141-149.

<sup>50</sup> Gene Ammarell, *Bugis Navigation* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 17-20.

<sup>51</sup> James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 75-76.



particular was a Bugis stronghold, and the deep rivalry for predominance in the area created tensions between the Bugis on the island and the Taosug from Sulu.<sup>52</sup> In the 1770s, divisions between the sultanates of Gunung Tabur and Sambaliun led both to seek help from the Sultan of Sulu who forcibly brought them into a tributary relationship with himself, an event which opened up this part of Borneo for more migrants from the east.<sup>53</sup> When Europeans came to this region in the nineteenth century, they would have encountered not only the Chinese, Malays, Dayaks, Bugis, and the Taosug, but many other ethnic groups indigenous and exogenous to the island. And by the time Conrad arrived in Berau aboard the *Vidar* in 1887, many of these groups and “traveling communities” would have “made Borneo their satellite home.”<sup>54</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century, more Europeans were arriving on Borneo’s shores, some for the purpose of carrying out scientific expeditions and others for establishing trade ports or diplomatic treaties. These Europeans included government-sponsored naturalists and cartographers, merchants of private trading companies, officers of empire as well as curious travelers looking for adventure and profit. This increased European presence, however, did not necessarily strengthen colonial control. On East Borneo, for instance, local sultanates regarded their treaties with the Dutch with much more flexibility than the Dutch would have preferred. In 1844, Dutch authorities in Batavia heard news of an incident involving a Scotsman’s death in the farther reaches of the Mahakam River in East Borneo.<sup>55</sup> The report alarmed Dutch authorities particularly because it pointed to British or “foreign” Europeans’ attempts to establish riverine trade on the Dutch side of the island.<sup>56</sup> Authorities in Batavia then dispatched Lieutenant J. van

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, “Navigating communities: race, place, and travel in the history of maritime Southeast Asia,” *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 2 (2009): 101.

<sup>55</sup> Graham Irwin, *Nineteenth-Century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry* (S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), 102-103.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

Capella of the Dutch Navy to negotiate a new treaty with the various Sultans of East Borneo.<sup>57</sup> This treaty, which was eventually signed by the Sultans of Bulungan, Gunung Tabur, and Sambaliung, expressly prohibited relations with foreign Europeans in the area without special permission from Dutch authorities.<sup>58</sup> Two months later, this treaty was temporarily cast aside when an Englishman by the name of Sir Edward Belcher arrived to establish friendly relations with the Sultan of Gunung Tabur. Belcher's reports suggest that the sultan was open to the idea of establishing new and better trade relations with the British despite his recent treaty with the Dutch.<sup>59</sup> As this suggests, increased European presence in Borneo in the mid-nineteenth century did not necessarily result in an effective tightening of colonial control over the region, although it did heighten existing rivalries between colonial powers and led to an increase in colonial efforts for regional control. While the motor of imperialism kept churning, it seems that local sultans were, at the very least, privy to the economic advantage to be gained from their situation. This would partly explain why a local sultan in Berau would grant Lingard's request for the native title of Rajah Laut, a royal title that would have provided a convenient loophole for the English trader and an opportunity for commercial gain for the sultanate.

Colonials' lack of real control over the region can also be seen in the continuation and intensification of time-old "illegal" practices that were supported and, at times, sponsored by the local sultans on the island.<sup>60</sup> In Borneo, smuggling and raiding operations continued unabated throughout the nineteenth century as Bugis merchants, local traders, and regional princes participated and had reason to sustain their activities of kidnapping, slavery, and human

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-155.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

trafficking.<sup>61</sup> Relatedly, colonial concerns with piracy also intensified during the nineteenth century. “Pirates” were able to evade colonial surveillance of the seas by using their knowledge of local geography and by finding new ways to take advantage of European maritime technologies.<sup>62</sup> For small native boats on the run, complex island clusters and coastal mangrove swamps provided easy protection in hard-to-find places, while for big colonial steam cruisers on the hunt, the same geography posed greater difficulties. Interestingly, pirates were also able to take advantage of the new colonial lighthouses that had been built in major ports of the archipelago. At night, they would strategically hide near the base of a lighthouse so as to see their targets come into port while keeping themselves safely hidden from view.<sup>63</sup>

With the rise of colonial concerns came the heightening of colonial rhetoric. The call for the suppression of piracy used, as its immediate basis, the need to bring civilization to the natives and to safeguard international trade in the region. As Tarling argues, the need to suppress piracy was often used as a justification for taking over native lands.<sup>64</sup> In his “Letter from Borneo,” published in London in 1843, James Brooke argued that because of the vacuum created by Brunei’s decline in the region, bands of marauders—the Illanun and Dayak pirates, locally sponsored Bugis pirates, the Saribas and Sekrang pirates led by Arab Sharifs and Syeds—were gaining power along the island’s coasts with support from the local princes.<sup>65</sup> Brooke then called for the restoration of Brunei through British intervention, defending a policy of “indirect rule.”<sup>66</sup> While the British were seeing results from their targeted intervention in North Borneo, the lack of control on the Dutch side of the colonial frontier became readily apparent. Even in the last

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 236-241.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 108-127.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 110-112.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century South-East Asia* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 118-119.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 126.

decades of the 19th century, piracy, smuggling, and other “illegal” activities continued to be practiced all over the Netherlands Indies despite increased efforts at colonial surveillance.

