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**HUGH CLIFFORD AND FRANK SWETTENHAM:  
ENVIRONMENTAL COGNITION AND THE MALAYAN COLONIAL PROCESS**

by

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## INTRODUCTION

To the natural philosopher, the descriptive poet, the painter, and the sculptor, as well as to the common observer, the power most important to cultivate, and, at the same time, hardest to acquire, is that of seeing what is before him. Sight is a faculty; seeing an art. The eye is a physical, but not a self-acting apparatus, and in general it sees only what it seeks. Like a mirror, it reflects objects presented to it; but it may be as insensible as a mirror, and it does not necessarily perceive what it reflects (Marsh, 1974:15).

In the above quotation, George Perkins Marsh has successfully highlighted the importance of the subjective in "seeing". Without precisely labelling the process as a "cognitive" one, Marsh nevertheless recognised that people's perceptions and evaluations are significant filters in the understanding of any social "reality". In the same vein, Gailey (1982:ix) has also pointed out that people are not "mere reflections of a period. They impose their own order and vision upon their times". In this paper, we will focus specifically on this cognitive element; in particular, we have chosen two people of similar sex, nationality and professions, working in Malaya in the same period, to discuss the importance of their cognitive capacities in providing both similar and dissimilar perceptions of a country and its people. We will discuss Sir Hugh Clifford (1866-1941) and Sir Frank Swettenham (1851-1946), early British Residents<sup>1</sup> in Malaya, to highlight their historical perceptions of Malaya during the colonial period (Figure 1) as evident in their writings and to discuss the influences on these perceptions.

By centering on the "cognition" of writers, our object is to draw two important relations to light. First, we emphasise that writers are "historical witnesses" in the true sense of the term because they write about events, however minor, landscapes, people and personalities that they have perceived and evaluated. Despite the fact that Clifford and Swettenham are not classed as "major" writers in the same way that Hardy and Dickens are, we agree with Arthur Lovejoy that the historian of literature will find minor writers of importance. This is because

(t)he tendencies of an age appear more distinctly in its writers of inferior rank than in those of commanding genius. These latter tell of past and future as well as of the age in which they live. They are for all time. But on the sensitive responsive souls, of less creative power, current ideals record themselves with clearness (Lovejoy, 1936:19-20).

Certainly in the case of Clifford, his literary writings have been shown to cast light on, inter alia, the thoughts, attitudes, preconceptions and motivations of the isolated European administrator in early Malaya (Saw, 1969:ii, 3).

Second, the process of witnessing is strongly affected by the individual's power of perception and the influences that govern his/her perceptions. Our thesis is that writers are prisoners of their personalities, hostages of their cultures and products of their times. We will illustrate this in subsequent sections where we discuss Clifford's and Swettenham's

perceptions of Malaya and the influences on these perceptions.

#### HUGH CLIFFORD AND FRANK SWETTENHAM

Enough has been written biographically of these two British Residents (for example, Gailey, 1982; Chew, 1966) to make unnecessary any lengthy rehearsals here. Their ideas, evaluations and perceptions, however, have not been placed side by side for comparison and contrast, save for De V. Allen's (1964) work. As he pointed out, the two men shared some beliefs and assumptions, some of which were also fairly general among their contemporaries, while others departed from "mainstream" thinking. Conversely, both men sometimes held differing views from each other. In our following analyses, these similarities and differences between the two men will be highlighted where appropriate.

The Malayan experiences were to reveal for both Clifford and Swettenham their literary expressions and talents. Each produced one major non-fictional book of a historical nature. Clifford's (1904) Further India is a history of western explorations and expeditions in Southeast Asia. It reveals Clifford's erudition, his love for adventure and exploration, and his romance with the mysterious orient. Swettenham's (1920) book British Malaya is a historical narrative of the "origins and progress" of British influence in Malaya. In Swettenham's Malayan history book, the material reads like an autobiography.

The history of British Malaya was very much 'His Story', a nostalgic recounting of his personal experiences, his adventures and achievements. He wrote a history from an 'insider's' point of view in which he was as much the subject of historical inquiry. In writing their 'history books', Clifford (1904) and Swettenham (1920) revealed their own characters and biases. Clifford (1904) found his personal dreams of adventure and romance in Malaya through the adventures and explorations of other western 'filibusters' and 'bushwhackers' in Southeast Asia. Swettenham's (1920) history was not only a nostalgic outpouring for a retired colonialist, it betrayed his egocentric nature in trying to establish his role in the making of British Malaya.

Both administrators began producing 'fictional' works in the form of short stories in the 1890's. Of the two, Clifford was the more prolific, producing four novels and 80 short stories with settings mainly in Malaya (Roff, 1966:viii). Whether in the novels or short stories, neither writer wrote purely 'fictional works' based on imagination. Their stories were securely anchored in real Malayan settings that they had experienced. The characters of their stories, like the physical and cultural milieu, were also not a product of imagination; they were based on real persons, though they were given fictitious names. As Clifford himself pointed out, although his stories "wore the guise of fiction, (they were) for the most part relations of sober fact" (Gailey, 1982:33).

