

Wild gentlemen and terrible savages

Hungarian travellers in Borneo in the nineteenth century

GÁBOR PUSZTAI

ABSTRACT

In the nineteenth century most of Borneo was terra incognita; an area still to be mapped. In the writings of European travellers, the indigenous people were portrayed as stereotypes. In this article, I briefly examine the representation of the indigenous in the texts of three Western European travellers: the German Karl Bernhard von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach (1792-1862), commander of the Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858), an Austrian traveller, and the Norwegian traveller Carl Bock (1848-1932). I then analyse the texts of three Hungarian travellers: the traveller and scientist, János Xántus (1825-1894), the Hungarian aristocrat and author, Manó Andrásy (1821-1891), and the young Hungarian explorer, Xavér Ferenc Wittl (1850-1882). The texts of the Western European travellers are compared with texts by the Hungarian writers to discover if there were such a thing as a Hungarian view of Borneo and its people. This assumption proved unfounded. Although the three texts of the three Hungarian travellers are very different from each other, they are not much different from those of contemporary Western European travellers.

KEYWORDS

Borneo, Hungarian travellers, János Xántus, Manó Andrásy, Xavér Ferenc Wittl.

GÁBOR PUSZTAI (1971) has been associated with the University of Debrecen since 1995. He studied in the Dutch Studies Programme, Leiden University, and Germanistics at Debrecen University, obtained his PhD in 2003 and habilitated in literary studies in 2015. Since 2007, he has been Head of the Department of Dutch Studies. Since 2021, he has been director of the International Migration Research Center. His research areas are Dutch-Hungarian cultural and historical contacts, colonial and post-colonial literature. Among other works, he has written about the literary experiences of the foreign in *An der Grenze* (2007), about the Hungarian writer, painter, and literary translator László Székely in *Menekülés az idegenbe* (2017) and, together with others, about the history of Dutch literature in *A holland nyelvű irodalom története* (2022). Gábor Pusztai can be contacted at: gpusztai@unideb.hu.

In the colonial era, Borneo was designated a *buitengewest* (outer district), far distant from the centrally located island of Java. It was an area which lay on the periphery of the Archipelago, was very difficult to access, and, for a very long time, was visited by only a few Europeans. The Norwegian scientist Carl Alfred Bock (1849-1932) led an expedition to Borneo in 1878-1879. Its route was from the Mahakam River in the east of the island to Banjarmasin in the south. For five months he travelled through unknown territory and wrote about his findings in his book with the remarkable title *The Head-hunters of Borneo* (1882). He claimed that Borneo was so densely forested with jungle that a monkey could move effortlessly from one end of the island to the other without touching the ground even once (Bock 1882: 51). This remark demonstrates why it took so long for the island to be “discovered” by Europeans.

The three largest ethnic groups in the island were the Malays, the Dayaks, and the Chinese. The Dayaks, in particular, were an exotic people unknown to Europeans, because they lived in the hinterland and only rarely came in contact with outsiders. Dayak is in fact a collective term for many different tribes whose only common denominator was that they inhabited the Bornean inland, lived by the rivers, and grew rice. The different tribes spoke separate languages, had specific customs and cultures, and wore different apparel (Darja de Wever 2015: 85). However, in the writings of European travellers, the indigenous are mostly portrayed stereotypically. In the following, I briefly examine the representation of the indigenous people in the texts of three Western European travellers. I then analyse the texts of three Hungarian travellers.

THREE TRAVELLERS FROM THE WEST

Of the above-mentioned ethnic groups, the Dayaks receive the lion's share of attention in travel texts. Their habits and customs deviated so much from those of the Europeans, the white narrator very naturally concentrated on them. In 1835, the German Duke Karl Bernhard von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach (1792-1862) wrote the book *Beknopte beschrijving van den veldtocht op Java in 1811* (Brief description of the campaign in Java in 1811). In his book Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach, who was commander of the Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) from 1848, gives a description of the different indigenous soldiers who served in the colonial army at that time. He was not particularly pleased with the quality of the men. In his opinion, the Javanese man showed little courage, the Balinese had a predominantly peaceful character, the Buginese were more courageous than the rest of them, but they could not accustom themselves to military discipline. However, the Ambonese were loyal allies (Frits Jaquet 1989: 178). He has nothing good to say about the Dayaks from Borneo. Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach's view of the Dayaks was mainly from the viewpoint of a military leader and his judgement was unequivocal: the Dayaks did not come up to the mark as soldiers. He paints a picture of the Dayaks as murderous cannibals, who kill innocent people in “cowardly fashion” only to brag at home to their tribe brandishing the severed heads. From the text

it seems that Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach dismissed the Dayaks as utterly useless as soldiers. Not because they were head-hunters, because they did not recognize any authority and were insubordinate to their commanders.

Ida Pfeiffer (1797-1858) was an Austrian woman who had made several journeys to Scandinavia, South America, China, India, the Middle East, and Singapore since 1842. In 1852 she travelled to Borneo. In Sarawak she met "the wite raja", Charles Brooke (1806-1868).¹ Under Brooke's guidance, Ida Pfeiffer visited a Dayak village in the Serambo Mountains. Pfeiffer writes about a peaceful community of large families composed of different generations. Nevertheless, when she discovered a number of severed heads above a small fire, she writes with dismay at the sight of the dried, shrivelled black objects: "It was with genuine horror that I saw thirty-six skulls lined up here, hung like a garland. The eye sockets were filled with longish, white shells" (Pfeiffer 1856: 76).² She was also appalled by the appearance of the Dayaks: "The Dayaks are endowed with just as little beauty as the Malays" (Pfeiffer 1856: 77).³ Although she had a typical Eurocentric view (Gabriele Habinger 2005: ix), not all her comments about the Dayaks are negative. Pfeiffer saw a dance performance by young Dayaks which she certainly thought praiseworthy: "This was undoubtedly the most beautiful dance I had ever seen 'Wilden' [savages] perform" (Habinger 2005: 89).⁴ Despite the beauty of the dance, the Dayaks remained simply "Wilden" [savages].

