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Orang-utans, Tribes, and Nations: Degeneracy, Primordialism, and the Chain of Being

Gareth Knapman

This article explores how early anthropological writing (1830s and 1840s) on the nation faced the question: How natural was the nation? In exploring development of the nation from the tribe, colonial ethnological writers in Southeast Asia also explored the limits of primordialism. Debates on the humanity of the orang-utan represented the search for these limits. The theme of degeneracy underpinned these connections. Degeneracy was a complex belief that connected the civilized nation to the savage tribe. Two methodologies underpinned this discourse: scientific rationality and imagination. Many contemporary studies focus on how scientific rationality created distance between the colonized and the colonizer. Imagination, however, also connected the civilized to the savage. These connections occurred amid the divisions caused by colonial rationality. This was a romantic view of identity, which connected identity to nature. In doing so, a question of primordialism emerged: What were the primordial limits of the nation?

Keywords: Orang-utans; Nationalism; Ethnicity; Anthropology; Evolution; Colonialism

Race and biology altered European perceptions of Southeast Asian peoples. A symptom of this transformation was the traveller’s perception of the orang-utan. The orang-utan had long been a point of discussion for evolutionary theorists. By the 1830s, few ethnologists believed the orang-utan was a degenerate or primitive human. That is not to say that people did not wonder about the possibility of a missing link between orang-utans and humans. These speculations often resulted in derogatory connections about the Negros’ relationship to the orang-utans. Mid-nineteenth-century travel writers...
often reflected on this point. These travel writers linked the hunter-gatherer tribes of Southeast Asia to this perceived missing link (Boon 1990: 19–27).

The nineteenth-century travel writer provided a general commentary to readers on the culture and environment of the lands he travelled through (Bridges 2002: 53). Immersed within discussions on the environment and nature, ethnology reflected the wider debates on the national character. These debates linked the nation to the environment. The result was that the travel writer speculated about the environment’s impact on the identity of the people that he/she was observing. James Boon (1990) characterizes this as the theme of “man” and “nature”. For Boon, an example of this tradition was the writings of Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace was a naturalist and a travel writer; he was also a leading scientific theorist. Wallace theorized evolution simultaneously, yet separately, to Charles Darwin. Wallace (1962 [1869]) made detailed ethnographic descriptions of the people he saw during his travels in Southeast Asia. Wallace also gave the first detailed scientific study of the orang-utan. Boon (1990: 16) saw a thematic link between Wallace’s work on ethnology and the orang-utan, concluding that:

The theme of man and nature in Wallace extends beyond issues of natural selection and vagaries in distribution and diffusion. He depicts more than simple contradictions (or discourses) between natural regions and the dispersal of cultures. In special moments we shall savour, Wallace suggests an affinity between human and animal groups, but at the point where the latter transforms into nature’s most wondrous extremes.

Boon’s point is that this affinity between the orang-utan and tribal society was implicit. The fact that it was implicit meant it had loaded implications. The implicit connection was a discourse connecting indigenous people to apes. Discourse focuses on assumptions surrounding a particular issue. These assumptions, sometimes called norms, frame the issue and dictate the conclusions before the issue is analysed. Boon’s argument, therefore, was that although Wallace and his contemporaries dismissed the orang-utan as an exact missing link, their discourse presents tribal societies as being affiliated with the orang-utan. Wallace and his contemporaries could explicitly dismiss connections between tribal society and the orang-utan, but implicitly make such connections through discourse. Boon (1990: 24–25) goes on to argue:

Neither Indonesian peoples themselves nor the history of their documentation cooperated very well with this negative quest. Earlier “missing link” formulations tended to usher the famous orang-utan (orang hutan = forest dweller or wild man) toward the human as much as to push human groups down. Reputed cannibalism cropped up in the literate Battak of Sumatra; headhunting was hard to isolate. And notorious amok-running and ritual suicide (as in the courts of Bali and Java) occurred at every level of civilization and “savagery”.

The themes Boon identified (the “missing-link”, cannibalism, headhunting, and the amok) were all favourite topics of nineteenth-century European commentary on Southeast Asia. As Boon (1990: 25) argues, these themes presented an image of degeneracy:

No two criteria of degeneracy—physiological, psychological, cultural—pointed precisely in the same direction. No non-literate people perfectly filled the bill of the Renaissance’s “diabolical”, the Enlightenment’s taxonomic “missing link”, or the social evolutionist’s
“beastliest and oldest”. Over the centuries Indonesian cultures refracted changes of degeneracy whose symptoms proved difficult to “fix”, because their symbols kept dispersing.

The depiction of tribal and non-European peoples as inferior was a common aspect of colonial thought. Used in contemporary cultural critique of empires, nations, and ethnicity, the term the “other” represents the separateness of the barbarian from the civilized (who is always the “self”). These contemporary arguments explore, in different ways, the “other” as the binary opposite to the civilized. The summary of these arguments is that the civilized “self” projects the “other” as the essential opposite to civilisation and, therefore, the other is a degenerate of the civilized. In this article, I am focusing on the connections between the civilized and the barbarian through the idea of the nation.