Unlike many of the western writers of their time who confined their stories to all-white characters (De V. Allen, 1964:43; Silverstein, 1985:130), Clifford and Swettenham based their stories on a wide ethnic cast comprising Malays, aborigines (Sakai and Semang), Chinese, Indians and Europeans. What was perhaps even more remarkable for their time at a period of 'high colonialism' (1870-1940) was their sympathetic feelings for the various ethnic groups. Certainly, there was little evidence of racial prejudice in their stories. Both authors portrayed each ethnic group with a fair share of heroes and villains.

#### **MALAYA: THE UNKNOWN, EXOTIC AND MYSTERIOUS**

One dominant theme that surfaces in the writings of both authors is the sense of romance and adventure that filled them in their explorations and travels across Malaya. They were excited by the prospect of discovering the unknown; they were intoxicated by the exploration of exotic and mysterious landscapes; and they were beckoned by the victorious feeling of conquering pristine lands. This is clearly evident in descriptions such as this:

Who can say what hidden marvels may await their coming? The kingdom of the Sleeping Beauty was not more mysterious than in this remote country, which has slumbered on through the centuries undisturbed by the noise and progress of the restless west (Clifford, 1929:104).

These perceptions are a product of several factors: their own

personalities; the nature of the Malayan environment; the nature of Malayan society; and the nature of the times.

Clifford and Swettenham revealed through their stories that they were romantic adventurers in the prime of heedless youth. They revealed a certain daring, a pioneering spirit, an adventurism, without which there would not have been stories of romance and tales of adventure to recall. They were ready to plunge into the unknown because "the supreme recklessness which is born of the energy and sublime self-confidence of youth was ours" (Clifford, 1926b:129).

At the same time, the very nature of the Malayan environment encouraged the perception and evaluation of a land offering romance and adventure. Many areas were untamed, untrodden and remote. Similarly, as British pioneers in Malaya, both Clifford and Swettenham were privy to a phase in Malayan history of native rule where lawlessness prevailed. Clifford (1916:61) focused his short stories on Malays who were a product of the "old, free, lawless days". In his stories of Raja Haji Hamid of Selangor and Kulop Sumbing of Perak, he seemed almost sympathetic towards those Malay adventurers who came to lawless Pahang because the British administration in Perak and Selangor had turned both states into "deplorably monotonous and insipid" places (Clifford, 1903a:57; 1916:56-64; 215-243).

Another factor which contributed to the romance of



exploration was the very primitive nature of travel in this period of Malayan history. Travel was not a sightseeing tour; it was very much an adventure, dangerous and difficult. The blistering heat and torrential downpours made travel even more miserable and challenging. "No pen can write, nor tongue can tell", lamented Swettenham in the misery he experienced during a rainstorm in the Perak jungles (Burns & Cowan, 1975:30).

#### **NATURE AND LANDSCAPE: PRISTINE DELIGHTS OR ECONOMIC RESOURCE?**

Another pervasive theme in Clifford's and Swettenham's writings is their vivid word paintings of nature, landscape and scenery. This sensitivity to nature and landscape reflects several influences on both authors. Their detailed depictions and emotional descriptions of imposing scenes indicate that both authors were obviously delighted with and fond of nature. Both authors also revealed their romantic inclinations in their love for pristine landscapes, jungle wilderness and idyllic scenes. These personal influences are supplemented by two other factors external to their characters. One was the fact that Malaya, at the time of their administrative sojourn, had much to offer in terms of pristine and idyllic landscapes. Second, as Clifford (1966:177-179) acknowledged, the very slow nature of travel in Malaya during this period allowed for quiet reflection and aesthetic appreciation of scenery. In particular, he contrasted the slow river travel of his Pahang days to the rapid train

journeys in Perak and Selangor, and lamented that people travelling by train could only provide a "poor conception of what a lively land it is through which they are hurrying".

Despite these common inclinations and influences, there was one glaring difference between the two authors' aesthetic appreciation of landscapes. While Clifford feared the progressive ruining of these beautiful scenes, Swettenham's evaluation of the Malayan landscapes was essentially based on its potential economic rewards, its natural resources, and its remunerative returns (Aiken, 1973:146-147). His appreciation of scenes may be likened to one's appreciation of a landscape painting -- a visual representation of forms, colours and textures. While there is no doubt that he was attracted to landscape aesthetics, it did not distract him from what he saw to be the ultimate end of colonialism -- landscape changes and 'improvements'. Hence, even while he aesthetically enjoyed the tropical forests, he was emotionally detached from them, equating them with "fallow" land awaiting agricultural replacement. At the same time, inheriting his father's love for hunting, Swettenham (1942:112-116, 137; 1967:32) indulged unashamedly in hunting game and shooting snipe in his veritable Garden of Eden.