In a village, she discovered two recently severed heads, roasting above a fire. Although she had mentioned earlier in her book that headhunting belonged to the past thanks to Brooke's intervention, she notes that, despite the ban, the Dayaks were still hunting heads. With dismay she describes the half-dried lips and ears, the skin blackened by smoke, the bared teeth, and the half-opened eyes. When the Dayaks noticed her interest in their trophies, they took the heads off the fire so that the Austrian could inspect them more closely. It is to Pfeiffer's credit that she was able to overcome her own disgust, take a step back from the situation, and not immediately condemn the customs of the Dayaks. She tried to view the situation objectively and compared the custom of the Dayaks with the atrocities of the so-called civilized Europeans: "I shuddered, - but could not help thinking that we Europeans are no better, indeed are worse, than these despised savages" (Habinger 2005: 90).⁵

In his book, the Norwegian traveller Carl Bock indicates that the biggest problem was to find personnel or servants in Java for the journey to Borneo.

¹ Northwest Borneo, the sultanates of Sarawak and Brunei, was in the hands of the English adventurer James Brooke (1803-1868) who ruled there like a king. He was called the *white raja*. After his death his cousin, Charles Brooke, succeeded him. In 1888, he handed power over to Britain. The British North Borneo Company had been active in the area since 1878.

² *Mit wahren Grauen sah ich hier 36 Schädel aneinandergereiht und gleich einer Guirlande aufgehangen. Die Augenhöhlen waren mit weißen, länglichen Muscheln ausgefüllt.*

³ *Die Dayaker sind eben so wenig mit Schönheit begabt wie die Malaien.*

⁴ *Unstreitig war dies der schönste Tanz, den ich bisher von Wilden hatte aufführen gesehen.*

⁵ *Ich schauderte, - konnte aber nicht umhin zu bedenken, dass wir Europäer nicht besser, ja im Gegentheil schlechter sind als diese verachtete Wilden.*

Most candidates lost their nerve completely the moment they heard the goal of the journey. Everyone knew of the head-hunters and was very afraid of the Dayaks. Even the famous soldiers of fortune and adventurers in the city could not be convinced to sail to Borneo with Bock.

My greatest difficulty was in engaging servants. The very idea of venturing into the territory of the Head-hunters of Borneo was enough to cool the ardour of those who otherwise professed to be most anxious to accompany me. The offer of high wages, so high as to amount to a positive bribe, was of no avail. Malays, Dutch, half-breeds, Chinese, all valued their heads too highly to risk them among the Dyaks of Borneo. Even the superintendent of police, who might be supposed to be acquainted with all the desperadoes of the place, and who very kindly assisted me in my search, failed to find any one enterprising enough, and in other respects suitable, to accompany me. (Bock 1882: 3).

From the above it seems clear that the representations of the indigenous population of Borneo by Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach and Bock present the island as a place of horror: should you venture to Borneo as a European, you must be prepared for the worst. Fortunately, there were also a few cautiously dissenting voices.

The travellers also describe the Malays, as well as the Dayaks. However, this second ethnic group generally comes off worse than the Dayaks. The dilatoriness of the Malays is particularly emphasized by Ida Pfeiffer: "In no country have I found the people so indifferent and lethargic as in Borneo, not so much the Dayaks as the Malays" (Pfeiffer 1856: 143).⁶ In addition, the extreme uncleanliness of these people is described by Pfeiffer. She thinks that the Chinese are certainly no better in this regard: "I saw here that the Chinese loves dirt no less than the Malays; the difference between the two is that the Malay, who builds his house on poles, lives above the dirt, while the Chinese has it at his door" (Pfeiffer 1856: 73).⁷

Carl Alfred Bock also writes about the dilatoriness of his Malayan servants: "Like all Malays they were lazy, and glad of any opportunity to save themselves a little labour" (Bock 1882: 48). However, according to him, this is not their worst trait. During his expedition it was pointed out to him by his Chinese servant that the Malays in the area were notorious thieves and murderers:

Tan Bon Hijok, whom I had made my *mandoer*, or headman, busied himself with cleaning his revolver, and asked if mine was ready. He and all my men were astonished to be told that it would be time enough to look to our arms when we came among the Dyaks. They declared that the Malays living up the river were great thieves, with few scruples about spilling blood. This was nothing new, but the oft-repeated statement gained force in our present surroundings. (Bock 1882: 47).

⁶ *In keinem Lande fand ich bisher die Leute so gleichgültig und träge wie auf Borneo, weniger die Dayaker als die Malaien.*

⁷ *Ich sah hier dass der Chinese den Schmutz nicht minder liebt als der Malaie; der Unterschied zwischen beide ist, dass der Malaie, der sein Haus auf Pfählen setzt, über dem Schmutze lebt, während der Chinese ihn vor seinem Türe hat.*

These stereotypes were creating binary opposition pairs, thereby boosting the superiority of the European and creating their identity (Alasdair Pettinger and Tim Youngs 2021: 4). One event is singled out, magnified, and the foreign is identified. Moving on, how were the indigenous peoples represented in Hungarian travellers' texts? In what follows I examine three Hungarian travellers, János Xántus, Manó Andrassy, and Xavér Ferenc Witt, who wrote about Borneo from the nineteenth century onwards, and explore how stereotypes are handled in their texts, what the role of the colonial "Other" is, and whether there might have been a "Hungarian perspective" on Borneo at the time.

THE WILD GENTLEMAN

The Hungarian traveller and scientist, János Xántus (1825-1894), who studied the Dayaks in northern Borneo in 1870, was familiar with Ida Pfeiffer's books, but he was not particularly impressed by the Austrian's work. He believed that Pfeiffer had begun without any prior knowledge and preparation in the fields of ethnography or the natural sciences, and therefore could not claim to write any kind of serious work (Xántus 1880: 154).