As a term, the “nation” is not easy to define. In today’s world everybody belongs to a nation, but the structure, size and cultural context of nations varies considerably. Benedict Anderson (1991) referred to the nation as the “imagined community”. Anderson’s definition has precision, yet it also allows for the ambiguities already mentioned. By emphasizing the “imagined” aspect of the “community”, Anderson defined the nation as a constructed cultural entity. The nation, therefore, becomes a common culture connecting individuals within an imagined community. Shared values define the community, and these shared values give the community an identity. This is a socially constructed vision of the nation.

The problem, however, is that an “imagined community” could be any social community. For example, an “imagined community” could be a nation or a society of bird lovers. The imagined community gains its identity as a nation courtesy of its relationship to the idea of state. Earnest Gellner’s (1964, 1983) argument is that nationalism forms the nation. Nationalism becomes the ideology for the attainment of the nation-state. This argument has a strong explanatory value. It bypasses much of the ethnic heritage that became incorporated within the narrative of a nation’s history. Anthony Smith views the ethnic legacies within nations as central to the nature of nations (1986). Smith and others argue that there was a continuation of earlier ethnic identities into modern national identities. Smith strongly separates his approach, which he terms the “ethno-symbolist approach”, from other approaches that emphasize ethnicity. Smith terms these other approaches as being primordialist. The “ethno-symbolist approach” concerns itself “with the myths, symbols, memories, and values of ethnic communities and nations” (Smith 2004: 19). For Smith, these are “the main elements of cultural continuity and distinctiveness”. His approach is to outline the transmission of collective memories through long stretches of time. These memories provide a continuity between an ethnic group (which Smith refers to as “ethnie”) and the modern nation.

This ethno-symbolist approach is distinctly different from the primordialist approach. In the primordialist view, Smith (2004: 5–6) argues that “nations cannot be regarded as either ‘ancient’ or ‘modern’, for they stand outside historical time, being coeval with humanity”. For the primordialist the nation is natural, it is a matter of biology and not history. Smith (2000: 4; 2004: 6–7) focuses purely on deliberate attempts to link the nation to biology or from “cultural givens” that represent a cultural
primordialism. Cultural primordialism in Smith’s view “rests on perception, cognition, and belief”. Because of this, he maintains “it is individual members who assume that these cultural features are givens, who attribute overwhelming importance to these ties, who feel an overpowering sense of coerciveness, and so on” (Smith 2000: 21). This is a very narrow view of primordialism, which, by implication, connects primordialism to irrationality. This view of primordialism creates hard theoretical definitions of primordialism. In doing so, we miss unintended subtle primordialising actions which naturalize the nation. The definitions of the nation, that late-twentieth-century theorists use, were not constant. In the nineteenth century, there was considerable ambiguity between the tribe, the nation and the state. To make these definitions more complex it was still common to refer to animal species as tribes or nations. This use of language created a primordial legacy. Mid-nineteenth-century ethnology was an attempt to determine the origins of the nations and the limits to what was human. Modern ideas of the nation emerged in the context of “this” primordializing tendency. This tendency naturalized the nation, but it also blurred the lines between the nation and nature: between the human and the animal.

According to Smith (2004: 26), a key aspect of modern nations is their search for “roots”, which he defines as an “antiquity’ that is created to serve vital social and cultural needs”. It is the search for “authentic myths and memories” which “encapsulate the ‘origins’ and ‘essence’ of the national identity”. Smith (1999: 10) attributes historians as having played a central role in this search for a nation’s roots. Historians provided the “delineation of the nation and [assisted] in the rediscovery, transmission, and analysis of its [the nation’s] ethnic heritage”. A key aspect in this rediscovery of the ethnic heritage was providing an explanation of the nation’s collective past. The modern civilized nation had to have an origin. Mythical pasts were easy surrogate origins for nations, but the Enlightenment historians were eager to attribute the beginnings of nations to fact and not myth.

To the Enlightenment historian, similarities between the civilized nation and the savage barbarian tribe were clearly visible. These similarities were group cohesion, community and a sense of collective identity. These Enlightenment histories connected the nation to the tribe. David Hume’s (1983 [1778]) History of England and Edward Gibbon’s (1997 [1788]) Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire are classic examples of this tradition. Both historians gave the origins of European nations as having emerged from the Roman Empire’s tribal periphery. The barbarian was a historical phenomenon, and the classic example was that of the Germanic Saxon tribes which overran the Roman Empire. In doing so, these tribes created the nucleus of the modern German, French and English nations. With the Scottish Highlanders being considered barbarians, the barbarian was also then a contemporary reality. By linking the nation to the barbarian, the barbarian was the “other” and the primordial “self” (Pocock 2005: 13). Two forms of the primordial self were emerging. There was the atavistic primitive “self” and the natural “self”. The natural self was the idea of the “natural man”; this was the “self” as part of nature. The atavistic primitive “self” was blood-thirsty, self-interested, and free. Pocock, however, argues that the idea of the “natural man” was clouded by the idea of the “sub-human”. Primordialism in the context of
global expansion created a crisis in identity. Pocock (2005: 3–4) elaborates on this crisis:

As Europeans, who believed they had no prehistory but that of patriarchal shepherd
clans, took to the sea and mastered every arm of the global ocean, they everywhere
encountered peoples who might be thought hunter-gatherers, or who practised those
blends of village horticulture and fishing or hunting we now have in mind when we use
the term “indigenous” … There ensued a complicated and disastrous history in which
the will to describe such peoples as “savage” (and so sub-human) was reinforced by
stadial theory, for the reason that … progress … did not seem to have occurred outside
Eurasia.