Was Conrad aware of the history, politics, and the potential dangers of this region? It is most likely. It was widely known in the 1870s, about a decade before Conrad’s arrival, that the Sultans of Berau, Gunung Tabur, and others in East Borneo were sponsoring piracy in the region.<sup>67</sup> If Conrad were to have sailed the same route to Berau in 1849, he would have seen, from the port side of his sailing boat, handmade signs warning him about pirates at the mouth of the Berau.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, given Berau’s 18th -19th century history as part of the Sulu Zone and its importance in the procurement of exotic goods for global redistributive trade, it is likely that government as well as company traders would have been aware of its advantageous geographic position, its economic and political viability, and, as usually follows, its regional volatility (this may also be why Conrad portrays Berau as Lingard’s secret place). Furthermore, given that Conrad’s *Almayer’s Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands* includes some generalizable yet uncannily specific Bornean figures—like a Malay of Sulu origins, an Arab rover from Brunei who is defeated by “white men,” the instability of a sultanate in Berau, Arab and Chinese traders, Eurasian and European traders, and colonial figures as farce—it is likely that Conrad had more than a vague notion of what was happening in the frontiers of insular Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, what makes Conrad’s first two novels interesting is that colonialism and colonial figures, for that matter, do not loom as large as in some of his later novels. The key European figures are the *dagang*, or private traders, and they are thoroughly part of the makeshift frontier community described here. The Chinese, Malays, and the Taosug from Sulu, too, are mobile *dagang* figures in Conrad’s estimation. Colonial’s lack of control in the outer islands of

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>68</sup> Eric Tagliacozzo, “Kettle on a Slow Boil: Batavia’s Threat Perceptions in the Indies’ *Outer Islands*, 1870-1910,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 72.

the archipelago sets the stage for a different kind of fictional rendering and a decentering of normative historical narratives of Southeast Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The small town of Berau where these diverse characters come together becomes center stage for the dynamics of Conrad's Malay world.

Conrad was familiar with the works of British scholars, travelers, and colonial officials who had written about their journeys in Southeast Asia. It is well-known that Alfred Russel Wallace's two-volume masterpiece, *The Malay Archipelago* (1869), was Conrad's favorite bedside book. One could very well trace the influence of Wallace's work in Conrad's own writings, especially in the latter's descriptions of the region's scenery, geography, as well as the fauna and flora. He had also read many travel accounts about Southeast Asia, and with his particular interest in James Brooke, he would have undoubtedly read Brooke's Celebes journal and Rodney Mundy's edited version of Brooke's journal.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, Conrad had also read the English translation of Max Havelaar, which would have included a map of Sumatra showing large areas outside of Dutch control, a map that was not published in the Dutch original.<sup>70</sup> Colonial insertion into the Malay world Conrad describes remains incomplete and at times irrelevant to the community dynamics of Berau. One can certainly make a study of Conrad by tracing how these texts influenced Conrad's fiction, working from older text to newer text. But rather than assume that influence was unidirectional, it would perhaps be more fitting to ask how lived experience became Conrad's "prior texts" for the writing of these novels.

---

<sup>69</sup> G.J. Resink, "The Eastern Archipelago under Joseph Conrad's Western Eyes," in *Indonesia's History Between the Myths* (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968), 314-315.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

## Chapter 4

### Conrad and his Malay World

This chapter focuses on Conrad's own writing of the Malay world in English. What might he himself understand about this part of the world? And how did his own experience as a *dagang* help him to create the Malay world of his text? In reading his novels, how might readers uncover some of Conrad's "prior texts," his experiences, memories, and understandings of a people and place, so as to understand what inspired him to start writing in the first place? Moreover, what can we learn of the history of the Malay Archipelago from Conrad's novels? What evidence of the past does he leave with us and in what ways can we check this against other sources? Can history, experience, and the writing of a novel align at a point in the reading so as to bring us a little closer to the reality of history itself?

One might start by looking at the way Conrad portrays the figure of Babalatchi, one of the two vagabonds mentioned in the letter to his aunt. Babalatchi is first described as "a vagabond of the seas, a true Orang-Laut." He lived,

...by rapine and plunder of coasts and ships in his prosperous days; earning his living by honest and irksome toil when the days of adversity were upon him. So, although at times leading the Sulu rovers, he had also served as Serang of country ships, and in that wise had visited the distant seas, beheld the glories of Bombay, the might of the Mascati Sultan; had even struggled in a pious throng for the privilege of touching with his lips the Sacred Stone of the Holy City. He gathered experience and wisdom in many lands, and after attaching himself to Omar el Badavi, he affected great piety (as became a pilgrim), although unable to read the inspired words of the Prophet. He was brave and bloodthirsty without any affectation, and he hated the white men who interfered with the manly pursuits of throat-cutting, kidnapping, slave-dealing, and fire-raising, that were the only possible occupation for a true man of the sea.<sup>71</sup>

Babalatchi is presented to us as a man of extravagant oppositions. Line by line, the description of this sole figure pivots around a set of seemingly contradictory values: from violent plunder to honest and weary toil; from roaming in a Sulu prahu to becoming a serang on a company ship;

---

<sup>71</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42.

