

## Book Review

*In Malay Forests*, by George Maxwell. Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1907, 306 pp. ISBN 13: 9781429743136

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Sir George Maxwell features prominently as a colonial historian of Malaysia. He played a key role in the Bangkok Treaty in 1909 and Chief Secretary of Federated Malay States in 1926. His noteworthy contribution to the British colonial administration of Malaya and the surrounding region afforded him the access and resources to document the history of Malaya. Reviewing his work, *In Malay Forests*, provides rarely documented insights into the impressions of the British colonials towards Malaya forests wherein the British spent much of their time. His approach was relatively peculiar given that the majority of British colonials hitherto featured political and social aspect of Malay ethnography in their research and writing, with little regard for the Malayan geographical landscape.

*In Malay Forests* documents the adventures of a British officer exploring Malay forests and records Sir George's perceptions of local villagers and customs (Mohamad Rashidi Pakri 2014, 64). Sir George Maxwell acquired in-depth knowledge and a genuine appreciation of Malay customs. This led Mohamad Rashidi to regard Sir George's narrative as an articulate depiction of Malay folklore and customs. Such a perception was gained, in part, by his active engagement in Malay sporting customs such as a deer-drive, crocodile catching, a fish drive and a tiger drive.

The original manuscript of *In Malay Forests* was published in 1907 in Great Britain by Messrs. William Blackwood and Sons Limited, Edinburgh and London. It consisted of 306 pages. Singapore based Eastern Universities Press Ltd. reprinted a pocket edition consisting of 313 pages in 1957 and a standard version consisting of 238 pages in 1960. Sir George's magnum offers rare insights into the Malayan

atmosphere and geography. His anecdote style of writing is poetic and paints vivid images of Malaya's virgin forests. His descriptions of the geographical aspects of Malay forests and the cultures of forest communities are clear and intuitive. His record of the Malay beliefs associated with the forest continues to exist in parts of the Malay culture.

Maxwell introduced the Malayan forest in the chapter titled 'The Forest'. This mesmerising chapter begins by detailing the geography of the region. This narrative is closely associated with land changes resulting from changes in economic matters such as the mining activities of tin ore in Kinta, Selangor and Larut, Seremban. By including local anecdotes, Maxwell describes a Malay village with paddy fields near the river banks. The village for him seen as a unique structure surrounded by the dark and heavy forest hems which he regards as the walls of a prison. The poetic way of describing the forest can be seen in a few lines, like "Then you see that the whole cloud is swimming on into the mountain".

In the first chapter, Maxwell depicts the mountain ranges, shapes, sizes, climates, floras and faunas. While doing this, he contemplates the meaning of Malay folklore that reflects Malay beliefs towards the forest. He notes how the Malays associate with forests supernatural powers like *Jin Tanah* (Earth Spirit), *Gergasi* (Great Tusked Giants), *Orang Bunyi* (Invisible Voice Folk), *Hantu Pemburu* (Spectral Hunter) and *Hantu Hutan* (Spirit of the Forest) and that these beliefs reach the extent of invocation and prayers to these supernatural powers which he perceived as "good invocation". One invocation reads;

Peace unto ye all!

I come as friend, not as enemy,

I come to seek my living, not to make war.

May no harm come to me, nor mine,

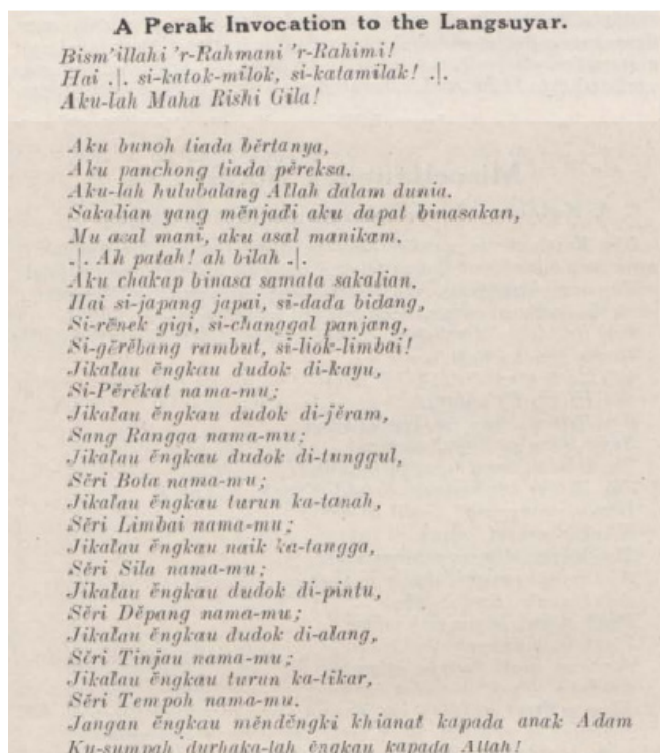
To my wife, my children, or my home.