János Xántus, a descendant of Greek immigrants to Hungary, was originally a lawyer who had fought as a volunteer in 1848-1849 during the struggle for liberty against the Habsburgs for an independent and free Hungary. In 1849, he was captured by the Austrians. After the defeat of the Hungarians, he was forcibly recruited into the Austrian army. He was discharged in 1850, but met Hungarian emigrants in Prague and did nothing to hide his severely negative opinion of the Habsburgs. He was arrested and convicted for his statements. He subsequently faced a prison sentence, but managed to escape and, via Hamburg, reached London, where a considerable number of Hungarian emigrés were already present. From there, he sailed to the United States with a group of other Hungarians, coming ashore in New York with a total of seven dollars in his pocket (István Sándor 1970: 34). To make ends meet, he worked as a day labourer, and was later employed as a map illustrator, soldier, and surveyor. He ran expeditions to the Arkansas River commissioned by the University of New Orleans. By this time, he was already building up collections for the Hungarian National Museum (Xántus 1860). Emperor Franz Joseph granted him clemency and he was allowed to return to his country of birth.⁸ The first time he revisited Hungary was in 1861, but, because he was not offered a suitable job, he returned to America the next year. There he worked for the Maritime Ministry, and was later appointed consul in Mexico (Balázs Venkovits 2014: 495-510).

In 1864 he returned to Hungary. The establishment of the zoo in Budapest, of which he later became director, is associated with his name. He also played a key role in the foundation of the ethnography department of the Hungarian National Museum, whose head he later became. The Hungarian Academy

⁸ "Weenen, 29 oktober", *Utrechtse Provinciale- en Stadscourant*, 1-11-1861, p. 2.

of Sciences elected him a corresponding member. The agreement between the Austrians and the Hungarians, the so-called “Ausgleich” which led to the foundation of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy in 1867, marked the beginning of a new period. For Xántus this also opened up new opportunities. In 1868 he departed for East Asia with an Austro-Hungarian trade mission, but friction between him and his Austrian travelling companions repeatedly led to disputes. Xántus was not an easy man. There was continuous conflict between him and an Austrian member of the trade mission, Baron Scherzer.

This resulted in Xántus leaving the ship at Borneo to do ethnographic and natural science research in the Archipelago for the Hungarian National Museum. Besides Borneo, he also visited Java and Sumatra (Xántus 1879, 1880). In Java, he lost no time claiming the inheritance left to him by his brother-in-law, Lajos Doleschall (1827-1859), who had worked as a doctor in the service of the KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) between 1852 and 1859 and had passed away in Ambon. János Xántus collected so many ethnographic objects in the islands⁹ that, after his return to Hungary, he was able to organize an exhibition consisting of no fewer than 165,444 items (Sándor 1970: 310).

He might be the only one of the travellers mentioned above who clearly expressed a positive opinion of the Dayaks. Xántus was, by his own account, received very cheerfully and hospitably everywhere by the Dayaks (Xántus 1880: 191). According to him the Dayaks were – in contrast to the findings of Pfeiffer – “a very brave, combative, well-endowed, and beautiful people” (Xántus 1880: 162).¹⁰ Xántus was always welcomed and kindly treated in the Dayak villages.

The Dayaks everywhere welcomed me gladly and in a kindly manner. They saw in me their benefactor pursuing the greatest enemy of their orchards, the orang-utan, or as they call him, the “mayas”. I was given rice, fruit, and other gifts everywhere. I was showered with gifts to such an extent, I felt really uncomfortable because I did not know how to recompense this kindness. (Xántus 1880: 191).¹¹

Xántus particularly admired the honesty of the Dayaks, whom he portrays as true gentlemen in his text. He claimed that the Dayaks would not entertain the idea of lying, not even if they were standing in front of a judge and knew that they would be sentenced to death for the crime committed: “It is impossible not to admire the savage Dayak, when with honest openness he admits to his deeds, even though he could save his life by lying. This honesty makes him a gentleman and elevates him far above the Malays and Chinese – at least in this regard” (Xántus 1880: 170).¹² Xántus also describes the headhunting and the

⁹ “Uit Nederlands-Indië”, *De Grondwet* 23/48, 7-8-1883, p. 2.

¹⁰ [...] felette bátor, harczias, jól termett és csinos nép.

¹¹ A dájekek mindenütt igen szívesen s nagy vendégszeretettel fogadtak, úgy tekintettek, mint jóltevőjüket, ki gyümölcsöseik legnagyobb ellenségét az orangutánt – vagy a mint ők nevezik: a májászt üldözi, s mindenütt elláttak gyümölccsel és rizzsel, s egyéb ajándékokkal is annyira elhalmoztak, hogy sokszor valóban nagy zavarba hoztak, hogyan viszonzzam a sok szívességet.

¹² [...] lehetetlen nem bámulni ily vad emberekből, a becsületes férfiaságot s a gentlemanféle bravourt, mely őt oly magasra emeli a maláj és sinai népek fölött – e tekintetben.

smoking of the heads, but does so more out of scientific interest. He explains the hunting of the heads by reference to the religious beliefs of the Dayaks, and absolutely does not condemn these natives for their, for Europeans, horrific practices. About the Malays, his feelings were more mixed. He thought the women were consummate beauties.