from the state of the wise, the experienced, and the pious, to acts of throat-cutting, kidnapping, and slave-dealing. How are we to understand such a figure? Conrad fills a life with such detail as to mention “Bombay,” “the Mascati Sultan,” and “the Sacred Stone of the Holy City,” only to wash over it with successive accounts of violence. Where do these ostensibly contradictory elements overlap? Conrad seems to tell us that their connection is the sea. At sea, past acts, whether good or bad, submerge under new waves, and there is no contradiction once that past disappears. One keeps going, wandering through a life counted in days, not distance.<sup>72</sup>

Other elements in the above passage also call for a careful reading. Conrad reveals what might have been the reality of everyday sea life for some of the native sailors and traders he encountered in Southeast Asia. As first mate on the *Vidar*, Conrad was living day to day with a Malay crew and quartermaster, a Chinese cook and carpenter, and an “elderly serang” who was noted for his habits of “moderate” opium smoking.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps he knew that many men who were engaged in this trade and depended on it for their livelihood shifted from one occupation to another, like himself, based on need, the seasons, patterns of regional and global trade—based on “prosperous days” or “days of adversity.” Or perhaps he had heard the wide-spread rumors about trepang fishers and shrimpers being pirates and sensed that at times accusations of piracy depended too much on appearance.<sup>74</sup> In *A Personal Record*, he recounts how Almayer reacted on seeing one of the native quartermasters on board the *Vidar*:

---

<sup>72</sup> Gene Ammarell writes admirably about this from an anthropological angle. He writes, “In international navigation, distance run is expressed in terms of linear distance, usually in nautical miles, and is determined from an estimate of the speed of the vessel and measurement of the time elapsed since leaving port or expected elapse before achieving port. Among the Bugis, however, distance is normally expressed in terms of time, and the use of units such as miles is uncommon. Instead, navigators speak of the number of hours or days it has taken or will take to travel between two points” (147). For Bugis maritime cosmologies, see Gene Ammarell, *Bugis Navigation* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), 106-153.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 73-78.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

Jurumudi Itam, our best quartermaster, deft at fine needlework, he who mended the ship's flags and sewed buttons on our coats, was disabled by a kick on the shoulder [by Almayer's pony].

Both remorse and gratitude seemed foreign to Almayer's character. He mumbled:

"Do you mean that pirate fellow?"

"What pirate fellow? The man has been in the ship eleven years," I said indignantly.

"It's his looks," Almayer muttered for all apology.<sup>75</sup>

Clearly, Conrad's sympathy is with Jurumudi Itam, the native quartermaster. Conrad's encounters, not only with indigenous sailors and traders, but with unscrupulous Europeans living in the region were likely to have had a big impact on his views. Furthermore, Conrad also suggests that seamen like Babalatchi were incredibly versatile and could have made the hajj by occupying various positions on ships engaged in intra-regional trade. Once in Bombay, there would have been plenty of opportunities to cross the western Indian Ocean to independent Oman. As scholars have shown, by the late 18th century, Omani maritime trade in the Gulf region extended as far as the east coast of Africa and the west coast of India.<sup>76</sup> Southeast Asian sailors could very well have been working strategically from ship to ship and port to port until they arrived on the shores of the Arabian Peninsula. In the case of Babalatchi, working as a serang on a company ship was just another means to an end.

Conrad's emphasis on the "true Orang-Laut," which he later translates in the passage as, "the true man of the sea," leads us to other lines of reading. Historically, the Orang-Laut, who were also known as Celates along the Straits of Malacca, were sea peoples engaged in multiple maritime pursuits, from collecting sea goods along the coast to acting as a local maritime force for Malay rulers.<sup>77</sup> Different Orang-Laut groups were bound to leaders of Malay states through

---

<sup>75</sup> Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 81.

<sup>76</sup> Patricia Risso, "Cross-Cultural Perception of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (2001), 310.

<sup>77</sup> Timothy P. Barnard, "Celates, Rayat-Laut, Pirates: The Orang Laut and Their Decline in History," *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 80, no. 2 (2007): 34-36.



patron-client relationships.<sup>78</sup> They would have used their excellent knowledge of the region's geography to advise Malay rulers and conduct raiding operations in strategic locations so as to direct "safe" trade toward their patrons.<sup>79</sup> According to Portuguese sources, it was the Orang-Laut that accompanied, protected, and advised Prince Paramesvara in the 14th-15th century when he left Palembang for Singapore then left Singapore for Karimun and Muar, and later moved up the coast from Muar to found the famous port-city of Melaka.<sup>80</sup> When the Malay ruler moved his center of power to Johor after the Portuguese takeover of Melaka in 1511, loyal Orang-Laut groups followed him and eventually helped him maintain his sovereignty against Portuguese and Acehnese attacks.<sup>81</sup>

The history of Orang-Laut and their valuable role as clients to Malay patrons may help us to rethink Conrad's descriptions of many of the relationships in the novel. We are told in the same passage above that Babalatchi "attach[ed] himself to Omar el Badavi," the famous rover of Brunei. Babalatchi's loyalty to Omar el Badavi is demonstrated in the following scene. Conrad writes that Babalatchi

...found favour in the eyes of his chief, the fearless Omar el Badavi, the leader of Brunei rovers, whom he followed with unquestioning loyalty through the long years of successful depredation. And when that long career of murder, robbery and violence received its first serious check at the hands of white men, he stood faithfully by his chief, looked steadily at the bursting shells, was undismayed by the flames of the burning stronghold, by the death of his companions, by the shrieks of their women, the wailing of their children; by the sudden ruin and destruction of all that he deemed indispensable to a happy and glorious existence.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>82</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-43.

