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Cambiamenti nella percezione e rappresentazione dell'esotico

a cura di Hans-Georg Grüning con la collaborazione di Gianna Angelini

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Masturah Alatas

Sandokan's Daughter: Emilio Salgari meets his first Malaysian reader

I had never heard of Emilio Salgari until I came to live in Italy. Now, although this has never been verified, I suspect I am the only Malaysian to have read, in Italian, his first adventure novel in the Sandokan series, *Le Tigri di Mompracem* (*The Tigers of Mompracem*) (1900). I am not going to investigate in this article why Salgari's books enjoy less popularity among Italians today than they did a few generations ago, or why Salgari is not read at all in Malaysia, both oversights I consider to be a great pity. However, I would like to exploit my position as both Malaysian in origin and Italian by adoption, which I feel allows me to be entertained by the book in unique ways because of my insider knowledge of both countries.

At first it struck me as odd that Emilio Salgari, a nineteenth-century writer from Verona, would have set several of his novels in the northern part of the island of Borneo at the time when it was a British dominion. Aside from the fact that Salgari hadnever set foot in Borneo, or anywhere else outside Italy for that matter, what concerns would he have had with writing about British imperialist expansion when he could have written about, say, the Kingdom of Italy's creation of the Italian colony of Eritrea in 1888, for example?[1] Perhaps it is easier for us to understand why

[1] Most of my knowledge of Salgari's life is derived from Silvino Gonzato's biography of the writer. Gonzato, S., *Emilio Salgari. Demoni, amori e tragedie di un 'Capita-*

Joseph Conrad, the British writer of Polish origin and contemporary of Emilio Salgari, set his first novel, *Almayer's Folly* (1895), in Borneo, thus putting the tropical island on the British literary map. But perhaps I was asking the wrong question and my perplexity was misplaced. I knew that the privilege to write about Malaya[2] was not one that only members of the British Empire – colonizers and colonized alike – exclusively held. If Salgari cared enough to write about Malaya without having any real social, cultural or political reason to do so, then his motivations must have been purely personal. There must have been something about Malaya that he was particularly attracted to, and that was what I wanted to put my finger on.

Then I discovered that a Florentine botanist, Odoardo Beccari, had returned to visit Borneo in 1877, where he had previously spent the years 1865 to 1868 collecting specimens[3]. Beccari's second visit to Borneo took place a mere six years before serialized installments of *Le Tigri di Mompracem* made their appearance in *La Nuova Arena*, a Veronese daily. Paolo Ciampi surmises that Beccari's own writings on his findings in Borneo, published in the 1880s in a Florentine botanical journal called *Malesia,* may in fact have been Salgari's principle source of information on Borneo[4]. The works of people like Beccari and Salgari would fit into what Edward Said calls the "Orientalist" literary tradition in which a noticeable body of writings about the Orient began to emerge in Europe, a tradition which, according to Said, began in the late eighteenth century and continued and flourished in the nineteenth century. Among Salgari's contemporaries in the genre of adventure literature set in the Orient were Jules Verne, Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling and Karl May. Said defines Orientalism

no' che navigò solo con la fantasia, Venezia: Neri Pozza 1995.

[2] The Italian word 'Malesia' does not distinguish between pre and post-independence Malaysia. Malaya, of which British Borneo was a part, is the pre-Independence (1957) name for Malaysia.

[3] Beccari, O., *Nelle Foreste del Borneo*, Milano: Longanesi 1982.

[4] Ciampi, P., *Gli occhi di Salgari. Avventure e scoperte di Odoardo Beccari, viaggiatore fiorentino*, Firenze: Polistampa 2003.

as the image of the Orient in systems of representations, including literature, constructed not necessarily as recognizably inferior and alien to the West, but always according to a hegemonic vision and in relation to categories defined by the West[5]. One of the ways in which Orientalist discourse is perceived is through a recognition of exotic depictions of the Orient or the Oriental by which a generalised, non-European Other is constructed as fascinating and different. The exotic as a way of describing fascination for the strange, unusual, and foreign includes both attraction and repulsion, marvel and disgust.

At a distance of more than a hundred years, we cannot help but revisit *Le Tigri di Mompracem* through the analytical framework of historicism. Salgari's writing in the socio-historical context of a newly unified Kingdom of Italy – a land which had, in its past, known foreign invasion by the Arabs, Spanish, French and Austrians – helped me better appreciate the rebel rousing, resistance theme in his novel – local populations reacting against foreign invaders – and the many allusions in it to military and political leader of the Risorgimento, Giuseppe Garibaldi himself, embodied in the figure of Sandokan, the hero of *Le Tigri di Mompracem*. But is Salgari's exoticism always necessarily Orientalist? To answer this question we really need to look at how exoticism is represented in the novel.