Their stature is very beautiful, they have small hands, their fingers are long and almost transparent, their arms, breasts, and legs are so shapely they attain the acme of perfection – even by our standards. They are particularly admired for their thick black hair which often reaches to their ankles, even to the ground. (Xántus 1880: 179).¹³

This positive description of the native women is put into perspective in the passage which immediately follows, in which Xántus lists all the flaws of this group. He begins by saying that the Malay women can never match “our women” (meaning Hungarian women):

The flat and blunt noses, the dark complexions which can never assume a clear shape, the unvarying faces mean that they can never be on a par with our women, also presents a natural obstacle in this regard. Added to this is the chewing of areca nuts and betel leaves. This turns their teeth black, their lips blood red and their breath is always unpleasantly acrid. Finally, their biggest drawback is that they are ignorant. They can neither read nor write, they live in wretched conditions, are excluded from intellectual life, and cannot see beyond their daily monotonous life. They display no interest whatsoever; no attention, no enthusiasm. (Xántus 1880: 179).¹⁴

The Hungarian traveller believed that this might possibly change later, and the Malays of Borneo could stride forward on the path of development “if they are in a position to renounce their Muslim religion” (Xántus 1880: 179). Positive descriptions and negative stereotypes alternate. When Xántus talks about his Malay, Chinese, and Dayak servants, he notes: “I must mention here that in my life I have rarely met people as honest, helpful, and reliable as they are. They invariably performed their duties with great devotion and loyalty, as if they had served and known only me all their” (Xántus 1880: 187).¹⁵ He

¹³ *Termetők azonban csudálatosan szép arányokban tűnik fel, kezük igen piczi, ujjaik hosszúak s csaknem átlátszók, karjuk, mellök, lábaik pedig oly gyönyörű alkotásúak, hogy valóban a tökély legmagasabb fokán állanak – még a mi fogalmaink szerint is. S különösen a dús fekete haj, mely néha bokáig, sőt a földig ér, méltó csudálkozás tárgya mindenki előtt, a ki őket szemléli.*

¹⁴ *A lapos és felgyúrt orr, a sötét és derűtségre képtelen homályos szín, az arcz élénktelensége, soha nem képes őket egyenrangúakká tenni a mi nőinkkel s mintegy természetes torlaszt képez e tekintetben. Hozzájárul még, hogy örökösen areka diót és bétel levelet rágnak, mi által fogaik feketék, ajkaik vérpirosak, s lehelletük folyton kellemetlen keserű. Végre a legnagyobb hátrányuk, hogy tudatlanok, írni és olvasni sem tudnak, s egyáltalán oly szánandó helyzetben élnek, s a szellemi világból annyira ki vannak küszöbölve, hogy egyhangú rendeltetésükön túl, úgyszólván semmiről sincs fogalmuk; semmiért nem érdeklődnek, semmiért sem képesek felemelkedni, hevílni vagy lelkesedni.*

¹⁵ *[...] elmondhatom mindjárt itten, hogy hogy derekabb, ügyesebb, és megbízhatóbb emberekkel ritkán volt életemben dolgom. Véges végig oly szolgálatkészséggel és odaadó hűséggel teljesítették feladatukat, mintha csak egy egész hosszú emberélet lánczolta volna őket hozzám, s mintha egész életükön át csakis*

does not have a good word to say about the Dutch. Xántus was convince that they lied because they did not want to let slip any information about Borneo: "The Dutch are so circumspect and secretive about mines and other material matters that one must assume the opposite of what they tell us every time. Only then does one come closest to the truth" (Xántus 1880: 154).¹⁶ According to the Hungarian traveller, the Dutch were avaricious, their rule in the colonies was tyrannical, and they flouted all human rights (Xántus 1880: 155-156).

In this continuous dynamic of binary opposition pairs, the hierarchy of oppositions is constantly changing. Xántus paints a broad picture of Borneo and its history, its inhabitants, and rulers. Stereotypes are confirmed but then deconstructed; hierarchies are built up and broken down, which makes his text an exciting and varied read.

THE PLACE OF CRUELTY

The book by the Hungarian author Manó Andrassy (1821-1891) with the title *Utazás Kelet-Indiákon* (Travels in East India) was published in 1853. It is an account of an eleven-month-long journey through China, Java, Ceylon, and Bengal in 1849-1850. The Hungarian reading audience was not particularly ready for such a book. In August 1849 the Hungarians' struggle for liberty was crushed by the Habsburg troops and the army of the Russian Tsar. Wielding their united forces, the two rulers drowned the struggle for liberty in blood. This was followed by repercussions for all participants: executions, prison, exile, flight, and terror ruled the entire country. The Habsburgs wanted to demonstrate who was the real ruler of the country. The young emperor, Franz Joseph (1830-1916), at the time nineteen years old, wanted to show the rebels and the outside world the talons of the victors. The population was terrorized and oppressed, but members of the Hungarian political opposition refused to cooperate with Habsburg rule.

Under these circumstances, a book about travels in Asia could not count on a particularly interested reception from the Hungarian reading public of 1853. The book was first published in Hungarian in Pest (the eastern part of Budapest, which was still a separate municipality at that time) and then in German in 1859 (Emanuel Andrásy 1859).

The author, Count Manó Andrassy, belonged to one of the most famous Hungarian noble families, whose members had always been very active in politics. They had done much for their country and for the civil development of Hungary. The Andrassy family were among the first aristocrats who used their money for the modernization and industrialization of their coal- and ore-mines (B. Hóman and Gy. Szekfű 1936: 247). Manó Andrassy was born in Kassa (now Košice in Slovakia) on 3 March, 1821. His father Károly Andrassy

és egyedül engem ismertek volna.

¹⁶ [...] a hollandusok egyáltalán olyan circumspectusok és titkolódzók a közeliükben létező bányászati s más anyagi érdekekkel összefüggő viszonyokat illetőleg, hogy az embernek minden esetben éppen az ellenkezőjét kell föltenni, mint a mit ők előadnak, s akkor nagyon közel leszünk a valósághoz.

was a member of the upper house of the Hungarian parliament.¹⁷ Manó was the oldest of three sons, and, as was customary with the aristocracy, as a young child he was privately tutored at home. He then went to the western Hungarian city of Tata, where he attended a Roman Catholic grammar school. He continued his studies in Pest, where he received a degree from the Faculty of Arts of the university.