Pocock raises the historiographical point that medieval ideas of patriarchy—rather than
modern ideas of history— informs early modern European perceptions of the past.
The modern introduction of history to explain the past made the savage a duality. The
idea of the savage, in historical intellectual thought, fed into a hypothesis of contractual
and social theory. As a cultural symbol, the savage became a derogatory mark of primitivism
feeding into ideas of race (Bindman 2002: 42–46; Pocock 2005: 3–4). The savage
became a universal stage of social development, whilst also being a cultural identity. This
meant that the condition of the savage was a universal tabula rasa, but the (“savage”)
condition varied from region to region. As David Hume (1983 [1778]: 15–16) main-
tained, the German barbarians were distinctly different from other ancient barbarians
and the savages of the New World, the central difference being that the German barbar-
ians founded nations, whilst the savages of the New World were just savages. The mode
of production determined the condition of the savage and the values that this condition
reflected. By intertwining the two conceptions of the savage (the savage as an economic
model and the savage as a cultural expression), the savage became an ideology that was
superimposed on indigenous societies (Meek 1976; Ellingson 2001; Bindman 2002;
Pocock 2005). The result was disastrous. These societies were both idealized and
derided.

This article examines two ways in which the nation was linked to the tribe. These
links were the savage and the barbarian. These streams are observed by exploring nine-
teenth-century ethnology and natural history in British-controlled areas of Southeast
Asia. By tribalizing the nation, culture became bound within a “chain of being” to
primordialism. This was distinctly different to earlier conceptions of civilisation versus
barbarism. The nation was seen to begin with the barbarian. All European nations had
barbarian histories. These histories began with the barbarian tribes that overthrew the
Roman Empire and, rather than being excluded from the nation, barbarism was drawn
into the nation.

By naturalizing the nation through primordialism, new questions emerged that
focused on the primordiality of the nation. This article is split into three parts. The first
focuses on an 1830 attempt to theorize ethnology in Southeast Asia. This attempt to
theorize ethnology naturalized the nation within the two streams of the savage and the
barbarian. The second part proceeds to examine the extreme limits of primordialism
by examining nineteenth-century accounts of the orang-utan and the tribe. Finally, the
third part focuses on James Logan’s theorizing of ethnology and the nation in the
1840s. In each of these vignettes, the writers were primordializing the nation, and grappling with the consequences of doing so.

Theorizing Ethnology in Southeast Asia: Primordializing Culture and the Nation

On 16 January 1830, the first of three subsequent instalment articles appeared in the Government Gazette for Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca. The first article was written under the nom de plume of “Y” (1830a), it was entitled “Floreat Scientia et Literatura”. In the subsequent instalments the editor, or the author, decided to be more explicit in the title, and renamed the series “Sketch for a Literary Society at Penang” (1830b,c). Yet the title still did not fully embrace what the author was trying to convey. “Y” introduced his theme as follows:

The Asiatic Society of Calcutta affords a brilliant example of what may be achieved by talent and perseverance [sic], directed by judgment, and aided by an intimate acquaintance with the languages manners, and feelings of the people amongst whom inquiries are to be made. (Y 1830a)

The proposed focus of this society was broad, covering “Geography, Statistics, History, Laws, Literature”. It would also cover the productions of the various countries embraced under the general titles “Indo-Chinese and Malayan”. In doing so, it would examine “the languages, manners, arts and sciences existing amongst the Nations inhabiting so wide a range”. This was an orientalist project covering every aspect of Southeast Asian landscape and society. The author, however, stepped back from this broad project. He wished to limit his focus to what we would now refer to as ethnology, stating:

Led by the lights derived from language, and philosophical investigation, we may be enabled in time to arrive at rational conclusions regarding the origin and affiliation of the many interesting nations and tribes around us. (Y 1830a)

The nation and the tribe were the key themes running throughout the author’s prose. The purpose of this proposed society was to examine oriental nations. This included their origins and connections to each other. The author went on to argue that the purpose of the society was to gain a “fair picture of a national mind”. For the author, “Geography, Statistics, History, Laws, and Literature” were all pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of the “national mind”. These could be pieced together to reclaim nations from being “a blank in the History of the world”. To fill in these blanks, “Y” proposed the use of conjectural history.