This passage also recalls James Brooke's campaign for the suppression of piracy in North Borneo.<sup>83</sup> Conrad's description may be read as a portrayal of subsequent bombardments of Brunei by British forces. Conrad continues,

The beaten ground between the houses was slippery with blood, and the dark mangroves of the muddy creeks were full of sighs of the dying men who were stricken down before they could see their enemy. They died helplessly, for into the tangled forest there was no escape, and their swift praus, in which they had so often scoured the coast and the seas, now wedged together in the narrow creek, were burning fiercely.<sup>84</sup>

Even while writing of the rovers' own depredations, Conrad's main focus is on the violence, suffering, and razing of a native town at the hands of a technologically-superior European power. Local piracy, it is implied, would have been incomparable to the kind of violence suffered under foreign bombardment. True to the title of *Orang-Laut*, Babalatchi subsequently saves his patron, Omar, and Omar's daughter, Aissa, from the wreckage of the final explosion and says, "They are very strong. When we fight with them we can only die. Yet,' he add[s], menacingly—'some of us still live! Some of us still live!'"<sup>85</sup> Clearly, as with the case of Jurumudi Itam, the native quartermaster who was suspected of being a pirate, Conrad's sympathy is with the native characters. This brief scene sets the stage for the rest of the novel, and it reveals much about what impelled Conrad to write it before launching into the main plot of the novel. One can read Conrad's disdain for European military action as well as his sympathy for the named and the unnamed villagers of the razed town. Here one can't help but read into what Conrad must have felt about James Brooke and the latter's successful campaign for imperial intervention against the so-called "pirates" of this region.

---

<sup>83</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century South-East Asia* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963), 125-126.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 42-43.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

Directly after the razing of the village, Babalatchi, Omar, and Aissa head east to take refuge under the protection of the Sultan of Sulu. However, they are forced to escape from Sulu as well. Conrad writes,

There was nothing to be done. Times were changed. So changed that, when a Spanish frigate appeared before the island and a demand was sent to the Sultan to deliver Omar and his companions, Babalatchi was not surprised to hear that they were going to be made victims of political expediency.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, times had changed. By the time Conrad arrived in Southeast Asia, the Sulu Sultanate was on the verge of collapse. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the main islands of the Sulu Empire, Jolo and Balangingi, had been destroyed by technologically more superior Spanish fleets, and by the 1880s, Sulu's intricate trade system was irreparably damaged by concerted efforts of different colonial powers.<sup>87</sup> As in Conrad's story, the Sultan of Sulu would have had little power to refuse a demand from a Spanish frigate. Furthermore, this part of the story suggests that there may have been close diplomatic and military connections between the British and the Spanish at the time for the mutual benefit of suppressing "piracy." All the same, the three characters, Babalatchi, Omar, and Aissa, make their escape and end up in a little town called Berau on the east coast of Borneo.

In Berau, readers are introduced to a complex network of alliances and competition between characters of different races and ethnicities. And as the story unfolds, readers see how the dynamics between these different characters intensify. This part of the novel shows how Conrad conceived of the pattern of relationships within a multiethnic, multiracial maritime community. There are two main factions vying for political and economic control in Berau. Within each faction, characters are organized into multiple layers of client-patron relationships

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>87</sup> James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), 253.

(see figure 1). At the head of the first faction, we have the Sultan of Berau, a man named Patalolo. In his patronage is the Englishman Tom Lingard, the famous Rajah Laut of the archipelago, who in turn, acts as a patron for Almayer, his Dutch assistant, who lives in Berau and takes care of business while Lingard is off at sea. When Lingard brings Willems to Berau, Almayer and Willems compete with each other for Lingard's attention. At the head of the second faction is Lakamba who describes himself as someone from the east and of princely origins. Disappointed that there was "already some semblance of organization amongst the settlers of various races,"<sup>88</sup> Lakamba foments conflict between Patalolo and the Sultan of Koti. When this fails, he foments another outbreak, this time, with the Bugis settlers in the region. However, Lingard comes to Patalolo's rescue and stability is restored in Berau. By the time Babalatchi, Omar, and Aissa enter the scene, Lakamba is living alone some fourteen miles down the river from Berau. These four characters enter into a client-patron relationship. So here we have the two factions: Patalolo—Lingard—Almayer—Willems and Lakamba—Omar—Babalatchi—Aissa. There is competition between Patalolo and Lakamba, Lingard and Babalatchi, Lingard and Syed Abdulla, and Almayer and Willems.

The main story revolves around Babalatchi's plan to disrupt Lingard's trade so as to weaken his economic and political control in the area, and by extension, Patalolo's power as Sultan. In this endeavor, Babalatchi sends for the famous Arab trader of the Straits, Syed Abdulla, who is already in competition with Lingard for economic dominance in the region. When Willems falls in love with the beautiful Aissa, he betrays Lingard and enters into a patron-client relationship with Babalatchi and, by extension, with Syed Abdulla. As Abdulla's new assistant, Willems gives away Lingard's secret and personally guides Abdulla's trade ship up the Berau River. Lingard's power through monopolistic trade is completely destroyed by this turn of events.