After his studies, Manó travelled to Germany, Italy, France, England, Portugal, even as far as Morocco.¹⁸ Back in Hungary, he devoted himself to politics, being elected a parliamentarian in 1847.¹⁹ One year later, the revolution followed by a struggle for liberty broke out in Hungary. Together with his two younger brothers, Gyula (1823-1890, the future prime minister) and Aladár (1827-1903), he fought on the side of the Hungarian freedom fighters against the troops of General Josip Jelačić (1801-1859) at Pákozd (54 km west of Budapest) on 29 September, 1848. The troops of this Croatian general in Austrian service suffered a painful defeat and fled to Austria. A few months later, however, at the beginning of 1849, Manó Andrassy considered it advisable to leave the country.

What had happened? Andrassy had proved himself a patriot, but was bothered by the new direction in which the struggle was heading. He did not flee out of fear of the repercussions (the struggle would go on for another eight months), but because he believed that the leaders of the struggle for liberty were “straying from the legal path” (B. Radvánszky 1901: 337). By this remark, he was referring to the situation in which the legal ruler of the country was resorting to violence to overturn the legal decrees of the parliament. For an aristocrat like Andrassy this proved a serious dilemma. What was more important, the ruler’s will or the decrees of parliament?

He did not want to make a choice and preferred to flee the country. At the beginning of his book published in 1853 in the middle of the oppression, he wrote: “At the beginning of 1849, amidst the tragic events which engulfed my home country, I got my hands on a book, and while reading it I felt this great urge to travel to the East, to the cradle of humanity [...]” (Manó Andrassy 1853: 1). However, he had already fled. By the beginning of February 1849, he was already in London and on 20 February of that year he departed for the East by ship, travelling via Gibraltar, Alexandria, Cairo, and from there by post-coach to Suez, where he arrived on 17 March. On 30 March he reached the harbour of Colombo in Ceylon, which was the first place he remained for a longer time. From Ceylon he sailed to Sumatra. Here the boat docked in Penang, where he stayed only a few hours and used the time to buy different types of fruit. He reached Singapore via the Straits of Malacca, and on 8 July

¹⁷ As a member of the opposition Károly Andrassy was an advocate of extensive reforms in Hungary. In 1883 a pamphlet of his on this subject: *Umrisse einer möglichen Reform in Ungarn, im Geiste des Justemilieu*, was published in German. Beside this, he wrote political articles in Hungarian dailies and theoretical treatises about road building.

¹⁸ Manó Andrassy wrote letters about these travels, which were published in the journal *Honderű* in 1843.

¹⁹ He was deputy for the province Torna.

he left Singapore for Batavia. In Buitenzorg (Bogor) he met a German doctor, a certain Dr F., who had travelled through Borneo for four years. For eight hours he regaled the Hungarian count with his experiences and adventures on Borneo. In the doctor's account, Borneo emerges as a place of horrors. The inhabitants of the island were continuously at war with each other, and the warriors cut off the heads of their enemies to take them home and smoke them: "In Borneo only those young men who have already hunted a head of the enemy are heroes. Only they can ask a girl for their hand in marriage. But, once a warrior possesses a head, he can count on the favours of the girls. The more heads severed, the more attractive the groom" (M. Andrásy 1853: 209).²⁰

For Andrásy, the Dayaks were just bloodthirsty, cruel barbarians, who cut off the hands of thieves and executed those sentenced to death in a vile manner: "A death sentence has to be executed with a kris. The executioner plunges the dagger into the heart of the offender, to the rhythm of the music which is played for the occasion. Depending on the crime, the music is played faster or slower, therefore death follows either quickly or excruciatingly slowly" (M. Andrásy 1853: 211).²¹ According to Andrásy, the Dayaks were "terribly savage", and they had "no concept of religion" (M. Andrásy 1853: 211). The Hungarian traveller did see something "sympathetic" in the Dayaks' apparel, by which he meant a "fur hat adorned with feathers". Otherwise, they were a "wild people" with "rough morals" (M. Andrásy 1853: 210). It is therefore no wonder he avoided Borneo on his travels and sailed from Java to China. Andrásy left Hungary in 1849 amidst a struggle for liberty which had broken out against the oppression of the foreign rule of the Habsburgs. In the beginning he had joined the battle with full conviction. But, when he reached Asia, he saw no parallel at all between the oppressed, colonized indigenous people and the oppressed Hungarians fighting for their freedom. Nor did it even cross his mind to compare the oppression of the two peoples. This obtuseness could be explained by the fact that he did not consider them as equals. His Eurocentric, colonialist outlook prevented Andrásy from exploring the similarities between these two types of oppression. While he took the oppression of the colonial peoples for granted, he did not question the legitimacy of the Hungarian struggle for freedom and took part in the struggles himself.

In his complacency, in his arrogance, this comparison did not even enter his head. Completely at odds to Xántus, Andrásy represents the colonial "Other", confirming colonial stereotypes about the natives in his book. He merely notes from his host's stories that Borneo's indigenous people are dangerous and cruel, therefore best avoided. There is no trace of a dynamic movement of the binary opposition pairs, no deconstruction of hierarchy, no recognition of the colonial "Other".

²⁰ [...] Borneón csak az a legény, az követelhet férfit tekintélyt, az tarthat igényt nőre, kinek már ellenségfő van birtokában. Hamarabb nőszülhetésre (sic!) gondolnia sem szabad: hanem azután, minél több ellenségfejet mutathat föl, annál kitűnőbb arára számít, annál keresettebb vőlegény.

²¹ Halálbüntetéseiket krizzel hajtják végre. E gyilkos szert a bitóhoz kötözött bűnösnek szívgödörébe üti a bakó, és pedig zenehang mellett lassabban vagy hamarabb, miként a zene szól, melly a bűn mivolta szerint tart mértéket.