We cannot dismiss the process of naturalizing the nation in Southeast Asia as a projection of the “other”. Our author was more nuanced and holistic than simple projections of the civilized and the barbaric.

They [the nations and tribes around us] will claim our regard as notions of our species which in many instances have attained to that peculiar stage of civilization where the traits of the savage, though not orientated entirely, are yet blended and softened by way of the conventional obligations and refinements existing in a more advanced stage of Society, and where the half grown mind revels [sic] on a literature of its own—one through which
may be caught glimpses of the science and literary acquisitions of the remaining ages.
(Y 1830a)

In his articles, “Y” outlined two methodologies for understanding the nation and its connection to the tribe. The first methodology was to employ language and philosophy to develop scientific and “rational conclusions regarding the origin and affiliation of the many interesting nations and tribes around us”. He saw the then recent developments in philology as an example of scientific methodology. The author gave the following example to illustrate this point: “the language of one of these tribes, which has, in process of time, grown up into a nation (the Siamese) has been found to prevail in the Khamti country lately discovered, or visited by Lieut. Wilcox”. Therefore, language and philosophy, or the theory of social development, became the objective mechanism by which the “origin and affiliations of … nations and tribes” and the “national mind” could be deduced.

Postmodern-influenced analysis of nineteenth-century anthropology holds that the employment of language and philosophy was a symptom of distance, whereby the colonizer presumed to know the oriental better than the oriental could know himself. Edward Said’s (1995 [1979]) argument on this point was that the colonizer believed they had rationality and told the colonized that they only had imagination. This belief was an ideology that kept the colonial and the oriental separate. There are many instances of this dichotomy. Proselytizers of ethnology, however, were very eager to use imagination. Imagination became our anonymous author’s second methodology. He argued that showing an interest in other peoples was a “notion of our species” and that “traits of the savage” still existed within the imperial culture, despite being “blended and softened by way of the conventional obligations and refinements existing in a more advanced stage of Society”. The methodologies of rational science and imagination became the tools to deduce the tribal origins of nations. It was the belief that the savage still existed within the civilized that enabled the civilized to use rationality. The savage was the common denominator between the tribe and the nation. The tribe was not the simple duality of the “other”; it was as much a reflection of the “self” as a reflection of the “other”.

The connection between the savage and the civilized, between the tribe and the nation, was the second methodology that our author (“Y”) outlined. In comparison with the scientific methodology, the second methodology was very unscientific, being a romantic methodology. “Y” mused on the possibilities of such an approach in the following manner:

We shall here find an imagination fruitful in metaphor and soaring to heights to which our colder rules forbid our ascending, yet in this very redundancy we shall discover matter [sic] of interest, since flights of fancy offer pretty fair pictures of a national mind.
(Y 1830a)

The romantic imagination emanating from the internal barbarian allowed the ethnologist to understand the comparative construction of the tribe and the nation. As the writer states, this methodology was against the “cold rules” of science. This demonstrates that the nation was being naturalized as a primal tribal condition, which was
universal. In naturalizing the nation, the anonymous author was grounding the naturalizing process to the primordial condition. For example, in describing the effects of political subjugation, on a nation he doesn’t actually name, “Y” observes: “such is the effect of slavery, that like the domesticated tenant of the forest, the human animal under it loses in a few generations the spirit which animated his free career” (Y 1830b). The author therefore linked the nation to the tribe and freedom. But above all, the author linked the nation to the animal condition. Therefore, in naturalizing the nation to the tribe, the “chain of being” interlined different forms of humanity—namely, the savage and the civilized. This produced dilemmas for ethnology, of which “Y” comments:

On the Malayan Peninsula the history and institutions of many petty states afford subjects for investigation, and it need scarcely be mentioned that the existence of woolly headed and negro featured tribes in the forests in our vicinity, and in the Islands of the Indian Archipelago, is a problem in the history of our Species [sic] which remains to be solved. The other aboriginal inhabitants too of these regions claim regard—those tribes which although differing little from the Malays in feature and external conformation yet speak a different language, and preserve a wild independence. (Y 1830c)

This is the classic example of the implicit link between Southeast Asian societies and nature through the missing link. The author discusses the “petty” Malay societies, then the “woolly headed … negro … tribes of the forests” and, finally, the “aboriginal inhabitants” with their “wild independence”. By discussing these as a block, “Y” created a “chain of being”. He connected these nations and tribes to the primordial core. In observing that the existence of primordial relics was “a problem in the history of our Species which remains to be solved”, “Y” was connecting himself to the “chain of being”. The savage and barbarian therefore were not totally the distinctive “other”. The “chain of being” connected the savage, the barbarian, and the civilized. They were all examples of the nation’s primordialism. This raised questions on the extent to which the nation could be primordially naturalized. Or, in other words, “how primitive was the nation?” It is at this point that debate on the orang-utan enters into perceptions of the nation.