---

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 41.

In the end, Patalolo, in his diminished state, decides to leave for Mecca, and Lakamba replaces him as Sultan of Berau. As Lakamba's closest aid, Babalatchi, the mastermind of the whole scheme, rises to the important position of *shahbandar*. The social and political structure remains, but each position within that structure is replaced by the main players from the competing faction (see figure 2).

Through a fictional portrayal of these shifting patron-client relationships, Conrad reconstructs the general structure of coastal societies in Southeast Asia and highlights the importance of commerce for political dominance. From his experience on the *Vidar*, perhaps he came to realize that in order to engage successfully in commercial activities in the region, one had to become part of the sprawling network of patron-client relationships that involved local elites, merchants, and at times, the Rajah himself.<sup>89</sup> What Conrad intensifies through his fiction, however, is the human side of these relations. There was loyalty between patrons and clients, but there also competition and ambition among patrons and clients across ethnic and racial boundaries. Thus, it was possible to imagine an "Orang-Laut," like Babalatchi, contending with a "Rajah Laut," like Lingard, or to see a Dutchman like Willems leaving his English patron, Lingard, for an Arab or Malay patron, like Syed Abdulla and Babalatchi. As these patron-client networks expanded to include new waves of foreigners and migrants in Borneo, the dynamics between people across these relationships must have been changing as well.

This speaks to a certain unpredictability when it comes to race and interethnic relations in the frontier zones of the Malay Archipelago, something that Conrad must have noticed not only on the *Vidar* where he became familiar with the native men of his crew but also in various port cities where he encountered diverse groups of people. And as the above narrative suggests, the

---

<sup>89</sup> Jeya Kathirithamby-Wells, "Restraints on the Development of Merchant Capitalism in Southeast Asia before 1800," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Anthony Reid (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 132.

transition from the so-called native forms of trade to a European one in the nineteenth century introduced new ways to deal with interethnic, interracial relations. Lingard does not automatically have the upper hand just because he is a white man. He has to insert himself into existing patron-client networks and secure his own networks through others like Almayer and Willems. At the same time, what Conrad suggests in the broad scope of this narrative is that the “Malay world” accepted all kinds of people as its own. Lingard, Willems, Almayer, as well as Conrad, following routes and networks of the *dagang*, lived within the embrace of the Malay world. Could Conrad have written these novels without having felt the consciousness that comes with entering into another world? Is it possible that out of his experiences in the Malay world, Conrad came to accumulate the necessary “prior texts” for languaging in English?

Languaging, Becker writes, is “building a new memory, a new past...” through language, and as opposed to learning a language through grammar books and dictionaries, it comes out of the experience of entering into another “culture’s philology.” Conrad may have used many of the same words that James Brooke used, for example, to describe some of the Malay characters in his first novels; however, he builds a new memory, a new context for them. Conrad’s use of English was less a commitment or an affiliation to Britain when he wrote his first two novels than a new, experimental way of “languaging” the experience of having entered into a different world.

From reading Conrad’s first two novels historically, readers also learn about what it might have been like in the frontiers of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Conrad portrays a Malay world before the two imperial powers were able to expand their influence more fully and before the rise of nation-states in Southeast Asia. Conrad is also able to decenter the Malay world proper through his fictions and construct the frontier zones of Borneo as one of the

many centers of the Malay world. The history of seafaring, piracy, and smuggling, of distant colonialism and interracial, interethnic relations within shifting networks among patrons and clients, becomes the key to understanding how Conrad saw and remembered his experiences in the Malay Archipelago.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

In this thesis, I have tried to explore how one might read historical and fictional parallels in Conrad's first two novels. In reading *Almayer's Folly* and *An Outcast of the Islands*, one gets the sense that these works were not just romantic stories arbitrarily set in the Malay Archipelago but were part of Conrad's initial "languaging" of the Malay world. As Alton Becker explained, "languaging" is an attempt to enter another's individual or cultural philology, a process of building of a new past and new memories by invoking a set of "prior texts" based on lived experience. These "prior texts" from which Conrad was able to draw such historical and fictional parallels were based on his experiences of working, traveling, and interacting among a diverse group of people in the Malay Archipelago towards the end of the nineteenth century. As Becker argues, a modern philologist is like an ethnographer who enters a world not wholly his own, a person who is able to enter another "culture's philology" and come out of it having learned and unlearned some of his own exuberances and deficiencies and to have built new memories in and through a language not his own. In the case of Conrad, he entered the Malay world and upon leaving it began his transition into becoming a writer and novelist in the English language.