Unlike Swettenham, Clifford enjoyed an almost transcendental experience with wilderness and pristine landscapes. His was a communion with nature. The wildness of

places and especially their "remoteness from humans" filled him with sublime feelings of awe, solemnity, mystery and sacredness (Clifford, 1916:371, 373). The exclusive privilege of witnessing such pristine jungles imparted to him a

feeling akin to that by which the newly initiated priest may be inspired when, for the first time, he lifts the veil that cloaks the inner temple of his worship; but here there is no grinning idol to dispel illusion, but rather a little glimpse vouchsafed to unworthy man of the vision of true God (Clifford, 1916:373).

In other words, Clifford saw the aesthetics of pristine nature and landscape as an end in itself. His perceptions of nature's wealth were not an evaluation of natural resources but rather the plenitude and diversity of tropical nature (Khong, 1983/84:38-39). It is ironic that though his argument for colonialism meant the obvious expansion of development in these wild areas, he feared the commercial and capitalistic rape of these pristine landscapes. In his writings, he demonstrates his suspicions of technological progress and his dilemmas between landscape development and change and his romantic urge for the conservation of the unfettered power, freedom, and beauty of wilderness. No story captures this better than "In Chains" -- the story of the "insolent freedom, the vigour, the complete, unrestrained savagery" of the Sempam River Falls which was tamed by the concrete dam created by humans. To Clifford (1916:358-388) the damming of the river meant that it was now "cribbed and confined" and "in chains". At the same time, the story had a wider symbolic meaning for Clifford. He surveyed the landscape

changes of material development and commercial progress that western society had brought and that he had in fact worked and striven for, and realised that he, like the dammed river, had lost his "vitality and freedom": "Together we had shared the wild life which we had known and loved in the past; together in the present we went soberly, working in chains" (Clifford, 1916:387-388).

In short, both extolled the beauties of nature and enjoyed its aesthetic attractions. However, the difference lay in that Swettenham believed in the possibilist credo of the role of humans in changing the face of the landscape. This role, in his view, was facilitated through colonialism. Clifford, on the other hand, was more transcendentalist in his concern for preserving pristine nature for posterity; to that end, he reflected the sentiments of present day ecologists and conservationists.

#### **UNDERSTANDING MALAY PSYCHE AND SOCIETY**

While both authors wrote about the character and cultural traits of many ethnic groups (Europeans, Chinese, Indians, aborigines), their definitions of the Malay character, of Malay customs, language, religion and culture were by far the most profuse.

If Clifford and Swettenham were attracted to Malaya and the

Malays because of the western stereotype of a mysterious, strange and cryptic East, they were indeed responsible also for stripping the country of this western myth and mystique by what they discovered and revealed of this people. The mystery of the Malay character excited their curiosity and aroused their inquisitiveness to discover the culture and disposition of this exotic race. In addition, their personal fascination with characters encouraged them to discover and understand the Malay (Clifford, 1903b:123; 166:56; Swettenham, 1967:207-208). Swettenham (1967:207) summed up best their sentiments when he stated categorically that "(t)he more complex the character, the more difficult it is to discover in all its workings, the more absorbing the study".

In their stories of Malays, Clifford and Swettenham demonstrated how Malays shared many of the ethical ideals and moral standards of western society. Hence, there was little difference between East and West on that count. Indeed, despite their western smugness and declarations of intellectual and cultural superiority (Clifford, 1966:206; Swettenham, 1920:330), both administrators were far from blind to the favourable qualities of the Malay. Using their own cultural values and ethical ideals, Clifford and Swettenham were able to see the Malays in culturally relative terms. Malays were courageous and trustworthy, polite and hospitable, frank and proud. In particular, Clifford admired the Malay peasant ideals of virtue and innocence, charm and courtesy, faith and nobility. They

underscored these favourable perceptions with stories of Malay heroism, self-sacrifice, courage and devotion (Swettenham, 1895:83-91; 1907:237; 1920:17, 140; 1942:52; 1967:16-18; Clifford, 1916:103-114, 272-298; 1929:140-169).

In their stories, both Clifford and Swettenham were in fact demythologizing the mysterious Malay character. Clifford's confident understanding of the mysterious Malay character and society was seen in the western historical perspective. To him, the Malay beliefs in evil spirits (jin, hantu, bajang), sorcery, witchcraft, were-tigers, love-potions, bomohs (medicine men) and pawangs (mediums) were not only elements of romantic and exotic Malay culture, they endorsed his belief that he was witnessing a thirteenth century medieval society from a nineteenth century vantage point (Clifford, 1916:40). In part, Clifford's recognition of medieval Malay society reflects his own old-world Roman Catholic castle and cottage upbringing (Roff, 1966:ix-x).

For Swettenham, the Malay was viewed as a comprehensible "constant" rather than an inscrutable "variable". The Malay was definable, simple, primitive, conservative, and resisted change.