**Orang-utans and Tribes**

The use of orang-utans in dehumanizing the local populations of Southeast Asia was interlinked with the primordializing stream of naturalization that occurred in the nineteenth century. This hierarchical vision of colonial society has been criticized for its racism many times before (Spivak 1988; Ashcroft et al. 1989; Boon 1990; Said 1995 [1979]; Bhabha 2004). It is fair to say that the introduction of a racial hierarchy (as a modern version of the “chain of being”) was a deliberate policy of the British and other European empires. It was, however, a naturalized ideology of the period and therefore unquestioned (Smaje 2000). The hierarchical “chain of being” served to legitimate and maintain power in the colonial world. These hierarchical mechanisms were not solely external, but were rooted in pre-existing endogenous prejudices that were transformed by the process of colonization (Cannadine 2002). The symbolism
surrounding the orang-utan was part of this process. Travel writers, naturalists, and philosophers cultivated the European image of the orang-utan. The accounts left of the orang-utan by Alfred Russel Wallace, Spencer St John, James Brooke and others reveal nineteenth-century British perceptions on connections between the tribe, barbarism, and nature.

Three basic stories constituted the travel writers’ repertoire on the orang-utan’s role in indigenous society, each of which accompanied the ubiquitous acknowledgement that this was a “Dayak story”, and therefore unreliable. This acknowledgement created an important dynamic that will be discussed later. The first and most detailed of these stories were tails of orang-utans attempting to form sexual relations with humans. The second were derogatory stories that spoke of wild tribes, with tails, which lived in the distant hills. The final narrative was one of alliance, wherein the orang-utans aided humans in different ways.

These stories came in a variety of different forms. Sometimes they indicated some form of alliance that protected the tribe in the mythic past. Spencer St John noted that in some Dayak communities it was “forbidden to kill … an orang-utan”. In one community he visited, the people maintained it was because when the community was “first settled at the hill on Banting, the orang-utan abounded there. Their enemies once came to attack the place, but were repulsed by the assistance of the orang-utans, who crowded to the edge of the fruit groves to glare on the strangers, and were probably mistaken for men” (St John 1862: 73). Similar beliefs can be found on the Malayan peninsula in relation to the orang-asli, which, according to colonial writers, were sometimes referred to as orang-utan by the Malays (Bourien 1865: 72–83; Favre 1865: 14; Thomson 1875). One reported orang-asli tradition of their origins was that:

They were all descended from two white apes—from two “ounka puteh”. The two ounka puteh, having reared their young ones, sent them into the plains, and there they perfected so well, that they and their descendents became men; but others, on the contrary, who returned to the mountains, still remained apes. (Bourien 1865: 73)

This observation was made by a French ethnologist in a paper to the London Ethnological Society, and he didn’t fail to make the obvious connection to evolutionary theory:

M. Bemailet, consul for France and Egypt, says that men have descended from fishes; it is astonishing, then, that my savages should say they are descended from two white apes—two ounka putedh, the most beautiful species known, and that which approaches most close to the human race? I have however seen other savages contradict the former, and say that the ape is nothing else than a degenerate man. (Bourien 1865: 73)

When Europeans recounted these stories, they were interpreted through ideas of evolution and conceptions of the “chain of being”. These alliance stories connected the tribe to nature.

Inherent to the discourse on race was an undercurrent of sex. Sex was used to define the limits of what it meant to be human and the ability to form a tribe. The ability to procreate was the core issue around the debates on race and hybridity (Young 1997). It
was the hybridity argument that gave scientific support to the biological unity of the human races. This same question pervaded the literature on the orang-utan. St John informs us that “the Dayaks tell many stories of the male orang-utans in old times carrying off their young girls, and of the latter becoming pregnant by them”. St John qualified this, stating “but they are, perhaps, merely traditions”, thereby inferring that Dayaks were merely reiterating a good yarn. He also noted the case of a huge male orang-utan “carrying off a Dutch girl”. The Girl was “immediately rescued by her father and a party of Javanese soldiers before any injury beyond fright had occurred to her” (St John 1862: 22).

Presenting them as fanciful tales, St John and other travel writers use the Dayak traditions to present Borneo as a mythic reality, a blend of fact and fable. This blend of science and imagination comprised the twin methodologies that the anonymous theorist (discussed in the previous section) outlined in 1830. That anonymous writer believed imagination resulted in a connection between the civilized and the savage, but St John and other travel writers used imagination to distance themselves from indigenous society. Although rejecting these stories, St John supported them with a grain of European knowledge represented by the Dutch girl. St John wanted it both ways, but, in doing so, he reaffirmed a racial hierarchy. By pronouncing the native stories to be illogical, St John condemned the Dayaks to being devoid of higher reasoning capacity. At the same time, however, by giving some legitimacy to the stories, St John was also enshrining their primitiveness. St John held out the prospect that the Dayaks were the hybrid offspring of orang-utans and humans, although he would never formally subscribe to such a belief. The tension between disbelief and the desire to reiterate can be seen in the following passage by Fredrick Boyle (Boyle 1865: 164):

Stories are told by the Dayaks of youths and girls carried off into the jungle and retained by them in captivity; they say, indeed, that a monstrous progeny is borne by these prisoners, but as no specimens have ever been produced, we may be allowed to disbelieve the facts until authenticated.