Sandokan is a dethroned nobleman from Muluder who has little hope of regaining power since his family has been massacred by the British and hence his lineage has been extinguished. In exile on the island of Mompracem, Sandokan leads the native residents in military campaigns against the British in order to regain territory and avenge his family, garnering support from the weak and downtrodden and earning his name as the ferocious Tiger of Malaysia. When Sandokan hears about the orphan Lady Marianna – whom we are told hat an Italian mother and an English father, and who resides on the island of Labuan, a British

[5] Said, E., *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage 1978.

stronghold from where operations against piracy are conducted – Sandokan is completely mesmerised by the very idea of her. He manages to gain entry to her residence under the pretext of being a Malay prince who was wounded by Sandokan's rebels, and not only confess his love to Marianna, who had nursed him, but also reveal his true identity to her. Marianna immediately requites his love and his new mission now is to possess her at all costs, declaring that for her he would abandon his vengeance against her uncle, Sir James Guillonk, and even become English[6]. But while Sandokan may be willing to lay down arms, his adversaries are not and what was once Sandokan's battle for usurped power now becomes the battle for Marianna. What makes the book a page turner, and as much an adventure for the reader as it is for Sandokan and his allies, is the desire to know if, with the help of his loyal Portuguese friend, Yanez, the Malay pirates and Indian soldiers, Sandokan will be able to overcome all obstacles and marry Marianna, the Pearl of Labuan.

At this point, a legitimate question for this Malaysian-Italian reader to ask is: what is Sandokan? A Malay hero or an Italian hero? Salgari's portrait of Sandokan bears striking similarities to British historian Harry Hearder's portrait of Garibaldi. For Hearder, Garibaldi's "combination of tenderness of heart, total sincerity and honesty, and exceptional physical courage gave him the kind of personal magnetism which made women of all classes love him, and men of all classes follow him in circumstances of acute danger"[7]. There are also paintings which make the correlation between Sandokan and Garibaldi (see Figs. 1 and 2).

What is curious about these paintings is their title: Garibaldi as Sandokan, and not Sandokan as Garibaldi. Here we see a kind of postmodern twist of reality imitating art rather than art

[6] Salgari, E., *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, Bologna: Malipiero 1996, p.67. All references are to this edition. Henceforth, page references and brief quotes in translation will be included parenthetically in the main body of the text. Longer translations will appear in the notes. All translations are mine.

[7] Hearder, H., *Italy: A Short History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, p.188.

imitating reality. The real hero Garibaldi, who chronologically precedes the fictional hero Sandokan, is reinterpreted and reinvented after his death in 1882 as Sandokan, and not the other way around, that is, Sandokan who is represented as Garibaldi. It is to be expected that Italian writers and artists after the unification of Italy would draw their inspiration from Garibaldi in their imaginary creations of heroes[8]. But who do we recognise more in the images? Garibaldi in the guise of Sandokan, or Sandokan in the guise of Garibaldi? It is difficult to tell because of the dense hybridity of the images and hybridity, as Nederveen Pieterse says, is "a journey into the riddles of recognition"[9]. But the captions to the images lead us in an attempt to fix their ambiguous, multiple meanings.

In the case of *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, however, precisely because written texts are not iconical signs the way images are, one has to draw a distinction between the story and the illustrations to the story. For example, Garibaldi does not immediately spring to mind when one looks at the illustration of Sandokan in Fig. 3. But the same cannot be said of the narrative in which it is easier to perceive traces of Garibaldi, albeit a de-Italianised Garibaldi, in the character of Sandokan.

Sandokan is portrayed as an exotic character, but his exoticism is ambiguous because it is hybrid. He is described as being tall and muscular and slightly younger than Yanez, whom we are told is about 33 or 34. His eyes are black, like his long hair and beard, and his skin colour is slightly tanned (p.10). He resembles more a man of South Asian, Middle Eastern or even Mediterranean stock rather than of Southeast Asian stock whose men are normally not tall and have scarce facial hair. His military attire consists of a red, velvet tunic, azure silk trousers and red, leather boots. His headgear is a turban which has a diamond in the centre, and he

[8] Calabrese, O., *Garibaldi fra Ivanhoe e Sandokan*, Milano: Electa, 1982.

[9] Pieterse, N., "Hybridity, So what? The Anti-hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition" in *Theory, Culture and Society,* Vol.18 (2-3), London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage, 2001, pp.219-245.

is armed with an Indian rifle and a kriss, the wavy-bladed Malay dagger (p. 15). One can draw clear associations of the red tunic or "casacca rossa" to Garibaldi's camicia rossa, the trademark red shirt that Garibaldi and his freedom fighters wore[10]. While I tend to agree with Omar Calabrese that we can never know for sure if Garibaldi was the model for Sandokan because we do not have any archival evidence to support our claims, it is legitimate to affirm that Sandokan is Garibaldi because the influences of one's cultural milieu on creativity are stronger than even Salgari himself may have realised[11].