Because I intend no harm, nor evil,

I ask that I may come, and go, in peace. (Maxwell 1907, 11)

Here, "good" invocation is the opposite of the "bad" invocation noted by Winstedt's langsuyar invocation in Perak (refer to the pamphlet below) which is believed casts out evil spirits. This bad or black invocation is a kind of magical spell meant to harm one's enemy. These include spells like "aku bunoh tidak bertanya" which

means to kill without asking, and “aku panchong tiada pereksa” means beheading without cause and refers to demons and demonic entities. In contrast, the “good” invocation mentioned *In Malay Forests* refers to spirits that care for the forest and its inhabitants. They do not seek to harm including human beings who enter the forests.



**Figure 1.** *A Perak Invocation of the Langsuyar* by R.O. Winstedt

Source: *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*

Maxwell also addresses the issue of *kramat*, which was a popular interest among British officers. Another prominent colonial writer, Walter William Skeat, defines *kramat* as a sacred place inviting of worship. He states:

...to this sacred spot, constant pilgrimages are made by the Malays, and the lower branches of the tree rarely lack those pieces of white and yellow

which are always hung up as an indication that some devout person has paid his vows. (Skeat 1965, 68)

In another chapter, Skeat refers to *kramat* as graves of saints:

It is no means necessary to ensure the popularity of a *kramat* or shrine that the saint to whose memory it is dedicated should be a Malay. (Skeat 1965, 69)

Skeat signified *kramat* as a sacred place of worship. However, *In Malay Forests*, *kramat* refers to certain creatures of the jungle like the Pinjih Rhino and Blat elephant. In one chapter, he explained why the rhino was regarded as *kramat* due to its supernatural powers and its ability to protect against danger.

Interestingly, the Pinjih Rhino is believed to be the reincarnation of a deceased celebrity. According to Malay villagers, the *kramat* elephant is seen walking by the rice-fields and leaving the crops untouched. There was also a story during the British Occupation of Perak in 1874 wherein a terror incident happened in Pinjih Valley when they tried to kill the elephant. According to Maxwell, he panicked when the elephant was only a few yards behind him, and his rifle ran out of bullets. So he ran for his life, and after fifteen to twenty yards, he tripped and fell on the ground with his rifle flung from his hand. At that point, he could think of nothing but death. However, the elephant stopped following him and remained standing under the dead tree. Later, the elephant moved slowly away.

As an adventurous young man, Sir George Maxwell challenged himself to take part in Malay traditional competitions including the “deer-drive”. This was his favourite sport with which he engaged with the Malays. Maxwell introduces the reader to a tool used in the deer-drive for this sport named *sidin* (bundle of rattan that is coiled into great loops in the manner that a sailor coils a rope). Maxwell adds in page 66 how he hunted crocodiles as a traditional Malay sport with Manap Rimau (a distinguished name of a local villager, Abdul Manap, who was famous for catching crocodiles). In the Crocodile Catching chapter, he revealed some lore and charms to attract crocodiles. An interesting story behind the crocodile catch is a mystical story of the Prophet’s daughter, Fatimah who is related to the creation of this animal species. The villagers held that Fatimah cursed the crocodile such that all the properties that formed the animal could kill such as turmeric. Such information is useful for further studies on ancient Malay beliefs.

Chapter five covers the topic of *sladang* or Indian bason. Maxwell shared some interesting chronicles on the *sladang* which is dangerous especially when wounded.

He recounts a hunt of *sladang* wherein his friend Salleh performed certain charms to hunt the animal.

Chapter six is titled “The Lights of Changkat Asah”. Changkat Asah is located between Perak and Selangor rivers. It is a region for coconut and sugar plantations. It was also a busy mining centre of tin-ore. One hundred miles from the area lies a place called Simpang Kadangsa which is a magnificent forest inhabited by herds of elephants and rhinoceroses. It was home to a lovely spot called Changkat Asah which was clad in virgin forest. The place became a superstitious dread to the Malays. According to locals, spirits dwelt there such that no searcher dared to wander the area after dark. According to Maxwell, Changkat Asah is believed to be a *bilek hantu* or spirit room where villagers can see lights emanating from the darkness of the forest. The mysterious *bilek hantu* was, in fact, hunter-gatherers or colonial officers who terrorised the forest after dusk. The mystifying Changkat Asah tells of Malay spirits like *hantu penanggal* (a woman who dies in childbirth and wanders the land at night in search of blood).