It is important to note who the active sexual partner in these stories is. It is neither the Dayak nor the Europeans, but rather the orang-utan. Most of these accounts refer to the abduction of women. The abduction transferred the primordial desire of the beast to human civilization. As St John observed, “it is seldom that we hear of the female orang-utan running off with a man”. The dynamic of such a narrative is very different. The raw primitiveness of male sexual desire has a long cultural history; in comparison, women are rarely presented in this light. St John gave a detailed recollection of the only account he heard of a female orang-utan abducting a male human, in which she used her raw strength to subdue the Murut human. “There he remained some months jealously watched by his strange companion, fed by her on fruits and the cabbage of the palm, and rarely permitted to touch the earth with his feet, but compelled to move from tree to tree” (St John 1862: 156–157). St John believed that this was most likely a true story, having been told the location of the village in which this individual now lived. The narrative of primordialism is still compelling throughout this account. In the
end, the human’s wit led to his escape and the slaying of the orang-utan by the Murut’s technological prowess.

St John depicts a very close relationship between orang-utans and humans in these stories. Although depicted as being able to live in the same community, there is always a difference. The Murut did not want to live with the orang-utan and conversely the orang-utans refuse to become human. These stories show an ambiguity between civilization and primordialism. The implication for the barbarian was that civilization became biologically absolute. Education could not remove barbarism, with barbarism becoming an inherent animal trait.

Stories of abduction and sex focused on the primal desires and presented divisions between civilization and primitivism. There are many interesting connections between the themes of gender, tribalism, savagery, barbarism, and the orang-utan. Ulla Wagner (1972: 132) gives the following account of a Sakaran legend, which says that:

the daughter of their great ancestor, who resides in heaven, near the Evening Star, refused to marry until her betrothed brought her a present worth her acceptance. The man went into the jungle and killed a deer, which he presented to her; but the fair lady turned away in disdain. He went again, and returned with a mias, the great monkey [sic] who haunts the forest; but this present was not more to her taste. Then, in a fit of despair, the lover went abroad, and killed the first man that he met, and throwing his victim’s head at the maidens feet, he exclaimed at the cruelty she had made him guilty of; but to his surprise, she smiled, and said, that now he had discovered the only gift worthy of herself.

Wagner argues that head-hunting was emerging on a sliding scale of men proving their manhood, with women demanding the practice of head-hunting before consenting to marry. Wagner (1972: 132) rationally attributes this to women wanting protection, commenting that “an Iban woman would no doubt be well aware that a very beneficial side-effect of the warlike exploits of her kinsmen and co-villagers would be increased safety and greater chances of survival”. The rationality behind head-hunting is not an issue; however, it was being connected on a sliding scale of barbarism from hunting to murder, via the orang-utan. This practice was interlinked to the procreation of the tribe, with head-hunting becoming a cultural marker of ethnicity and the orang-utan representing the limits of the human and the tribe.

Associating humans with orang-utans was not just a European phenomenon. This same association was a derogatory symbol throughout Southeast Asia and became a mechanism to define extreme ethnic differences (Boon 1990: 24–29). Settled farming and maritime communities recounted stories of wild tribes, who lived in the interior of their respective lands. Supposedly, these wild tribes lived like orang-utans and still possessed tails. St John (1862: 40) recounted the following account:

It is singular how the story of the men with tails has spread. I have heard of it in every part I have visited, but their country is always a few days’ journey farther off. The most circumstantial account I ever had was from a man who had traded much on the north-east coast of Borneo. He said he had seen and felt the tails, they were four inches long, and were very stiff, so that all the people sat on seats in which there was a hole made for this remarkable appendage to fit in.

John Thomson (1875: 35) recounted a similar tradition from Malaya:
As to these hill tribes “Orang Bukit”, “Orang Outan, “Orang Anto” mountain men, men of the wilds, spirit men—such people, the Malays solemnly assure us, carry tails, whose tufted ends they dip in damar oil and ignite, and thereupon rushing all ablaze into the Malayan campongs, spread fire and destruction around.

Thomas Newbold’s (1839: 146) summary of some of these accounts show that these stories were common throughout the archipelago:

There are many idle tales current among Malays of the existence in the woods and mountains of malignant races, half men, half monkeys, endowed with supernatural powers; such for instance are the Pikats of Java, who are said to dwell on the summits of hills, and to intermarry with the Siamangs; the Pangans and the cannibal Bennangs, who, like beasts, cohabit with their nearest relatives; the malignant Mawa that mocks the laugh of a human being, with its iron arm and body covered with shaggy hair; and the treacherous Biliong that watches over the tigers, and which is supposed on rainy nights to visit the abodes of men, and under the pretext of asking for fire, to seize and tear them into pieces with its enormous claws.