What religion is Sandokan? It is not clearly stated and it cannot be clearly deduced from his name, but it is definitely implied that he is Muslim. Sandokan swears "maledizione di Allah" ("Goddamn it") (p. 140) when he finds the windows to Marianna's villa barred, thus making his access to her more difficult. It is also unlikely that his Malay pirates, whom are told are "tutti maomettani" (all Muhammadans) (p. 17) would follow and revere Sandokan as their leader if he was not a Muslim. While it is true that Malays are Muslim – Muslim traders and missionaries of Arab and Indian origin brought Islam to the Southeast Asian archipelago around the end of the 13th century – not all Muslims in Southeast Asia are Malay. In fact, Sandokan tells us that he is not Malay because he cannot tolerate the smell of *belacian* (shrimp paste) (p. 92). (Still, I will continue to refer to him as Malay because the Malays in the novel consider him as such). Sandokan's accessories (the Indian rifle, the turban) associate him to Malaysia's Indianized past before it was Islamicised. Here, Salgari has succeeded in capturing the complex, hybrid, syncretic nature of Malaysian identity while suggesting, by being

[10] Ann Lawson Lucas, instead, correlates Sandokan's red flag to a real historical figure, Sharif Osman, a half-Arab pirate who had the same flag, thus suggesting that Sharif Osman – sworn enemy of the Rajah Muda of Brunei who was a friend and ally of James Brooke, the British Rajah of Sarawak – may have been Salgari's model for Sandokan. Lucas, A. L., "Sandokan, la tigre di Allah". Introduction to *Emilio Salgari: Romanzi di giungla e di mare*, Torino, Einaudi, 2001, p. xxii.

[11] Calabrese, O., *op. cit.*, p. 80.

vague about Sandokan's own identity, that it is futile to search for the origins of one's identity just as it would be futile to continuously harp on the Austrian, French, Arab and Spanish origins of many Italians. Sandokan, who is Muslim but not Malay and looks Arab or Indian, is simply "La Tigre della Malesia" (The Tiger of Malaysia). However, though it is implied that Sandokan is Muslim, he is certainly not portrayed as an observant one. He drinks whisky, blood (p. 66) and he eats babirussa, a kind pig-deer (p. 91), all of which are *haram* – forbidden – for Muslims. We never see him praying, he does not marry Marianna in a Muslim ceremony and Muslim men are not supposed to climb into women's bedroom windows. In fact, Sandokan's religion, like the religion of the other characters in *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, is completely downplayed. Like Garibaldi who was secular, Sandokan is likewise portrayed.

What moral code does Sandokan adhere to? We hear about his ruthlessness, but we never actually see him commit any atrocities. Sergeant Willis, who was unfortunate enough to cross paths with Sandokan in the jungle while the latter was fleeing from British soldiers says, after Sandokan spares his life: "vi credevo un miserabile assassino, ma vedo che tutti s'ingannano" (p. 81)[12]. Sandokan stops himself also from killing his worst enemy and greatest obstacle to Marianna, Lord James, because he is her uncle: "egli per me è sacro" ("he is sacred to me") (p. 284). The only time we see Sandokan kill is to save Marianna's life (p. 209). He does not hate the "la razza bianca" ("the white race") simply because they are of a different 'race' but because he has suffered injustice by them. And of course he is able to distinguish between good white men, like Yanez, and bad white men like Lord James.

How is Sandokan perceived by the other characters in the novel? They do not openly judge him on race or culture but on virtue. We do not hear Marianna's uncle say to her 'Do not marry Sandokan because he is Muslim.' Sandokan is feared because he

[12] "I thought you were a merciless murderer, but I see we were all mistaken".

is ferocious and not because he is not European. The proof of this is that when he assumes the false identity of a Malay prince in Lord James' villa, he is given royal treatment by Marianna, her uncle and their staff. Sandokan, too, does not take advantage of the situation by killing his enemies. The only character who does not seem to care if Sandokan is good or bad and is Marianna, the only female protagonist in the novel: "Re o bandito io vi amerò ugualmente" (p. 68)[13]. Even though she tells Sandokan that "mio zio non acconsentirà mai a imparentarsi colla Tigre della Malesia" (p. 143) she is very determined to become Sandokan's bride[14].

At the end of this appraisal of Sandokan's portrait, I must conclude that in Sandokan's hybrid and exotic character, we see an attempt to construct a Malay hero through very Italian eyes. Sandokan is very different from Hang Tuah, the traditional Malay hero. In the legend set in fifteenth-century Malacca before it fell to the Portuguese, Hang Tuah, a laksamana (court admiral), is falsely accused by one of his jealous rivals of adultery with one of the courtesans of the reigning Sultan Mansur Shah. When the Sultan comes to hear of this, he orders Hang Tuah killed without verifying the truth of the accusation. Hang Tuah's life, however, is spared by his appointed executioner, the Bendahara (court treasurer and advisor). When Hang Jebat, one of Hang Tuah's close friends and fellow warrior, hears about the injustice that has befallen his friend Hang Tuah, he revolts against the Sultan in a grand display of loyalty to his dear friend. The Sultan, who has great difficulty suppressing Hang Jebat's rebellion, then learns of Hang Tuah's innocence and regrets having ordered to put him to death because he knows that Hang Tuah is the only one who can challenge Hang Jebat. The Bendahara then reveals to the Sultan

13 "King or bandit I will love you all the same".