Maxwell also describes a beautiful and unique creature named tapir. Sadly, the tapirs became an object for big game among the Malays. His admiration of this creature is perhaps best explained through his exquisite description of the tapir’s transformation from baby to adult through their spots and coat. Together with his tracker, Malias, they went to Kuala Kangsar in search of tapirs.

The next story is a fish drive. In this chapter, he collected the perceptions of the locals towards the colonial power. The anecdote of Alang Abdullah and his friends on the process of the fish drive was elaborated in detail including the interesting occasion where the villagers cast to scare the fish from the deeper pools to trap them into a net. The wild goat is also discussed. The Malays believed that the wild goat originated from the Tibetan mountains. They believed that wild goats were scattered around the limestone hills that studded the alluvial plain of Kinta. There was also an interesting story about goat hunting. Together with Hussein, his host, they hunted wild goats in Gunung Kroh. The cave of Gunung Kroh supposed to be the home of *Orang Bunyi* or Voice Talk spirit. It was an event when they must call Awang before entering the cave to ask permission from *Orang Bunyi*. With his sardonic humour, Maxwell proclaimed that anyone who meets the goats is lucky because he was unable to find one!

The elephant is discussed towards the end of his book. The famous story of a blot elephant feeding near Kuala Sol attracted him to wander from his place to see this animal. Unfortunately, there was an incident where the elephant seized his craft and swung it out of the way. Next, is a tiger drive. Tiger in the Malayan forest was

believed to reside in the *bluker* (secondary forest) behind the village. The tiger drive is believed to possess a magical weapon called *golok rembau* which can make the tigers powerless against them. In hunting the tiger, the *pawang* (shaman) needs to recite charms to close the tiger's mouth.

The next chapter is called, "a tale by the wayside" which comprised *pantun* and folktales from which are derived certain moral values. There are stories of Prophet Sulaiman, river turtle and *kumbang* (beetle). The remaining chapters consist of anecdotes of the tuba-fishing, a were-tiger and crocodile shooting, which are interesting topics for readers to explore.

After reading *In Malay Forest*, I recommend reading *Forest Life and Adventures in the Malay Archipelago* by Eric Mjöberg (1930) for further knowledge of Borneo's primaeval forest. Eric Mjöberg (1930, 13) claimed that "this little work contains some brief descriptions of the rich fauna and flora of the great Malay islands, special prominence being given to Borneo". However, Mjöberg's lacks Maxwell's amusing anecdotal style nor does it include socio-cultural elements when discussing Malay forests. A more detailed commentary on the socio-cultural elements of Malay forest can be found in *An Analysis of Malay Magic* by Kirk Micheal Endicott (1970). Endicott explains the mystical meaning of the forest and its impact on Malay customs by stating:

Temporary excursions into the natural spheres are launched for such purposes as hunting, fishing, seeking camphor wood and simply travelling. Charms may be used, however, to shore up the last line of defence – the human body. Offerings are usually made before an expedition embarks and are repeated regularly during the excursion. (Endicott 1970, 117)

He highlights the *sēmangat* (soul) or *hantu* (demon or evil spirit) that inhabited the Malayan forest in pages 106, 114 and 119. Also, the spells of Malay magic can be retrieved from page 126 where he mentioned the illness caused by the Spectre Huntsman.

For those concerned with the conservation of Malayan forest, *Nature Conservation in Western Malaysia 1961*, published by the Government of Strait Settlements in Singapore who were supervised by the Forest Department, Land Office and Forest Reserves, is a good read. This book explores issues in the protection of the Malayan rainforest and the wildlife habitat. The book includes vivid illustrations for the conservation of lands, rivers, ranges and caves. The book also includes details of the wildlife residing in national parks including tigers, birds, rhinos,

*seladang* and the marine ecosystem like coral reefs. While *In Malay Forest* focuses on Malay customs and folk stories on the forest, *Nature Conservation in Western Malaysia 1961* aims to create awareness in preserving public interest in Malayan nature. *Nature Conservation in Western Malaysia 1961* certainly will meet the expectations of readers who are keen to know the natural scenery of Malayan wildlife and conservation works during British Malaya.

Unlike other colonial writers like Kirk Michael Endicott, Walter William Skeat, J.M. Gullick and R.O. Winstedt who adopted pragmatic and ethnographic approaches to their writing, *In Malay Forests* reads like a more personal account of the lived experience and first-hand appreciation of Malay forests and associated customs. I truly recommend this book for the reader and researcher seeking to collect historical evidence on this subject. For lay readers, *In Malay Forests* is a light-hearted read with humorous anecdotes and fantastic customs that reflect the colonial perception of Malay forests and associated customs.

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