Swettenham explained this within a broader generalization of easterners. Easterners were, to him, less complex than the products of western civilization. There were a thousand things of western culture that the easterner was "blissfully unconscious" (Swettenham, 1967:208). Swettenham (1967:208) also observed that there were greater similarities amongst Malays

than "there (were) between two westerns, even though they be of the same nationality". These similarities meant that Malays were more easily understood and more predictable:

The Malay mind follows one bent, as his scenery -- beautiful, and strange, and novel though it is to us - - follows one type, repeating itself throughout the whole of a vast area (Swettenham, 1967:208).

All this evidence added up to the fact that though the Malay appeared "mysterious", he was not beyond western comprehension as long as the westerner took time to learn the language, understand the customs, and secure their trust (Swettenham, 1983:172). So confident was Swettenham in his claims of understanding the Malay that he apologized to his readers in one of his stories, saying

If I have failed to bring you close to the Malays, so that you could see into his heart, understand something of his life, and perhaps even sympathise with the motives ... then the fault is mine (Swettenham, 1895:281).

Even the mysterious and difficult to define hypnotic phenomenon or "disease" called "latah" (Swettenham, 1895:64-82) and the bizarre and notorious "homicidal mania" called "amok" (Clifford, 1916:319-340; Swettenham, 1895:38-43) were not beyond western explanation and understanding. Malay amok was a result of someone dishonoured, rather than one gone mad. In similar circumstances, a westerner would have committed suicide, but this act is unacceptable to Malays. Clifford explained that because the object of amok was self-destruction, the amok usually kills and destroys people closest to him. The first to

be murdered is always the spouse because the amok does not want him/her to be a widow/widower (Clifford, 1916:321).

Of all the negative Malay traits, few are more the subject of perennial stereotyping than Malay laziness (Alatas, 1977). However, Clifford and Swettenham went some way to question this western notion (Clifford, 1929:88-90; Swettenham, 1920:139, 304). For example, Clifford (1966:179) revealed his position when he remarked that one would hesitate to join the "loud-mouthed chorus" that "the Malays are the laziest people that inhabit God's earth" after he witnessed 25 Malays paddling his boat non-stop for 26 hours to overcome the barriers of distrust. Even if they did not dispute this view at times, Clifford and Swettenham at best only mildly endorsed it. Even when accepting Malay laziness, both authors argued forcefully that it was a product of the tropical environment, something beyond human control. Their explanations of environmental determinism centered on three aspects. One was that bountiful tropical nature was very lavish, and food was easily obtained so that there was little inducement to work (Clifford, 1916:151; Swettenham, 1920:136-137). The second reason was that the enervating tropical climate "inclines the body to ease and rest, the mind to dreamy contemplation rather than to strenuous and persistent toil" (Swettenham, 1920:137). Third, Clifford (1916:151) saw these native behavioural qualities as an acceptable resignation of "eternal defeat" to the powerful and intimidating force of tropical nature.



Both administrators showed an adeptness and a liking for the Malay language. Indeed, they both worked together to provide a much needed dictionary of the Malay language, which they published in 1894 (Gailey, 1982:32). To Clifford (1929:87; 1966:47), Malay was a "beautiful", "elaborate" and "musical" language. Swettenham's (1920:169) fascination with Malay lay in the fact that Malays drew ideas, metaphors and injunctions from common things in everyday life to "season their conversation". Clifford, on the other hand, knew the important nuances in the use of Malay and employed it to his advantage. In his story "At the Court of Pelesu" in which he narrated the argument Jack Norris (a fictitious name for himself) had with the Sultan, Clifford (1966) showed his mastery of Malay and deep understanding of its culture. In front of the courtiers and raiyat (masses), Clifford (1966:81) showed how the young British political agent won his argument with the devious Sultan because In a discussion among Malays it is ever the man who can quote, not he who can argue, who carries off the palm of debate; and Norris knew that his speech, with its tags of old wise-saws drawn from the proverbial philosophy of the people, was well calculated to appeal to his audience.

If Clifford showed an affinity for non-material aspects of Malay culture, Swettenham in his writings revealed a sensitivity to its material and observable aspects. In particular, two themes are evident in Swettenham's writings. At one level, his stories revolved around many Malay festivities, leisure and fun-

loving activities -- picnics, river fishing, turtle-egg hunting, dancing, bull fights, cock fights and boat racing (Swettenham, 1895:19-24; 31-37; 44-52; 211-226; 1967:154-166). Such fun-loving activities amongst good humoured natives only presented him with images of a tropical paradise where "when not actively engaged in amusing themselves they are lotus-eating, sometimes figuratively, sometimes in reality" (Swettenham, 1895:220).

At a second level, Swettenham also developed an interest in all sorts of Malay artifacts, arising perhaps from his father's mania for collecting all sorts of antiques and bric-a-bracs. His stories reveal his observances of Malay costume jewellery, dressing, and types of textiles (Swettenham, 1895:46-47, 118-119, 180-181, 215-216; 1967:46-47). He himself also admitted his attraction to Malay weapons, decorative kris, and ornate daggers. His greatest personal collection, however, was in Malay silver vessels.