14 "My uncle will never allow the Tiger of Malaysia to become a family relation".

that Hang Tuah is still alive. Hang Tuah is immediately pardoned and the Sultan asks him to kill Hang Jebat, which he does[15].

Now the Bendahara shows disloyalty, first to the King by not carrying out orders to kill Hang Tuah, and then to Hang Jebat by turning his best friend Hang Tuah against him. Hang Tuah, too, betrays his loyal friend, Hang Jebat. But the question is why is Hang Tuah revered as a hero in Malay culture when, as Syed Hussein Alatas writes, "every Malaysian schoolchild knows that Hang Tuah did not fight for the truth owing to his blind loyalty to a tyrannical king" and not Hang Jebat who stands for truth, justice and loyalty?[16] As we can see, Sandokan has nothing in common with popular conceptions of the Malay hero and not just because Sandokan has no tyrannical king to be loyal to because he is a dethroned nobleman himself. What makes him different from perceptions of the traditional Malay hero is that he is neither blindly loyal nor tyrannical, nor does he expect blind loyalty from his subjects. However, Italianised as Sandokan may be, like any great literary text which is rich in contradictions, the exoticism of *Le tigri di Mompracem* is not exclusively Orientalist (in Said's sense) because:

- English culture is also expressed in exotic terms: "La cucina inglese rappresentata da enormi beefsteaks e da colossali puddings" (p. 65)[17].
- The exotic woman in the story is not a willowy, sensuous, beautiful Malay woman but a beautiful, half-English half-Italian blonde woman. It is not an Italian or European man who describes her in exotic terms but an Oriental man, Sandokan himself: "capelli lunghi, più biondi dell'oro, più sottili della seta" (p. 106)[18].

[15] In the Malay annals, it was another friend and warrior, Hang Kasturi, who fought with Hang Tuah. Here, I am sticking to the more popular, Hikayat version in which the clash is between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat.

[16] Alatas, S.H., *Intellectuals in Developing Societies*, London: Frank Cass 1977, p. 18.

[17] "English cooking represented by enormous beefsteaks and colossal puddings".

[18] "Long hair blonder than gold and finer than silk".

- It is not cultural differences between Sandokan and the British that are emphasised but moral differences. And Sandokan is shown to have more moral integrity than the British. Lord James Guillonk, who would rather have Marianna, his own niece, killed than her become Sandokan's bride, orders her execution. "Ammazza lady Marianna! Te lo commando!" (p. 209)[19]. Sandokan circumvents Marianna's death by killing John just before he is about to shoot Marianna.
- It is not only the European who has a fascination for oriental goods to bring back to the metropolitan centre and adorn the walls of European homes, the domestic space for Imperialist wealth and spectacle. Sandokan's, himself, partakes in that spectacle. He says to Marianna: "Se vorrai essere immensamente ricca io andrò a saccheggiare i templi dell'India e della Birmania per coprirti di diamanti e di oro" (p. 69)[20].

To invoke George P. Landow's criticism of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, we cannot assume that exoticization, like Orientalism, is something that only the West does to the East and is not something that all societies do to one another[21]. In fact, what is to stop us from saying that the following description from *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* is not exotic in an Orientalist way? Ibn Battuta, a Muslim of North African origin, is describing Meccan society which, though not his own, is part of the Ottoman Empire:

> The Meccans are very elegant and clean in their dress, and most of them wear white garments, which you always see fresh and snowy. They use a great deal of perfume and kohl and make free use of toothpicks of green arak-wood. The Meccan women are extraordinarily beautiful and very pious and modest. They too make great use of perfumes to such a degree that they will spend the night hungry in order to buy perfumes with the price of their

[19] "Kill Lady Marianna! That's an order!"

[20] "If you want to be immensely rich, I will pillage the temples of India and Burma, and shower you with diamonds and gold".

[21] Landow, G.P., *Political Discourse – Theories of Colonialism and Post-Colonialism*, http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/poldiscourse/said/orient14.html Accessed 29 January 2008.

food. They visit the mosque every Thursday night, wearing their finest apparel; and the whole sanctuary is saturated with the smell of their perfume. When one of these women goes away the odour of the perfume clings to the place after she has gone[22].

Even though Sandokan is a fictional Oriental character invented by an Italian writer and Ibn Battuta is a real Oriental travel writer, there is surprisingly very little difference in the fervour with which Ibn Battuta and Sandokan both express their admiration for foreign women. Sandokan's taste for the treasures of Indian and Burmese temples, like the Meccan women's obsession with perfume, are also expressed in terms that can be considered Orientalist because their emotions reflect Imperialist desire for exotic, Oriental goods.