These stories were common and the European travel writers loved to reiterate them; however, they would also reject their logical plausibility. George Windsor Earl (1971 [1837]: 144–145) commented on this tendency:

In the year 1834 … I was informed by several of the more intelligent among the natives, that a wild, woolly-haired, people existed in the interior; but information was mixed up with so many incredible details respecting their habits, that I was led to consider the whole as fabulous; and the subject is treated in this light in the narrative of my voyages.

By the 1830s, few travel writers and ethnologists believed accounts of the wild tribes that possessed tails and lived in the dense jungle-protected interior. These stories reflected the reality that the interior of Borneo and Sumatra were wild places, in which the tribes were savage barbarians, and, like Africa, were dangerous places for European explorers. These claims by the travel writers reflected the indigenous social divisions that existed. With a hint of pathos, one travel writer commented on this trend: “In answer to my inquiry, the person in question said that the people on the other side of Kenibalu were very bad men, and killed every one who approached them. I said I had heard the same account of his fellow-countrymen, and he shook his head in deprecation of such a wicked report” (de Crespigny 1858: 347). These stories reflected pre-existing practices of power and persecution. Earl (1971 [1837]: 228) noted:

On approaching the boat, a Papua or New Guinea-negro, one of my boat’s crew, was perceived cutting wood for thole pins; and the Javanese soldiers, by way of alarming him, and amusing themselves, rushed towards the spot shouting “Orant-outan!” on which the poor man, who had no notion of being shot for a monkey, jumped behind a tree and roared out, that he was not an orang-outan but an orang Papua.

Earl’s story demonstrates that distinctions relating to civilization were being made prior to the European involvement in Southeast Asia; therefore, British travel writers were building on what they believed were pre-existing prejudices. In reiterating these stories and prejudices, the travel writers were reforming them into a new discourse of civilization and power, one based on biology, race and nation. This discourse transforms the
early colonial society from its mercantile multiculturalism into a racial hierarchy, bound by a vertical “chain of being”.

Reconciling the Limits of the Primordial Tribal-Nation

The “chain of being” that linked nations and tribes to a primordial core was a central theme in nineteenth-century narratives of Southeast Asia. The orang-utan emerged at the limits of the “chain of being”. The naturalizing of the nation required primordializing the nation into the natural landscape. This process meant the orang-utan was the ultimate expression of the primordial being. The orang-utan linked the barbarian tribal nation back to the savage condition of nature. The tribe, moreover, was the connection between nature and the civilized nation. The journalist, ethnologist, and founder of the Journal of the Indian Archipelago, James Logan (1847: 180), commented on this phenomenon:

When we look upon some half or wholly naked people as dark in the minds as in their persons, to judge from the absence of all arts, we are ready to conclude that they are in every respect at an infinite distance from ourselves, and in fact are as near the orang-utan as they are remote from us. But these people have a possession … they have a language, which is an image of our own, and is the same great record of sensation, thought and feeling.

Living in Singapore in 1847, Logan could see the popular tendency to place tribal society as the “other”. Tribal people were depicted as being “dark in mind” and in “person”. They lived in the jungle and were devoid of the “arts”. Logan’s criticism of the popular tendency to discriminate was reminiscent of the wider humanitarian push within ethnology. James Cowles Prichard, a Quaker and anti-slavery campaigner, devoted his life to ethnology and developed the first scientific argument proving the racial unity of humanity. Prichard (1855 [1843]: 6) also saw the threat in the popular tendency to link the orang-utan to the tribe, commenting that “our relations to these tribes will appear to be not very different from those which might be imagined to subsist between us and a race of orangs”. For both Logan and Prichard the primordial “chain of being” was the legitimization of barbarism by the civilized towards the savage. Logan (1847: 180–181) continues:

The contradiction, however, lies in our own ignorance and prejudice, and the fact, when considered with all that it implies, literally speaks volumes against the habit, in which we too often indulge, of viewing such races, not from the basis of a common humanity, but from the pinnacle of our own advantages.

Both Logan and Prichard presented their ethnology within a Christian cosmology, with Logan commenting: It is because Man is essentially, even in his lowest or normal state, a shadow of the Divinity, and a mirror of all nature, capable of an infinite perception and reflection of the sensible, that he creates a language as spontaneously, variously and luxuriantly as the earth arrays itself of vegetation (173). Rather than linking humans and nature within the “chain of being”, Logan saw two chains existing as a duality. Humans were shadows of God and therefore mirrors of nature, not part of nature.
Language and art therefore were the products of humans. They were distinctly different to nature, but language and art were still products of nature. They existed as a mirror to the diversity of nature.

Logan saw problems, however, in linking humans to nature; therefore, he clearly demarked two separate entities: culture (language and art) and nature. Although Logan separated culture from nature, he was still primordially naturalizing the nation; but, by separating the two, Logan was trying to place limits on the extent of primordialism, limiting human primordialism to culture.