These chapters were a tentative first step to exploring how readers might understand Conrad and his "languaging" of the Malay world from a historical perspective. It was also a way to understand the Malay world itself through Conrad. I have tried to engage with different lines of reading that encompass the historical, biographical, experiential, as well as the fictional, as all of these elements form Conrad's "prior texts." In the second chapter, I have tried to show that one of the ways to read Conrad's first two novels is to focus on the figure of the *dagang*, which



means both merchant and wanderer. It is one of the many so-called “illegible residues” of his novels. Although Conrad does not use the Malay word *dagang*, the figure of the *dagang* comes into relief when the fictional characters are traced to their historical counterparts. One might go one step further as to say that the world of the *dagang*, as we read it, is one that involves not only figures we describe as strangers and merchants but also their various interactions with the migrant populations of the Malay Archipelago. The world of the *dagang* contains within it many frontiers, a space where mobility and crossings are a natural part. It is also a world where comparisons made of difference, that is, among the different ethnic groups and races, are also what connect them. Conrad must have observed, like an ethnographer, the world of the *dagang* as he actively took part in it during his time in the Malay Archipelago. Reading his novels historically, one can’t help but wonder about other *dagang* in the archipelago: people who wandered and traded across seas and straits, taking part in different communities across space and time, the homeless European man or the native sailor in search of a new title.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I look at the history of the island of Borneo, touch briefly on the town of Berau on the island’s east coast, and reflect on the kind of communities that came to characterize what Conrad believed was the center of the Malay world. I suggest that in Conrad’s understanding, the vibrant and often fraught life of trade ports among a diverse group of people was what was central to the Malay world. Perhaps the key to understanding these first novels is to focus on relations over time and across social boundaries rather than momentary representations. The differences between Arab, Chinese, Malay, Taosug, European, and Eurasian traders are not as pronounced as these categories might make it seem. They form “traveling communities” that create “satellite homes.” In Conrad’s novels, I also suggest, new communities form then fall apart rather quickly. One can imagine this happening often over a

long period of time. As I have tried to show by focusing on the history of the different migrant groups coming to the island of Borneo, there has been a larger circulation of people coming in and out of the Malay world for a long time now. The cycle of community formation and dispersion in these parts became a pattern, and communities have become dependent on an economy built out of a continued movement of people and things. This reading of Conrad's description of a community in Berau also adds to the idea of the Malay world as a porous space.

I have also suggested that Conrad was much more knowledgeable about Southeast Asia than previously assumed. He was aware of the history and politics of this region through his reading of published works by Europeans as well as his personal experience of traveling and working in the outer islands of the archipelago. Experience, memory, texts all become context for the reading and writing of the Malay world.

The fourth chapter attempted two interrelated but separate readings. In the first, I tried to do a close reading of some of the passages that stood out in the novels as it related to the history of the region. The importance of the role of the *orang-laut* did not escape Conrad's notice. His focus on the character of Babalatchi, the Malay vagabond, and his loyalty to Omar el Badavi, Syed Abdulla, and later to Lakamba, demonstrates Conrad's understanding of the historical importance of the figure of the *orang-laut* in the Malay world. One might go one step further in perhaps comparing the figure of the *orang-laut* and the *shahbandar* with the figure of the *dagang* as they interact within the same social sphere. In the second part of the chapter, I have tried to take a step back and read into the underlying relationships and community dynamics that connect and drive the plots of the two novels. Every key character is related to other characters in the community through patron-client relationships and through intersecting economic and political relations. These two are not separate, however. They intersect when characters manipulate one

relationship across traditional categories of race and power to realign themselves politically and economically. Through a contextual, cultural-historical reading of these novels, we get the sense that Conrad's understanding of community relations within the Malay world was much more complex and extensive than we had previously assumed.

Trying to explore any author's "prior texts" is a complex and daunting task. But as I have tried to argue in the pages of this thesis, the first step is to try to read the works historically. For Conrad's first two novels, reflecting on the history of the region and Conrad's personal experiences together energize the reading process. One of the questions I have tried to address is: how did Conrad learn a new way of languaging in English through his experiences of the Malay world? What kinds of memories and experiences became the "prior text" of his writings? And why did he attempt to write in a language that was not his native language? Does this have anything to do with his purposeful seeking of frontiers whether that is in the Malay world, the Indian Ocean, or even, in Britain? The answers are not clear, but as I have tried to demonstrate, it would be difficult to answer such questions without looking at the historical layers that connect text, experience, understanding, reading and writing, specific places and times.

I have tried to argue that tracing parallels between the historical, fictional, and the experiential is entirely relevant to understanding the author's unique philology and by extension, his texts. How does one figure out an author's "unique set of remembered prior texts," his ongoing negotiations of exuberances and deficiencies without trying to imagine what he may have seen, experienced, and understood at the time? This was also the question Stephen Greenblatt seems to have had in mind when he wrote,

"...we wanted to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if we knew that we could not find these—the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent—we could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be lost to actual

experience... The greatest challenge lay not simply in exploring these other texts... but in making the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other's thick description."<sup>90</sup>

To come back to Conrad and his Malay world, the distinction between the literary and the nonliterary would have had little bearing on the nineteenth-century world of the *dagang*, the world of merchants and strangers. *Bahasa* accounted for the written and the unwritten, the literary and the nonliterary. It means language, manners, and behavior.<sup>91</sup> What Conrad experienced in the Malay world would not have distinguished the literary from the non-literary, but rather from the spoken, unspoken, and the misspoken. So much of the reading of Conrad's texts is trying to decipher what exactly was spoken and yet remains silent, nuanced gestures of language blurring motives and intentions. One might argue that this, too, was the world of the *dagang* in which misunderstandings abounded and rhetorical and political moves required one to be highly conscious of one's own and each other's exuberances and deficiencies. It is one way to consider how Conrad learned a new way of "languaging" in a world far from Europe and home and eventually came into his own as a writer and author in the English language.