On the other hand, one could just as well argue that *Le Tigri di Mompracem* is Orientalist because:

- The Malays are represented as being disloyal, both to Sandokan (he is betrayed by one of his pirates, Ragno di Mare) and to the prophet of Islam. "Ad un cenno di Sandokan non avrebbero esitato a saccheggiare il sepolcro di Maometto" (p. 17)[23].
- No Malay nobleman would abandon the struggle for land and honour and become English for a woman, let alone for a white, *kafir* (non-believer) woman.
- Islam is Europeanised in the story. Sandokan is a European caricature of a Muslim hero.
- Malay culture and history are not taken seriously. Sandokan is not a Malay name and Mompracem is not a real place.
- Malays are described as being "vigorosi e agili come le scimmie" (vigorous and agile like monkeys) (p. 16)[24].

22 Gibb, H.A.R. (tr. and ed), *Selections from the Travels of Ibn Battuta*, London: Broadway House 1929, pp. 74-77.

23 "At the first go-ahead from Sandokan, they would not have hesitated to desecrate the tomb of Muhammad".

24 For other descriptions of the Malays, please see Beccari, *op. cit*., and the chapter "British image of the Malays in the late 19th century and 20th century" in Syed Hussein

- Only a nobleman is fit to marry Marianna. It does not count that Marianna says to Sandokan "Re o bandito vi amerò ugualmente" because she already knows that he is a dethroned nobleman who is cavalier and good at heart. If racial and cultural differences are downplayed in the novel, class differences are not.

Some of the above claims, however, do not take into account that Malay history and classical literature are ridden with stories of betrayal, and that class is as important for Malay culture as it is for Western culture[25]. Nor do they apply a scale of values when it comes to Sandokan's morals. What does it matter if he drinks whisky, falls in love with a *kafir* woman and has no obsession with what is *haram* or not, when he follows a strict moral code for what concerns killing and human life? Finally, in any analysis of racist language in a literary text, it is essential to separate the voice of the omniscient narrator from the voice of the characters. If Salgari characterises people by getting them to speak for themselves, then it has to be noted that none of the characters speak of each other in terms that can be considered culturally or racially derogatory. The person the omniscient narrator refers to as a "brutto Negro" ("ugly Negro"), Sandokan calls a "schiavo maladetto" ("damned slave") (p. 25) in direct speech. Any critical reading of Orientalism or racism in *Le Tigri di Mompracem,* therefore, has to take into account the dialectical tensions and contradictions between the polyphonic voices within the text[26].

Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, London, Frank Cass, 1977, pp. 43-51. But to what can we attribute this peculiar way of describing people? It was conventional for many nineteenth and early twentieth century British writers to adopt a taxonomic style in their descriptions of people because they were influenced by Social Darwinism and positivism. Not only were people classified like animals, they were also described like animals. In an age obsessed by measuring and studying apes to compare them with humans (see Beccari), it was believed that there was a biological basis for cultural differences.

[25] See, for example, the texts of classical Malay literature such as the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (*The epic tale of Hang Tuah*) or the *Sejarah Melayu* (*Malay annals*).

[26] Bakhtin, M., *The Dialogic Imagination*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

What, then, is the function of exoticism in *Le Tigri di Mompracem* if the focus in the novel is more on class and moral rather than cultural differences? The issue for me is no longer why, if at all, Salgari disguised an Italian hero as a foreigner, or why he set the story in Borneo because, as I stated earlier, no writer needs the pretext of belonging to a country to write about that country. At the same time, writers do not choose their subjects on a whim or in a vacuum. They write about things they have either experienced directly, heard or read about, and are profoundly intrigued by. Writers are conditioned in their narrative choices also by the tastes of their public. Salgari's novels, as Luisa Villa and Richard Ambrosini argue, are melodramatic because melodrama was still extremely popular in late nineteenth-century Italy despite the advent of literary realism[27]. This would make of Salgari's exoticism a mere aesthetic, decorative prop that, while being subordinate to the moral dilemmas that are to be resolved on stage, helps create identification on a symbolic level. It is more interesting to read about conflicts in a foreign land when one is in a newly unified and relatively peaceful Italy. We could, of course, wonder why Salgari did not write a good melodrama about cultural conflict in which tensions revolve around, say, Lord James Guillonk not wanting Marianna to marry Sandokan because he eats durian[28]. And this would be the kind of story that also Malay-

[27] Villa, L., "La Tigre della Malesia (Emilio Salgari, 1883-84)", in *Il Romanzo: temi, Luoghi, Eroi*, Vol. 4, ed. Franco Moretti, Torino, Einaudi, 2003, p. 330. Ambrosini, R., "Emilio Salgari e la 'grande' tradizione del romanzo d'avventura inglese" in *Emilio Salgari e la grande tradizione del romanzo d'avventura,* ed. Luisa Villa, Genova, ECIG, 2007, p. 12.