It is in this field, where necessity and reason have released man from their inflexible bonds, and given him over to the capricious and protean power of accident, fancy, and taste, that we must find the evidence which tradition has lost. All that lies without it belongs to the common history of man. It is here that we shall find the particular history of races. (172–173)

The common history of man united the tribes and nations, but this history was the history of the races. Logan saw that “necessity and reason” had created the need for language, with language being a common “possession” of all humans. Language was the common connection linking the tribe and the nation, with Logan explaining that “the person of the savage, and the mind of the civilized man must first wander far into new realms of action or thought, before he can loosen the ties of a language once produced” (174). Language was the key to the nation’s past, because “every language contains within itself the evidence of its own immediate origin and progress”. The nation therefore could be traced back to the tribal barbarian. Yet Logan believed that language was merely a traceable symptom of the nation. Language was not the key aspect of the nation. Instead, Logan believed that “a nation portrays its existing condition better in its manners, habits, and customs” (175). Language became the traceable mirror of change. Therefore, Logan saw that “expression[s] which were once a literal reflex of the former” social condition were retained in the language. These linguistic legacies of a former time, however, had a changed meaning in the present time. Although Logan saw that the nation primarily existed in mannerisms and customs; he believed that only language could provide the mechanism to trace the nation back to the tribe. In doing this, Logan was primordializing culture.

The nation therefore descends back to the tribe, and for Logan, this marks the limits of primordialism. He did not want to further primordialize the tribe and blur the distinction between nature and culture. Yet in limiting primordialism to culture, Logan was still naturalizing the nation. He was still blurring the distinction between nature and culture. He saw that “in communities there [was] a general social prototype on which every person [was] formed” (175). At the same time, however, Logan saw this as a product of nature, commenting: “this great fixed life-mould, imprints its shape on every fresh member born into the community, and gives a sameness of direction to the wild and luxuriant growth in which nature indulges when free from such restraint” (175). Logan was arguing that culture, in both the tribe and the nation, civilized raw nature. In making this argument, Logan was still connecting nature to the tribe and the nation. He was, however, aware of the ethical problems with this action. Logan recognized that primordialism led to dehumanization. He found it hard,
however, to overcome the primordializing tendency of linking the nation and the tribe to nature.

This article has examined how the naturalizing of the nation led to the primordializing of the nation. As the nation was naturalized as common sense, a second process of naturalization occurred: the nation became primordialized and therefore linked to nature. In presenting the nation as primordial, the nation was a continuum of the tribe. This raised questions on the limits of primordialism. In naturalizing the nation as common sense, with the tribe acting as a primordial pathway, the nation became part of nature. Therefore, the orang-utan and the missing link emerged as a conjunctural point, potentially explaining the birth of the tribe. These arguments were the projection of degeneracy on to tribal society. Nevertheless, this was problematic, as this article has argued. By primordializing the nation, the nation made the barbarian and tribal savage the cultural source of identity in the civilized nation. It was, therefore, not a simple process of depicting the “other” as degenerate. Degeneracy only had meaning because the barbarian connected the civilized to the savage. This connection also grounded the nation in nature. It was not rationality that underpinned this discourse, for rationality spoke of division. It was the connections made, through the act of imagination. In their imaginations the civilized believed they were still possessed an aspect of the savage. This belief in a savage connection allowed for the projection of degeneracy.

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Notes

[1] Lord Monboddo (1773) argued that the orang-utan was a primitive human that had not learnt language.

[2] There were two theoretical camps at this time. The first was the climatic theory, in which humans developed racial differences as a result of environmental conditions. An example of this approach is James Cowles Prichard’s (1855 [1843]) The Natural History of Man. The second theory was a mixture of early biological theory, a bigoted Christian philosophy. This second theory held that the races were separate creations of God or nature. Arthur Gobineau’s (1984 [1856]) The Moral and Intellectual Diversity of Races and Robert Knox’s (1862) The Races of Men: A Philosophical Enquiry into the Influence of Race over the Destinies of Nations are examples of this tradition. Knox’s work was also infused with a radical form of republicanism. Republican thought was not uncommon amongst the early anatomists—see Desmond (1989).

[3] The following quote captures this attitude: “The people [Highlanders] were also more lawless and, if possible, more idle, than those of the Lowland districts about the same period. The latter regarded their northern neighbours as the settlers in America did the Red Indians round their borders—like so many savages always ready to burst in upon them, fire their buildings, and carry off their cattle” (Samuel Smiles [1867: 56]).

[4] Adam Ferguson’s An Essay on the History of Civil Society (1767) is a classic example of this view of self-interest.
Although the “Dayak stories” were questioned for their reliability, the European accounts are equally unreliable, for travel writers/explorers/ethnologists reiterate each other’s gossip and accounts to boost their own small observations.

Another French traveller-ethnologist, Pierre Etienne Lazare Favre or Paul Abbé Favre (Favre 1865: 84–85), recorded this tradition. Paul Abbé Favre also went under the pseudonym of R. Favre, and as such the library records vary somewhat.

An exception to this was Walter Murray Gibson, who became obsessed with these stories. Gibson’s account in The Prison of Weltevreden and A Glance at the East Indian Archipelago (1853) are extremely interesting.

Until otherwise indicated, all references are to this work, and are given as page numbers in parentheses in the text.

References

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