THE KINDLY HEAD-HUNTERS

On 12 October, 1882, a short article appeared in the English newspaper, *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, reporting the death of a young Hungarian explorer, Xavér Ferenc Witt (1850-1882): "A London contemporary learns from Singapore that Mr Witt (formerly an officer in the Austrian army), an explorer in the service of the British North Borneo Company, has been treacherously murdered by 'Head-hunters', who also killed several of his native attendants."²²

The reader can tell from this brief notification that, at the end of the nineteenth century in the hinterland of Borneo there were cruel, "treacherous" indigenous tribes, head-hunters, who cut off the heads of whites and their native escorts who just happened to be in the area. Even though this newspaper article does refer to an actual event, the image of the reality in Borneo in it supplants the actual truth (Siegfried Huigen 1996: 19). As an explorer, Witt had – as presented to us as readers – fallen victim to those "bloodthirsty tribes", who infested the border area between the territory of James Brooke, the *white raja*, and Dutch Borneo.

Xavér Ferenc Witt was, with János Xántus and the doctor and geologist, Tivadar Posewitz²³ (1850-1917), the most important Hungarian explorer of Borneo (Gy 1889: 189-191; Miklós Kázmér 2022: 77-90; György Vítális 2001: 562). Witt was born in Budapest.²⁴ His father was a merchant and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Witt therefore attended a trade school in Budapest but was not very keen on a job as a merchant. He did, however, have an outstanding talent for languages. He learned Italian and German and enrolled in the Naval Academy in Pola.²⁵ At the time, Pola (now Pula in Croatia) was an important Austrian naval harbour and training base. The Naval Academy was an ethnically mixed institution in which Austrians, Hungarians, Croats, Italians, and Czechs studied together attending German-speaking lectures. This multi-ethnic, multi-lingual experience must have left a great impression on Witt, and also have influenced the image of his own cultural background. He had nearly finished his studies when, in 1866, the

²² "Summary of News", *The Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 12-10-1882, p. 2.

²³ Posewitz signed up to serve as a doctor with the KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) in 1879. He served three years in Borneo and wrote a geographical monograph about the island, which was published in German in 1889, and in English in 1892. In his work he devotes scant attention to the people of Borneo. He mainly focuses on the geography and mineral resources of the island (Posewitz 1883, 1889, 1892). Further publications appeared in journals like *Das Ausland*, *Földtani Közlöny* [Geological Notifications], *Földrajzi Közlemények* [Geographical Notifications], *Verhandlungen der k. k. geologischen Reichsanstalt*, *Petermanns geogr. Mitteilungen en Mitteilungen der kais. königl. Geographischen Gesellschaft*.

²⁴ According to other sources, Witt was born in a village near Nagykanizsa ("Egy zalamegyei utazó meggyilkolása", *Zalamegye* 1/20, 12-11-1882, p. 3). However, according to the Pallas Lexicon of Hungarian writers, the *Révai Lexicon*, and the *Vasárnapi Újság* [The Sunday Newspaper], Witt was born in Pest. (A. Gy 1897: 1064.; "Witt Ferenc" 1955: 577; József Szinyei 1891-1914: 1597; H. 1882: 797). See further the article by Gábor Bécsi (2016).

²⁵ According to other sources, he attended the academy in Fiume (now Rijeka in Croatia) ("Külföld", *Fővárosi Lapok* 19/237, 15-10-1882, p. 1481).

war broke out between Austria and Prussia, and then between Austria and Italy.²⁶ After the call to arms by Admiral Tegetthoff,²⁷ Wittl volunteered for military war service and participated in several naval battles. He distinguished himself at the Battle of Lissa.

After the war, Wittl remained with the Navy and was a crew member on the great East Asian Expedition of 1868.²⁸ This combined Austro-Hungarian venture was a trade mission, by which they hoped to establish relations with Indochina, China, Japan, and other East Asian countries (Miklós Mihály Nagy 2001). In 1872 Wittl was appointed a naval ensign.²⁹ Later he was promoted to lieutenant and remained in the service until 1878.³⁰ The exact reason he resigned with the rank of lieutenant remains unclear. In the press there was talk of “financial struggles and family circumstances” (H 1882: 797) which necessitated him resigning his naval commission and searching for another job. Others believed they knew he left because of “conduct unbecoming an officer”,³¹ and, wanting to rehabilitate himself, left for Borneo. Whatever the case may be, he went to London where he received an offer from the journalist and explorer of Africa Henry Morton Stanley (1841-1904) to head a station during his next expedition into the Congo territory (H 1882: 797). Wittl refused the offer and took a job with the British North Borneo Company. His experience in the naval field, his wide knowledge of languages and geography, and his personal charm and courage certainly played a role in winning the job.³²

The position of explorer in the service of the British North Borneo Company, fitted him like a glove. He spoke the local language³³ and knew the natives. In his report, he hardly ever speaks of the Dayaks generally, but of one particular tribe, the Dusun. Wittl mainly travelled in the area inhabited by this indigenous tribe. He interacted with them in a friendly fashion, and he spoke their language, which was very much appreciated by the natives. In one village, a blind old village chief said to him: “I have never seen a white man’s face, and I cannot see yours, but I am glad to hear you speak our tongue” (16 May, 1881).³⁴ The trust

²⁶ After the disastrous defeat of the Austrian troops near Königgrätz, it was clear that militarily Austria could not measure up to Prussia. German unification (the Second Empire) was established under Otto von Bismarck in 1871. Although the Italians lost important battles, like at Custoza and at Lissa, but they eventually won the war with Prussian support. See György Gábor Józsa (1990: 45-57).

²⁷ Wilhelm von Tegetthoff (1827-1871) was the most successful admiral and commander of the Austrian fleet in the nineteenth century.

²⁸ “Külföld”, *Fővárosi Lapok* 19/237, 15-10-1882, p. 1481.

²⁹ “Hivatalos rész”, *Budapesti Közlöny* 114, 19-5-1872, p. 908.

³⁰ After the war with Prussia, in Vienna it was believed that Austria should remain a continental power and certainly did not have a future as a naval power. This is why the fleet was reduced (Józsa 1990: 57).