[28] The durian fruit is shaped like a large melon and its thick husk is covered with spiky thorns. It can be as heavy as a newborn child. It can kill you if you are hapless enough to be standing under a durian tree and one falls on your head. A delicacy, also because of its assumed aphrodisiacal properties, the durian can become a source of conflict when durian-lovers try to steal the fruit from other people's trees. The Europeans have a particular aversion to this fruit because of what they find to be its repellent odour. Anthony Burgess described it as "eating sweet raspberry blancmange in the lavatory". Burgess, A., *The Long Day Wanes: A Malayan Trilogy*, London: Norton and Company 1956, p. 68. Kit Leee writes that a sign that Europeans have completely assimilated into Malaysian culture is when they begin to love durian. Leee, K., *Adoi!,*

sians would be interested in. But rather than try to speculate on the functions and effects of exoticism as perceived by the Italian consumer of Salgari's novels what, instead, does Salgari's exoticism mean to me?[29]

I, personally, am not bothered by the lack of verisimilitude in *Le Tigri di Mompracem*. Many Salgari scholars carry out fascinating and useful research that tries to trace elements in Salgari's novels to his life and his sources of information on Borneo. I recognise the value of biographical criticism and literary historiography of this kind. But I do not need to know who the real model for Sandokan was or which real place Mompracem alludes to. I am more interested to establish where the symbolic meaning we ascribe to the novel comes from rather than draw connections between history and fiction, which are sometimes just happy coincidences. It is not necessary for me to know if Sandokan and Mompracem refer to a real person and a real place. Never mind that there are no tigers in Borneo (tigers are found in peninsula Malaysia, not in Borneo). Salgari is not obliged to tell the truth about Malaysia because *Le Tigri di Mompracem* is an adventure novel, not a historical novel. Writers like Salgari have to be faithful to the truth of what they have imagined, not to the truth of what is real.

Yet, there are other markers in the novel which immediately tell me that it is about Malaysia. Salgari has captured something real about Malaysian identity. Labuan, for example, is a real place. Durians and belacian are things I have eaten, and krisses, rotangs, orang utans and babirusas are all things that I have touched. I have gone down a river in a prahu and Salgari describes the jungle exactly as I myself have experienced it (and this would seem to confirm Ciampi's theory about Beccari having been a source of information for Salgari). Malaysians *are* a

Singapore: Times Publishing 1989, p. 45

[29] Nevertheless, I believe that conducting response research into how Salgari's readers felt, for example, about the intercultural marriage between Sandokan and Marianna would be of extreme interest and importance.

hybrid people, the result, in part, of immigration from China and India during colonial times. Malaysian society is multilingual and multiethnic, and is made up of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Eurasians, Dyaks and more, the same kind of mix that Salgari populated his novel with. Malaysia was Indianised, Islamicised and Colonised, not just by the British but before them the Portuguese. Why else would Yanez have ambiguous feelings for the British and be on Sandokan's side? There were conflicts between the various tribal groups, pirates and the British in Sabah and Sarawak, rebellions which sometimes dragged on for years. And Salgari used the right Malay word for pirate – *lanun* – just as he got the word for fruit – *buah* – right. But when I read that Yanez and Sandokan quenched their thirst in the jungle "col succo di alcuni bua mamplam" ("with the juice of some buah mamplam") (p.167), I paused and imagined myself asking every single Malay-speaking friend of mine if I have ever eaten bua mamplam: *Apa itu buah mamplam? Saya pernah makan, tak, buah itu?* It did not matter to me that I did not know what bua mamplam was, and have probably never eaten a bua mamplam in my life. It did not matter to me that there is no glossary in the book to help the clueless reader, who nevertheless derives pleasure from the phrase not from understanding what the words actually refer to, but from the surprising hybrid confluence of incongruous Italian and Malay sounds that has the effect of accentuating the properties of the two languages, giving the impression that the writer is at home in both. What mattered to me was that Salgari was able to plant the seed of doubt in me about my own knowledge of Malaysian fruits. How do I know, with the hundreds of variety of fruit that are to be found in the second largest rainforest in the world, that bua mamplam does not exist and is waiting to be discovered? This kind of exoticism, which is not fascination for the unfamiliar or the consumption of the inscrutable, is closer to Viktor Shklovsky's concept of ostranenie or art as defamiliarization, a making strange of what is already familiar that

leads to a renewal of perception[30]. Why I believe this concept of exoticisation as defamiliarisation is useful for Salgarian criticism is because it rescues the Salgarian opus from the label of fantastic and makes him a bit more of a realist. Salgari may not have been concerned to represent Borneo authentically, but in many ways he inadvertently ended up doing so.