---

<sup>90</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "The Touch of the Real," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 30-50.

<sup>91</sup> See Henk Maier, *We are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writings* (Leiden: KITLV, 2004).

## Appendix

Figure 1. *An Outcast of the Islands*

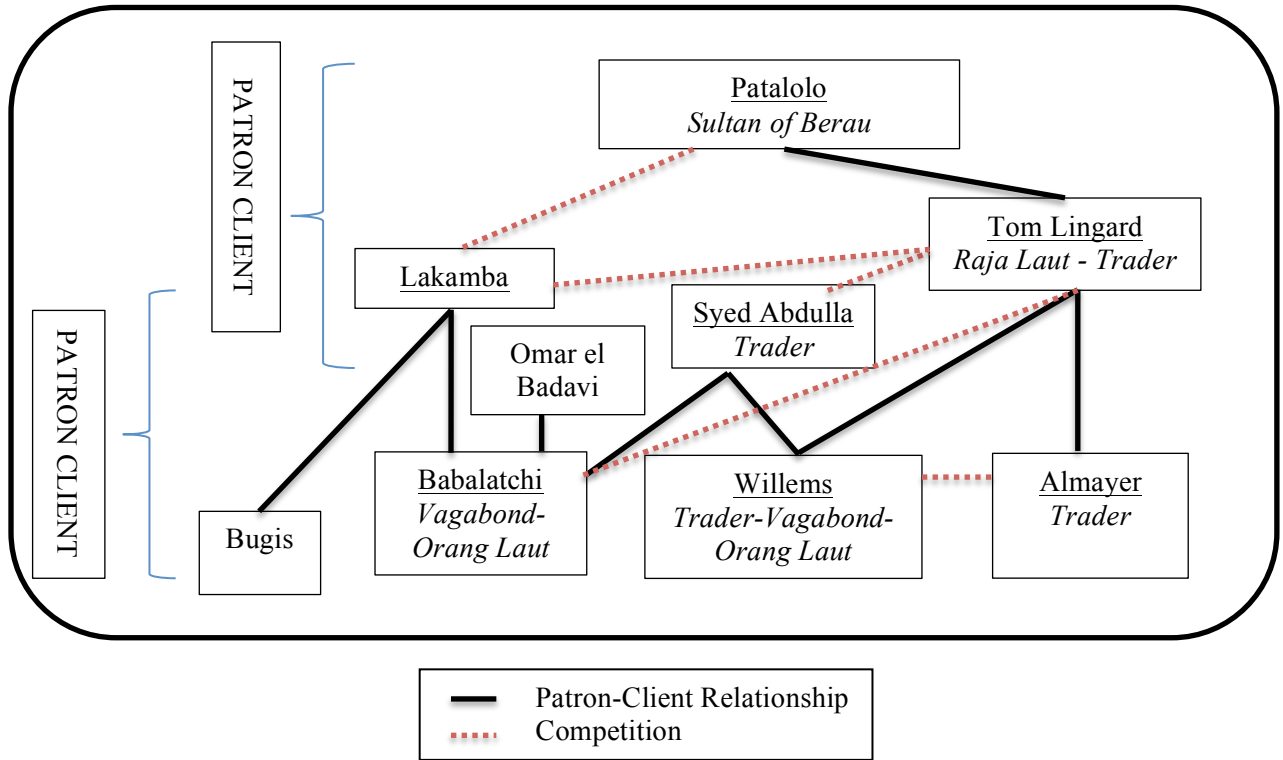
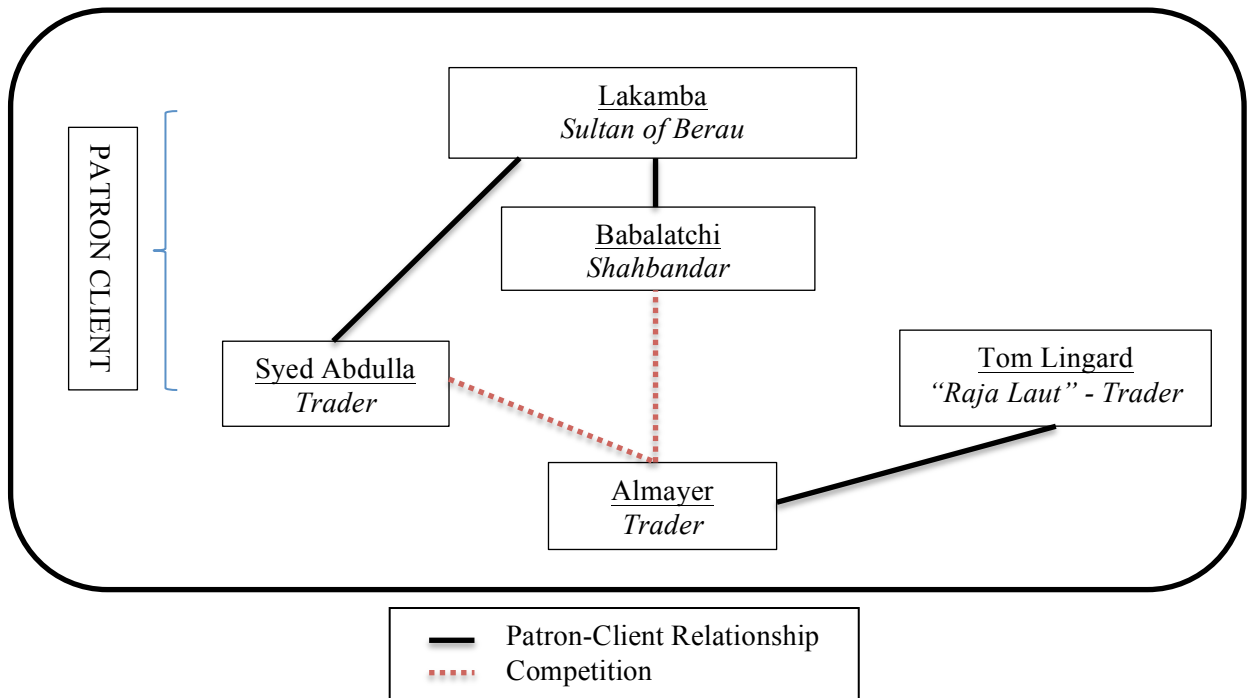