³¹ “Külföld”, *Fővárosi Lapok* 19/237, 15-10-1882, p. 1500.

³² W.A. Treacher, the first governor of British Borneo, wrote about Wittl in 1891: “He had served in the Austrian Navy and was a very energetic, courageous and accomplished man” (Treacher 1891: 159).

³³ According to Tivadar Ács, Wittl had learned five indigenous languages before his departure. See Ács (2008: 221).

³⁴ The quotes from Wittl’s journal refer to the text in the theme number of *Acta Neerlandica*

between Wittl and the Dusun was evident. A form of friendship developed, which went to such lengths the life of the expedition members was entrusted to the Dusun.

When the interpreter on the expedition, Si Ong, fell ill, he was left in a Dusun village. Wittl was certain that the man would be well cared for and that he was safe among the "friendly Dusun" (15 November, 1880). Wittl was firmly convinced of the amiable nature of the Dusun and that he had nothing to fear from these people. When he arrived in a Dusun village with his escort, they were accommodated in a house: "Put up in the 'big house' after dusk. People at first reserved, almost suspicious: then the genial Dusun ways broke through, and we turned in as declared friends" (10 November, 1880). On 16 November, 1880, he writes in his report: "We are at this moment enjoying the situation, sitting with the Dusun round the damar (resin) light, snug and dry, whilst outside it is pouring cats and dogs. The Dusun received Wittl and his men amiably everywhere and the Hungarian explorer emphasized that he had become very used to 'the kindly Dusun'" (19 November, 1880).

Therefore, in Wittl's texts the indigenous tribes of Borneo are presented in a completely different light to that in which they were represented by the other travellers of his time. The amiable interaction with strangers, and the peaceful and hospitable nature of the natives are stressed in the Hungarian traveller's journal. In his text, Wittl deconstructs the binary oppositions of the prevailing stereotypes of his time. In his eyes, the natives were not bloodthirsty, cruel people (as is the case for Andrásy, for example) but friendly, pleasant people with whom he felt at ease. Precisely because of this friendly contact between Wittl and the natives, the fact that he was killed near the Sambakong River by head-hunters in July 1882, hits much harder (A. Cook 1890: 65).

In September 1882, the world was shocked by the news of the Hungarian explorer's death. Initial reports, which were quickly copied by the English, and later the American and Dutch press came in from Singapore. The descriptions of Wittl's death are almost identical in all the newspapers. Despite the warnings of the governor, Wittl had gone farther inland, into an area which was inhabited, also according to Carl Bock, by exceptionally cruel, bloodthirsty indigenous tribes. Wittl and his seventeen native escorts had navigated upstream on the Sibuco river (so at the frontier of Dutch Borneo). At a certain point, they could not sail any farther, and Wittl divided his men into two groups. One group had to stay with the boats, the other group proceeded inland on foot. Wittl had just begun to write his report when three hundred natives (Murut or Tanjung Dayak), armed with poisoned arrows and lances, appeared out of the forest.

13/2016: *Koppensnellers en ontdekkingsreizigers, Borneo in reisteksten van Hongaren uit de 19de eeuw*. [Head-hunters and travellers, Borneo in travel descriptions of Hungarians from the nineteenth century.] The journal is a supplement to the article by Gábor Bécsi: *Van de Hongaarse poesta naar Noord-Borneo. De reisjournalen van Ferenc Wittl*. [From the Hungarian *pusta* to North Borneo. The travel journals of Ferenc Wittl.] (Bécsi 2016: 69-210).

Those who could not get away instantly were slaughtered. One of Wittí's indigenous followers escaped immediately with the Hungarian explorer's gun. Therefore, without his Winchester Wittí could do little to save himself. He defended himself with his revolver, shooting and killing two men, but was eventually stabbed with a spear, his head cut off, and his naked body thrown into the river.³⁵ The cause of the attack and the brutal murder was not clear at the time of Wittí's death. Almost ten years later, in 1891, the first governor of British North Borneo, W.A. Treacher, wrote about Wittí's death and its possible cause in his book *British Borneo*.

He and his men had slept in the village one night, and on the following day some of the tribe joined the party guides, but led them into the ambushade, where the gallant Wittí and many of his men were killed by *sumpitans*. So far as we have been able to ascertain the sole reason for the attack was the fact that Wittí had come to the district from a tribe with whom these people were at war, and he was, therefore, according to native custom, deemed also to be an enemy. (Treacher 1891: 159).

It was the Dutch press which was most concerned with the case, because the murder had been committed at the border river between Dutch and British Borneo, and there was a fear that this attack was only the beginning of a general rebellion by the natives, which could definitely not have been put down by the North Borneo Company without the help of the British army. And, if was this indeed the case, the rebellion could spread into Dutch territory.³⁶ Many immediately screamed for revenge:

Mister Wittí, an engineer with the British N. Borneo Cy., as is reported from Kudat, dated August 20th, has been abused and murdered in the inland in a disgraceful manner. "This has happened in Dutch territory – according to the Straits Times!" The "Straits Times" asks what will be done to avenge his death. Something *must* be done – this much is clear! – otherwise travel into the inland will have to abandoned.³⁷

Two years after Wittí's death in Borneo, an announcement appeared in the Hungarian paper *Budapesti Közlöny* concerning the testamentary bequests of

³⁵ "Nederland", *Java-Bode*, 31/270, 15-11-1882, p. 5; "De moord op Nord-Borneo", *Bataviaasch Handelsblad* 25/272, 18-11-1882, p. 7; "Particuliere telegrammen", *Algemeen Handelsblad* 16456, 13-10-1882, p. 6; "Buitenland", *Leeuwarder Courant* 244, 14-10-1882, p. 1; "Gemengd nieuws", *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* 1397, 13-10-1882, p. 2; "Nederlandsch-Indie", *Sumatra Courant* 23/122, 12-10-1882, p. 2.