Le Tigri di Mompracem, therefore, inspires us to ask the question 'What is Malaysianness'? If Salgari was so impressed by the things he had discovered about Malaysia enough to write about them, and these (mis)representations were able to meet my own expectations of what to find in a book set in Malaysia despite him never having been there, then there must be such a thing as Malaysian-ness. What I find to be not very Malaysian, instead, is the uncomplicated ease with which characters in *Le Tigri di Mompracem* identify and negotiate their own cultural affiliations. Sandokan vacillates from wanting to destroy the English to becoming English. Yanez, the Portuguese, can easily pass for the English nephew of Lord Guillonk. Marianna, who will always be Lord James' English niece, becomes overnight the Queen of Mompracem. But it is precisely in Salgari's vision of cultural crossover that I see a model for rethinking literary representations of intercultural relationships. Can we imagine, today, a contemporary novel with a multicultural cast in which the cultural identities of the characters are not problematised? Can we imagine a love story between a Muslim man and a Christian woman in which their different religious identities are not in some way justified or accounted for in story? In which there is no talk even of conversion? There are many examples of Italian migrant writing or Asian British writing – think for example of the anthology *Amori Bicolori* (2008) or Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for lost lovers* (2004) – which are also about cultural conflict resolution. But the cultural conflict is always integral to the plot in ways that are completely absent from *Le Tigri di Mompracem.*

[30] Jameson, F., *The Prison House of Language*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1972, pp. 51-2.

To elaborate on this point, let us try to imagine that Marianna did not die of cholera as we discover in *I Pirati della Malesia,* the sequel to *Le Tigri di Mompracem*, and that she and Sandokan had a daughter whose picture is shown in Fig.4. This girl is strikingly beautiful. She is exotic, not in the same way that Marianna is exotic for Sandokan, but more as a construct of the globalised, cinematic Western gaze. She resembles actresses who play the part of exotic Asian women in Hollywood films about Southeast Asia. Unlike the Garibaldi images (Figs. 1 and 2) which are both hybrid and essentialist because we are told that they are morphs of Garibaldi and Sandokan, (Fig. 4) is an example of how "strategic essentialism" can be contra hybridity[31].

The book title tells us that the girl is supposed to be representative of Malaysians. But if Malaysians are made up of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, Eurasians, Dyaks, Ibans etc, then why does this girl look more Malay than anything else? It is to be expected – since the Malays constitute the majority of the Malaysian population – that a Malay-looking person should be on the cover of a book titled *Malaysians*. It would have been problematic to put a Chinese or an Indian face on a book titled 'Malaysians'. They would be better off adorning the covers of books called 'Chinese' and 'Indians'. But the truth of the matter is that this girl is not even Malay. She is Eurasian. She is of Iban (a tribe from Borneo) and English parentage and her name is Rachel Ann Ward. This information is provided in small print on the inside flap of the book's jacket cover.

Fifteen-year-old Rachel Ann Ward is the perfect cover girl because she does not match popular conceptions of what it means to look English. One cannot have an English-looking face representing post-colonial Malaysia. However, in Rachel's image my trained eye also sees the repressed conviction lurking in the

[31] Gayatri Spivak used the concept to mean "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest". Spivak, G., *In Other Worlds*, London: Routledge 1988, p. 205.

Malaysian unconscious that *mixed models are better looking than Malay models because English blood makes the Malay woman more beautiful* (my italics). This explains why Zainuddin Maidin, Malaysia's former Information Minister, called for the reduction of Eurasian-looking models in the Malaysian media.[32] It does not matter that Rachel is Eurasian. What counts is that she doesn't immediately look it. All Rachel has to be is a beautiful, Malay/sian girl.

Thus, hybrid forms first have to be recognized as such in order to be effective critiques of essentialism. The recognition of the individual components that make up hybrid forms is made more difficult when images like Rachel Ann Ward's are masked by discourses of myths of multiculturalism reflective of Malay hegemonic power. One wonders why, for example, a book cover bearing images of men and women representing the different ethnicities in Malaysia was not imagined to be seductive, just as Fig.3 is seductive in its own way. We cannot entrust Salgari with the responsibility of providing solutions to the many problems currently surrounding intercultural relations in Malaysia today. But it is quite amazing that *Le Tigri di Mompracem* stimulates us to talk about them, and provides us with a model for critiquing the kind of negative strategic essentialism characterising Malaysian society today.

In conclusion Sandokan is, for me, the first Italian-Malay hero in Italian literature (and also Malay literature, for that matter). And I like him because he seems to have no religious or cultural complexes. The Sandokan-Marianna couple is the first mixed-marriage in Italian literature between a Malay man and an English-Italian woman. And Salgari allows me to revisit and rediscover Malaysia in nostalgic and surprising ways from my home in Macerata. But perhaps Salgari's greatest legacy lies in the challenges he presents for the new historicism and cultural

[32] See newspaper article "Move seen as giving others a chance" in *The Star (Malaysia)*, 7 February 2007, p. 4.

studies. How far does *Le Tigri di Mompracem* as a late 19th century exotic and hybrid text offer a critique of the hegemonic discourses of its time, such as Orientalism, and how does it contain its own subversive discourses? We should not expect *Le Tigri di Mompracem* to be an Orientalist treatise just because discourses of Imperialism and Orientalism were dominant in Salgari's time. Salgari has taught us that the greatest adventure of all is to always look for exceptions to the rule. And the greatest relief to find them.