Figure 2. *Almayer's Folly*



## Bibliography

- Ammarell, Gene. *Bugis Navigation*. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1999.
- Barnard, Timothy P. "Celates, Rayat-Laut, Pirates: The Orang Laut and Their Decline in History," *Journal of Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 80, no. 2 (2007): 33-49.
- Becker, Alton L. *Beyond Translation: Essays Toward a Modern Philology*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Becker, Alton L. *Writing on the Tongue*. Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989.
- Chew, Daniel. *Chinese Pioneers on the Sarawak Frontier 1841-1941*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Almayer's Folly: A Story of an Eastern River*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1921.
- Conrad, Joseph. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad Volume I 1861-1897*, ed. Frederick R. Karl, Laurence Davies, Gene M. Moore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Conrad, Joseph. *An Outcast of the Islands*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Conrad, Joseph. *A Personal Record*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Touch of the Real," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser, 30-50. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser, 1-14. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Irwin, Graham. *Nineteenth-Century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry*. 'S-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955.
- Ismail, Muhammad Gade. "Trade and State Power: Sambas (West Borneo) in the Early Nineteenth Century," in *State and Trade in the Indonesian Archipelago*, ed. G.J. Schutte, 141-149. Leiden: KITLV Working Paper #13, 1994.
- Kathirithamby-Wells, Jeya. "Restraints on the Development of Merchant Capitalism in Southeast Asia before 1800," in *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Anthony Reid, 123-148. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Lacapra, Dominick. "The Quest! The Quest! Conrad and Flaubert," in *History, Literature, and Critical Theory*, 31-53. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013.

- Maier, Henk. *We Are Playing Relatives: A Survey of Malay Writings*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2005.
- Ortega y Gasset, Jose. "The Difficulty of Reading," *Diogenes* 7, no.1 (1959).
- Purbatjaraka, Purnadi. "Shahbandars in the Archipelago," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (1961): 1-9.
- Resink, G.J. "Centuries of International Law in Indonesia," in *Indonesia's History Between the Myths*, 191-223. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968.
- Resink, G.J. "The Eastern Archipelago under Joseph Conrad's Western Eyes," in *Indonesia's History Between the Myths*, 307-323. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968.
- Resink, G.J. "The Law of Nations in Early Macassar," in *Indonesia's History Between the Myths*, 41-58. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1968.
- Risso, Patricia. "Cross-Cultural Perception of Piracy: Maritime Violence in the Western Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Region during a Long Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 2 (2001): 293-319.
- Roosa, John, Ayu Ratih, and Hilmar Farid. *Tahun yang tak Pernah Berakhir: Memahami Pengalaman Korban 65*. Jakarta: Lembaga Studi dan Advokasi Masyarakat, 2004.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad's Eastern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966.
- Sherry, Norman. *Conrad and his world*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1972.
- Sherry, Norman. "Conrad and the S.S. Vidar," *The Review of English Studies* 14, no. 54 (1963): 157-163.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. "Kettle on a Slow Boil: Batavia's Threat Perceptions in the Indies' Outer Islands, 1870-1910," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 70-100.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. *The Longest Journey: Southeast Asians and the Pilgrimage to Mecca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. "Navigating communities: race, place, and travel in the history of maritime Southeast Asia," *Asian Ethnicity* 10, no. 2 (2009): 97-120.
- Tagliacozzo, Eric. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.
- Tarling, Nicholas. *Piracy and Politics in the Malay World: A Study of British Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century South-East Asia*. Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1963.

- United States Bureau of Foreign Commerce, *Highways of Commerce: the ocean lines, railways, canals, and other trade routes of foreign countries Vol. XII*. The Bureau of Statistics, Department of State. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1895.
- Warren, James Francis. "Joseph Conrad's Fiction as Southeast Asian History: Trade and Politics in East Borneo in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *At the Edge of Southeast Asian History*, 8-20. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987.
- Warren, James Francis. "Savagism and Civilization: The Iranun, Globalization and the Literature of Joseph Conrad." *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 74, no. 1 (2001): 43-69.
- Warren, James Francis. *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2007.
- Yoo, Genie. "Reading across Time: the Fiction and History of Conrad and Pramoedya." Seminar paper, Cornell University, 2013.