The love for Malay language and cultural artifacts is further compounded with the intimate and deep understanding they have of the Malays (Clifford, 1966:207; Swettenham, 1895:281). However, each shows their close relationship with the Malays in different ways. Clifford (1916:ix; 1966:161-162) declares a couple of dozen of Malays amongst his personal friends. Swettenham (1967:207-209) does not claim Malay friends but he understands and appreciates them so well that he finds no cultural differences between easterner and westerner, contrasted

to the cultural conflicts amongst westerners themselves. Both however have become so involved in Malay culture that the natives have learned to look upon them "as one of their own people" (Clifford, 1966:208). In Malay terms, Clifford and Swettenham would be viewed as having "masuk melayu", or "become Malay". This clearly disputes Saw's (1969:4) argument that Clifford did not understand nor appreciate the "real worth and relevance of the deepest values in Malay culture", and that his knowledge of the Malays was confined to the "straightforward social facts of Malay life". Indeed, it would appear from the ways in which Clifford wrote about the subtle nuances of Malay language and social relationships that he did in fact transcend the merely superficial understanding of the Malay people.

Yet, despite their overall appreciation of Malay society, both men showed also differences in their views. Clifford's affection for the Malays was selective. He was suspicious and resentful of the Malay royalty who he viewed in medieval terms as being tyrannical and despotic (Wicks, 1979:66). Hence, he had great sympathy for the Malay peasants or "serfs" and was touched by their generosity, their community spirit and kind-heartedness. Kampong scenes with their 'noble peasants' provided for Clifford (1983a:241) "the making of a very Garden of Eden in these Malayan Lands, had only the serpent, in the form of the dominant classes, been excluded from the demesne". Yet, Clifford's sympathy for the Malay masses did not halt his criticisms of the way they bullied the primitive jungle folk

(the Sakais). For centuries, he observed, these wretched savages have been "plundered, outraged, and oppressed" by the Malays (Clifford, 1916:176, 229, 269; 1983a:242).

Unlike Clifford, Swettenham rarely criticised the Malay royalty. Two reasons may be offered for Swettenham's position. One was that he never really saw the dichotomy between the royalty and masses in Clifford's feudalistic terms. Perhaps he lacked Clifford's historical perspective and hence was less able to equate native rule with the feudalism and tyranny of the Middle Ages. Even in references to the royalty-masses dichotomy, Swettenham accepted the native order with little disquiet because he viewed it as part of Malay political culture. "The people hardly count", he wrote in his story of the British war in Perak. "They are passive and recognise that they live to obey their leaders" (Swettenham, 1895:252). Second, unlike Clifford, who identified with the hoi polloi and jungle savages, Swettenham seemed to enjoy the company of Malay royal families (Swettenham, 1895). Swettenham certainly relished such distinguished company, especially when he was the only white man around. To underscore his exclusive insights of the Perak royalty's festivities, he warned future travellers that they would meet with disappointment if they were searching for such "displays": "You cannot, in the language of western culture, put a penny in the slot and set in motion the wheels of the barbarous Eastern figure" (Swettenham, 1895:226).

## EVALUATING COLONIALISM

Because they were grassroots administrators advancing the cause of British colonialism in Malaya, their perceptions and evaluations of colonialism provide historic insights at a very pertinent phase of Malayan history. In their writings, both authors leave us a sampling of their feelings regarding the objectives and arguments for colonialism; the methods of translating colonialism; the difficulties and criticisms of advancing colonialism; the impacts of colonialism on native society; and the success of colonialism.

The success and failure in the advance of colonialism was dependent on the motivation and enthusiasm of grassroots administrators like Clifford and Swettenham (Savage, 1984:282-289). Indeed, as Gailey (1982:ix) pointed out, "the role of the 'man on the spot' has always been considered a crucial, even though sometimes a random, factor in explaining the domination of one polity over another." What inspired these grassroots administrators? What induced them? Clifford and Swettenham might have come to Malaya with textbook or government white paper objectives for colonialism, but their stories revealed how their perceptions of the natives and country influenced their rationalization for colonialism.

For Clifford, nothing incensed him and reaffirmed his

belief in colonialism more than the decadent native rule. In numerous stories, he ventilated freely his disgust for the feudalistic nature of native rule. Living in an age of enlightenment and liberalism, Clifford found the native system of despotism and tyranny a justification for colonialism. He was certain that the native Malays were incapable of good government (Saw, 1969:iv) and colonial rule was in his eyes a means of freeing the Malay masses and giving the Malays "self-government" (Clifford, 1916:xi; 1966:xvii).

Unlike Clifford's "narrow and idealistic" objectives (Wicks, 1979:68), Swettenham (1942:102-103) saw the broader economic and political objectives for colonialism. In his explorations, he became more convinced that Malaya was a "mine of wealth", agriculturally and minerally. To exploit this wealth, he saw four important requisites of British rule: to provide peace, order and security; to open up the means of communication; to introduce a working population; and to entice people to invest in the new enterprises (Swettenham, 1942:102).