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Fig. 1. 'Garibaldi come Sandokan'. Date and author unknown. Buenos Aires, Museo de Anita. http://www.garibaldi200.it/iconografia.asp?cat=4 Accessed 02 June 2008.

Fig. 2. 'Garibaldi come Sandokan', by G. Gallino. Date unknown. Private collection. http://www.garibaldi200.it/iconografia.asp?cat=2&pag=2 Accessed 02 June 2008.

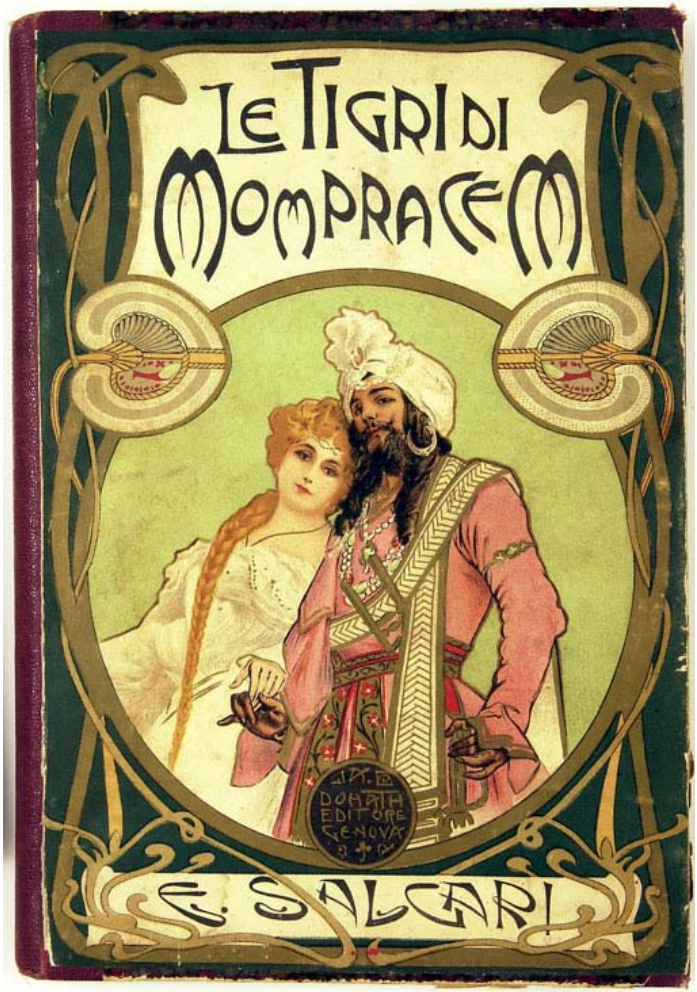

Fig. 3. 'Cover to 1906 Donath edition of *Le Tigri di Mompracem*. Illustration by Alberto della Valle and Pipein Gamba. http://www.italica.rai.it/index.php?categoria=libri&scheda=slagari_tigri. Accessed 02 June 2008.

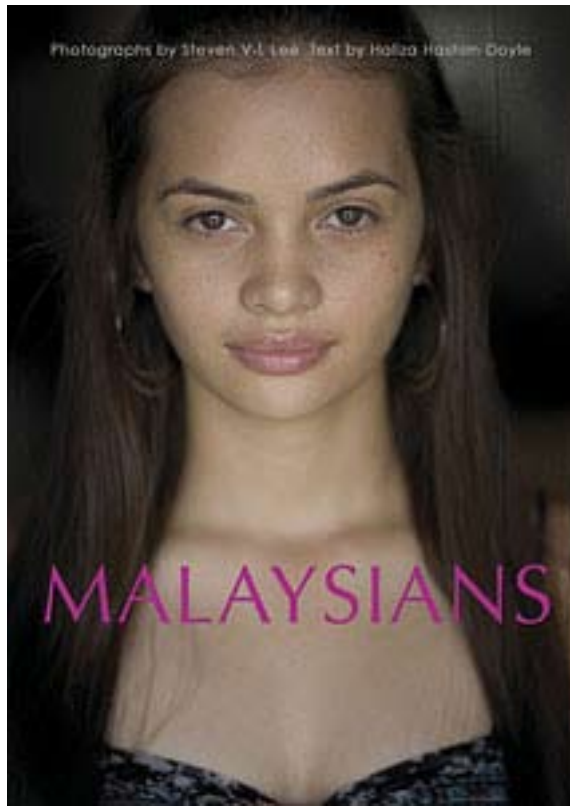

Fig. 4. Cover of the coffee table book by Hashim-Doyle, H., *Malaysians*, Kuala Lumpur: Sympress 2007. Photo by Steven V-L. Lee.

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