³⁶ "De moord op Nord-Borneo", *Bataviaasch Handelsblad* 25/272, 18-11-1882, p. 7.

³⁷ *De heer Wittí, ingenieur bij de British N. Borneo Cy., zoo wordt uit Koedat dd. 20 Augustus geschreven, is in het binnenland op een schandelijke wijze door inlanders mishandeld en vermoord. Dit is gebeurd op Hollandsch grondgebied – altijd volgens den Straits-Times! De Straits-Times vraagt wat gedaan zal worden om zijn dood te wreken. Iets moet gedaan worden, zegt het, want anders zal het reizen in het binnenland moeten worden opgegeven.* ("Nederlandsch-Indie", *Java-Bode* 31/241, 12-10-1882, p. 4).

the Hungarian explorer.³⁸ The announcement states clearly that, in his last will and testament, Wittl declared two young indigenous women, Tingel and Ematon, his heirs. Both women had to declare themselves, according to the paper, at the court in Budapest within one year to claim their inheritance.³⁹ The chances that Tingel and Ematon very often read a Hungarian paper, evidently in Hungarian, and would present themselves and claim the inheritance were, of course, extremely limited. Even though the announcement in the paper was according to the rules, it was farcical.

However, this post does reveal something: the fact that Wittl named two indigenous women his heirs in his testament, indicates that his relationship with the native population was close. And he, of all people, who was very favourably inclined towards the Dusun and the other tribes in Borneo, was tragically killed at the hands of indigenous warriors. Wittl was in the service of a undeniably colonial enterprise, the British North Borneo Company, and therefore a servant of European colonialism, and a scientific traveller of the British Empire (Angela Byrne 2021: 17). But, in his journal, Wittl was busy breaking the colonial rules about the stereotypes about the natives. In his text, we usually read the opposite to what Bock or Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach claimed. Hence, the representation of the indigenous people is a more rounded one in Wittl. But the tragedy is, that of all people, it was Wittl with his ghastly death who confirmed this stereotypical representation of the cruel head-hunters.

CONCLUSION

In the nineteenth century most of Borneo was terra incognita; an area which still had to be mapped. Little was known about its inhabitants. The Dayaks, the Malays, and the Chinese were not held in high regard by most European travellers. The few who did go ashore had only a few good words to say about the island. Scientists like Bock, military men like Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach, or the travelling widow Ida Pfeiffer had a predominantly negative opinion of the inhabitants of Borneo. The "savages" were cruel, bloodthirsty, heathen, lazy, cowardly, disobedient, and dangerous. By stereotyping of the strange, in their texts, they created binary opposition pairs which implicitly created a hierarchy. A hierarchy in which the European himself occupied the positive pole. The white European was the opposite to the strange: he was benign, Christian, diligent, brave, social, and kind. In short, it was a confirmation of the self-image of the European, a fixation of the auto-stereotype which secured the superiority of the whites and simultaneously preserved the inferiority of the indigenous.

The nineteenth-century Hungarian travellers who ended up in the island and wrote about it had very different perspectives. János Xántus did have a scientific interest, but was mainly interested in the people. His views can perhaps be explained by his own background. As a refugee in England, and

³⁸ "Felhívások", *A Budapesti Közlöny Hivatalos Értesítője* 67, 2-3-1884, p. 9.

³⁹ "De moord op Nord-Borneo", *Bataviaasch Handelsblad* 25/272, 18-11-1882, p. 7.

later as an emigrant in the USA, he had experienced the other in different ways. I find it very plausible to assume that this experience played a crucial role in his reflections on the natives and the self-reflexivity in his text. His text is the most non-conformist of all. He spent months in the villages of the Dayaks and learned to appreciate these people. He did not see the cruel and the horrific in the habits of the indigenous, but, as an ethnographer, found an exciting subject for study in the Dayaks and did at least try to find an explanation for their habits. The respect was mutual; the Dayaks accepted him and welcomed the Hungarian scientist into their community. Xántus not only contradicts all the stereotypes found in the other texts, and by doing so, he also breaks down the hierarchy of the binary opposition pair. With him, the dangerous stranger becomes an admirable gentleman.

This non-conformist attitude cannot be said of Count Andrásy. Admittedly he had no personal experience of Borneo, yet in his book he adopted an extraordinarily negative story about the Dayaks from someone who had personal experience of Borneo. The story of the German doctor was accepted by Andrásy without any questions or doubts because it confirmed his exceptionally hierarchical idea about his own superiority as a white European and aristocrat. The stereotypes of the Dayaks deviate only a little from those held by Bock or Von Saksen-Weimar-Eisenach. The white superiority and the Eurocentric view of the world of the natives springs off every page. But with the Hungarian aristocrat there is more; one could even say it was worse. In his book Andrásy looks down on almost everyone in a negatively ironical manner. He tries to disguise his smug arrogance with humour, but only seldom succeeds in camouflaging his true nature.

In the figure of Wittl and his journal we see a European who, just like Xántus, approached the indigenous population in a non-conformist fashion. Wittl was in the service of a colonial enterprise and as such the servant of European colonialism, a scientific traveller of the British Empire. However, Wittl was also someone who had respect for the local population. He learned their language and their habits and interacted amiably with the Dusun. The feeling was mutual. The tragedy, however, is that by a dose of complacency and by mistake, Wittl, fell victim to an internecine conflict among the natives. And through his death, especially the way he died, he provided a confirmation of the stereotypes of the cruel and dangerous indigenous people, even though his friendship with the Dusun was a testament to the destruction of this very hierarchy.

Based on the above, we can therefore say that there was no such thing as the Hungarian view of Borneo and its people. The three texts of the three Hungarian travellers are very different. The refugee and later emigrant, Xántus, and the naval officer with a multi-ethnic background from Pola had a totally different vision of Borneo to the aristocrat Andrásy, so conscious of his status. In the field of the representation of the foreigner, the texts of Hungarian travellers do not really differ much from those of Western European travellers.

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