Whether it was Clifford's ideal of freeing the Malay masses from feudal rule or Swettenham's economic and political motives, both administrators were also concerned with regenerating the "unregenerate Malays" (De V. Allen, 1964:55-60). Both saw the regeneration of the Malay in terms of greater personal liberty and a better, cleaner and happier life.

To publicise their objectives for colonialism, both authors wrote increasingly to convince their politicians and masses back home about the need for British rule and to silence the critics of British imperialism. They leave sufficient reminders for their readers that as front line witnesses of the Malayan experience and with their Malay expertise, they were qualified judges for the colonial advance. While both authors wrote for public consumption regarding the colonial process, Swettenham wrote in a pompous and egoistical fashion as the qualified authority (De V. Allen, 1964:54-55). Clifford (1916:xi), on the other hand, wrote as an emotional romantic trying to "inspire" the reader to "see the weak protected" and the "wrongs avenged" as he had been inspired to do.

To achieve their objectives for colonialism, both Clifford (1966:207) and Swettenham (1942:102) advocated close personal ties between the administrators and the local people (rulers and ruled). Swettenham brought across this point in a poignant manner in his story of James Birch's assassination. Though he upheld that Birch was assassinated solely and entirely for political reasons, and was sympathetic to the Malays, he had misgivings about Birch's relationships with the Malays. He regretted that Birch, ignorant of the Malay language and insensitive to Malay culture, was unable to detect the severity of the crisis at the village where he was assassinated; he failed to recognise the hostility of the people and the abusive language used. Instead, he chose to have a bath in a river

amidst all the turmoil.

Clifford, in advocating the need for close ties between the people and administrator, chose to emphasize this point in nostalgic recountings of his early Pahang days; perhaps as Wicks (1979:69-70) suggested, the ideal phase of his administrative career. This was a phase he highlighted in his story of the Court of Pelesu (Pahang), where he emphasized that it was only by intimacy and good fellowship amongst Malays that a "European can really learn what manner of men they are" (Clifford, 1966:56). Later, he lamented at the sad state of affairs because he saw the golden phase of British-Malay intimacy being eroded (Clifford, 1926b:6-7; 1966:266-267).

What was the impact of colonialism on Malay society? Both authors were sensitive to the great social changes that the Malays had to cope with as a result of British rule. They saw the conservative nature of Malay culture and the Malay's strict adherence to custom as a major point of difficulty and danger in colonial advances. Swettenham's (1895; 1907) apprehensions of pushing for change in Malay society were reflected in his story of Birch's assassination. Fully aware that Malays were culturally conservative, he noted that Birch's restless persistence for reforms was a crime in Malay eyes because "every change is regarded by the Malay with suspicion and distrust" (Swettenham, 1895:230). Clifford was equally cautious and at times ambivalent as to whether the regeneration of the Malays



was possible. On the one hand, he acknowledged the Malay's absolute adherence to custom. In many of his stories, he reminded his readers that adat or custom is "the fetish of the Malay" (Clifford, 1916:208; 1966:190). "Let our children die rather than our customs" is the familiar Malay saying that sums up the Malay detest for change and innovation (Clifford, 1983b:227). On the other hand, accepting a social Darwinist view of progressive change, Clifford (1966:12) sympathized with the violent and sudden changes that Malays had to contend with.

The British were trying to crush into 20 years in Malaya what energetic Europe took six centuries to accomplish. He cautioned that one could not change a medieval society into nineteenth century society without social problems:

The Malay whose proper place is amidst the conditions of the Thirteenth century, is apt to become morally weak and seedy, and to lose something of his robust self-respect, when he is forced to bear Nineteenth-Century fruit (Clifford, 1966:12).

While both Clifford (1929:192) and Swettenham (1942:103, 140) applauded the material and tangible benefits of Malayan development due to British rule, they were less in agreement and more defensive as to whether colonialism had improved the Malay.

In his book on the history of British Malaya, Swettenham (1920), the unrepentent colonialist, remained firm in his conviction that the British had not only improved the lives of the Malays but also of all nationalities. The Malays in particular, "the people of the country", had benefitted from British rule because they had "an independence, a happiness and

a prosperity which they never knew before" (Swettenham, 1920:305). However, Swettenham recognised that there were other qualities in the Malay character that had not been regenerated even with British influence. Yet, he chose not to see it as a failure of British rule, adopting instead a philosophical view of what he felt were acceptable Malay cultural traits. In particular, he countered the criticisms that the Malays were still lazy and useless. Malay laziness, he maintained, was a product of tropical environmental determinism. As to the question of Malay uselessness, he viewed it as a reflection of the Malay easy-going and non-materialistic lifestyle which he found acceptable and benign:

They do not strive for riches, but they are probably as happy and contented as other people who regard life differently, and it is questionable whether we should deserve their thanks if we could teach them the tireless energy, the self-denying frugality of the Chinese. And for what? Often in order that their children, or the adopted children, may squander, in a few years, what their fathers have collected by a lifetime of toil. You cannot make people virtuous by Act of Parliament, and you cannot graft the Chinese nature to the Malay body (Swettenham, 1920:305).

In the capitalist and colonial context of progress and development, the easy-going and non-materialistic Malay qualities confronted Swettenham with debatable issues of British success in regenerating the Malay and whether the pace of development might run out of tune with Malay aspirations.

In contrast to Swettenham's firm conviction in the merits of British rule for the Malays, Clifford in his writings

expressed apprehension and doubt. His uncertainties of the positive colonial influence on the Malays stemmed from his own romanticized idealization of the Malay and his fears and disapproval of denationalization. Despite his belief in western "racial superiority" (Clifford, 1926b:27), Clifford did not believe that noble conduct, courageous acts, loyalty and devotion, generosity and kind-heartedness were the monopoly of whites. Furthermore, betraying his incorrigible romantic nature, he confessed to his liking of the Malays in their "truculent untamed state". He lamented that 20 years of British rule in the west coast of Malaya had made the Malays there "sadly dull, limp, and civilized" and that their wooings had lost their "spice of danger" (Clifford, 1966:14). To substantiate further his love for the "unfettered freedom" of the semi-civilized people, Clifford (1916:362) drew attention to the bustle of European life and technological progress which he claimed had restricted human freedom and made people "less human and more mercilessly mechanical".

The more devastating effect of colonialism on native society in Clifford's eyes was the process of denationalization -- a product of the colonial grafting of western culture through its English education and codes of behaviour. He saw the process of colonialism leading a train of cultural changes (western language, tastes, literature, art, religion) in which natives increasingly became aliens in their own societies. Though Clifford dealt also with the process of denationalization

of whites in his stories of Frank Austin and Maurice Curzon (Kandiah, 1972:9-15), it was the denationalization of the natives that he found to have harmful effects. This process of denationalization is told in his tragic novel A Prince of Malaya (Clifford, 1926a). The story revolves around a Malay prince Saleh who is taken to England for an education, and on returning to his Malay kingdom, suffers from a spiritual crisis of identity, becomes a cultural misfit in his own society, and is severed from his own people by his English education and prejudices. In the end, Saleh becomes bitter against the English, leads a jihad against them and fails. He salvages his honour in Malay style by running amok, and is killed by an English officer who poignantly exclaims: "May God forgive us for our sorry deeds and for our glorious intentions" (Kandiah, 1972:16-17).

### CONCLUSION

The importance of Clifford's and Swettenham's stories and non-fictional works lie not in fine literature, though Clifford has some claim to works of "notable literary interest" (Lee, 1981:31) and was regarded sometimes by his literary peers as a "solid, sometimes inspired craftsman" (Gailey, 1982:37). Rather, their writings are important for various other reasons.

First, their stories are repositories of historical documentation in two major ways. They provide insights into an

'existential' and social history of Malaya; and they document individual perspectives of a country's political history. In the writing of history, many scholars have focused on traditional concerns with personalities and events. Malayan history, and particularly Malayan colonial history has been studied all too often from these same perspectives. Certainly, biographies have been written of chief figures and major events; and Clifford and Swettenham have been subject to their fair share of scrutiny for biographical purposes (for example, Gailey, 1982 and Chew, 1966). Often, such historical research are culled from standard sources like government white papers and colonial reports. Here, we have chosen to examine Clifford's and Swettenham's stories as accounts of personal experiences and involvement and to derive from them an 'existential history' based on a 'lived-in' world. What their stories depict is an experiential landscape with all the details of quotidian life, not only of themselves but also of the native societies with which they lived. In an era when photography was in its infancy, their vivid word-pictures, complete with sensual descriptions provide invaluable insights. In particular, both Clifford and Swettenham's adeptness with the Malay language and their almost complete cultural submergence into Malay culture yield some of the most interesting insights into Malay life, customs, beliefs and superstitions. Without realising it, they were in fact amateur anthropologists adopting participant observation to record a plethora of Malay cultural activities. What Clifford and Swettenham have done for Malay culture is to

put in writing an oral tradition of folklore, folk tales and myths that even the present day Malay might find a revelation. Furthermore, their definition of the nineteenth century pre-colonial Malay provides an important means by which comparisons can be made with present-day Malay society. In particular, the comparisons of past (as recorded by them) and present (current academic research) Malay society tell us what aspects of Malay culture have undergone evolutionary change. In his own time, Swettenham (1967:161-162, 166, 172) already noted the demise of certain Malay lifestyles and pastimes due to western cultural influence, such as cock-fighting; areca-nut chewing; kris carrying; blackening and filing of teeth; grotesquely-tied headkerchiefs.

From the perspective of political history, Clifford's and Swettenham's writings reflect their importance as historical witnesses because of the very significant period in which they undertook their administrative careers. In the last 30 years of the nineteenth century, Malaya underwent tremendous changes, politically, economically and socially. Both Clifford and Swettenham recognized the historic roles of their administrative tenure. What they "faithfully reproduced" in their stories was the lawless atmosphere and "conditions of life as they existed in the Malayan Peninsula before the white men took a hand in the government" (Clifford, 1916:vii). Unabashedly, Clifford (1926b:4-5) declared his stories of historical value because they contained "enshrined records of a vanished past". But the

historical importance of their writings was not confined only to the pre-British phase of Malayan history, it also extended to the events that they described in the course of advancing the British Residential system. Both men were indeed privy to an extremely dynamic phase of Malayan history at a time of great landscape and social changes.

Because these observances of political, social and 'existential' history are based on the perceptions of two people, some may question the validity of these discussions from a "factual" historical perspective. Since no two people are likely to see the same thing in similar light, there is undoubtedly a degree of subjectivity involved. Despite all their declarations of historic fidelity and faithful portrayals of their experiences, their writings are glaringly emotional, passionate and subjective. Are they of any importance then? We emphatically believe they are. At the "ground" level, Clifford and Swettenham played leading roles in the process of colonialism. As such, they are as much a subject of academic enquiry as the western and native characters whom they described and analysed. Through their subjective writings, which publicly displayed their emotions, fears, biases, prejudices and doubts, historians may see better the "inner workings" and character of both men. The historian, Emily Sadka (1969:204-213), used effectively their "impressionistic pieces" in her characterization of these Residents. Through Swettenham's writings, she discovered a man of tremendous ebullience and

energy, egoistical, self-confident, ambitious (though tampered with political realism) and possessing a good sense of judgement. He also had an easy relationship with Europeans and Malays alike (Sadka, 1969:209).

Given their close understanding of the Malay and given their significant roles in furthering colonial rule in Malaya, Clifford's and Swettenham's specific conclusions regarding Malay society deserve closer attention. From hindsight, an evaluation of these specific conclusions reveal them to be partially correct. They were right at that time in believing that Malay animism, spirit worship and Hindu influences made Islam amongst peasants "woefully slack and casual" (Clifford, 1916:343). But even Clifford (1916:343) erred in believing that the Kelantanese Malays were the "dullest and least fervent" -- certainly they would have been unpromising material for a religious revival in Asia. Contemporary Muslim fundamentalism in Kelantan as in other parts of Malaysia was certainly something both Clifford and Swettenham could never have imagined.

Clifford's and Swettenham's thesis that colonialism could only succeed with greater rapport, greater knowledge and greater understanding of the native, including the language, customs and culture, showed that they were prisoners of their own time -- a pioneering phase when grassroot administrators like themselves had to go out and win support from the Malay Sultans and the masses. The onus, as they rightly perceived at that time, was



on the British official to win over the native population. But over the decades, the western cultural onslaught spread, creating in turn a new generation of English speaking, anglicized natives (Malays, Chinese, Indians and Eurasians) who filled the middle ranks of the civil and uniform services. The white Malayan colonialist of the twentieth century had no more reason to culturally submerge himself in native culture and language to make himself understood. They had new native "converts" who acted as the bridge between themselves and the masses.

We take to task the argument by Clifford and Swettenham that colonialism and particularly western cultural imperialism would result in a deculturalization and denationalization of natives. From hindsight, it seems evident that the native acculturation of western language and culture was less disruptive than both administrators had anticipated and portrayed in their tragic stories.

Swettenham's insistence that British colonialism in Malaya is for the Malays because they are the "people of the country" rings a familiar tune in independent Malaysia where the Malays have been singled out for preferential treatment because they are bumiputras or "sons of the soil". He further advocated the importance of ensuring that the tempo of development should be in tune with the Malay aspirations of life as he feared the Malays would be left behind in their own country. Neither

Clifford nor Swettenham was realistic about solving this problem. They defended the Malay easy-going and non-materialistic ethos as acceptable and benign, and yet encouraged colonial development and capitalistic undertakings largely in European, Chinese and Indian hands. Indeed, through the decades, the gap between the progress of other Asians and the Malays only continued to increase, leaving one of the tragic legacies of colonialism that remains till today a sensitive problem.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the perceptions and evaluations of Malaya and various aspects of life there of two colonial administrators, Sir Hugh Clifford (1866-1941) and Sir Frank Swettenham (1851-1946). In particular, we discuss their perceptions and evaluations as derived from their literary works, highlighting similarities and differences between these two men. We contend that their literary works are repositories of historical documentation, providing insights into the 'existential' and social history of Malaya as well as individual perspectives of a country's political history. Specific attention is paid to their view of Malaya as exotic and mysterious; their evaluation of Malaya's nature and landscape as pristine delights and/or economic resource; their understanding of Malay psyche and society; and their appraisal of British colonialism in Malaya.

i. The British Residential System in Malaya involved the sending of Residents from Britain to Malaya from 1874 onwards. In the first instance, these Residents were sent to Perak, Selangor and Sungei Ujong in 1874-75 and subsequently to Negri Sembilan (incorporating Sungei Ujong) and Pahang in 1887-88. In the original treaties, Residents were meant to advise Malay rulers but in many instances, they effectively ruled.