

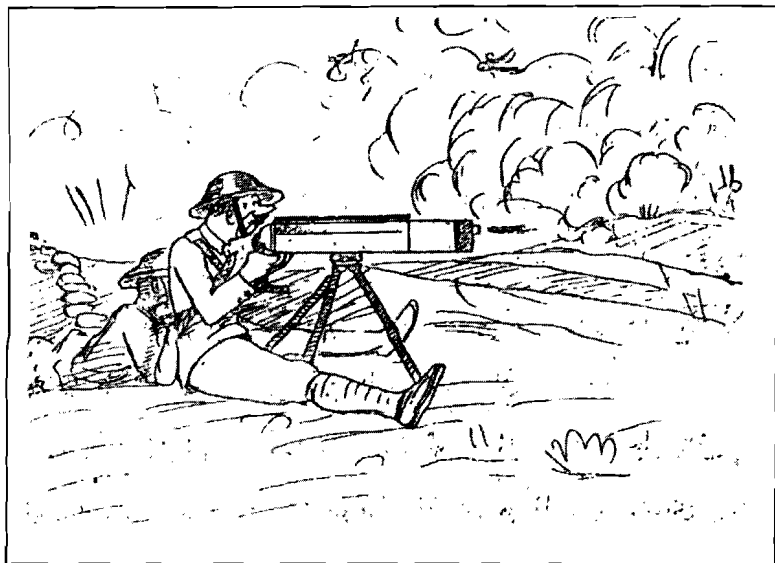
Wak Ketok Defends *Melayu*: Mediated Exchange and Identity Formation in late 1930s Singapore

One of the challenges in investigating cultural interaction and exchange is to locate the 'sites' at which the interaction occurs, as well as to identify the leading 'actors' and their interests, motivations and contributions. The 'sites' of, and contexts for, interaction may be located variously – historically, socially, politically, discursively, conceptually, linguistically, culturally, etc. – and in terms of the traditions and media in, and through, which they are operating. To illustrate, the key actor who forms the focus of this paper is the cartoon character Wak Ketok (literally, 'Uncle Knock'). However, he was merely the vehicle or 'front man' for the real actors – the cartoonist, Mohd. Ali Sanat, who gave him 'form', and editor/writer, Abdul Rahim Kajai, who gave him 'voice'. Locating him in historical context, Wak Ketok was prominent in the pre-World War II, Malay language *Utusan Zaman*. This illustrated weekend edition newspaper/magazine was first published in Singapore on 5 November 1939 to complement its sister Malay language daily newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*, first published on 29 May 1939. The *Utusan Melayu* was the first fully Malay-owned and run newspaper, and was the product of a nascent Malay nationalist awareness in Malaya and the Straits Settlements (the latter including Singapore), then under British colonial rule.

With reference to the conceptual context, factors shaping nationalist movements, the nationalist 'self' and the identity of its core *ethnie* – and the processes of interaction involved – have very often been represented as one of interaction with a European colonial metropole with the 'transfer' of European ideas concerning state, nation, democracy, race/ ethnicity, etc. to the colonial periphery. Whilst such influences were obviously important (for example the role of colonial censuses,¹ regulations, academic scholarship, education and even town planning²), these were not the only forces at work.

1 C. Hirschman, The Meaning and Measurement of Ethnicity in Malaysia: An Analysis of Census Classifications, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (1987), no. 3, pp. 555-82.

2 W. R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur 1994, pp. 178-9.



Wak Ketok Defends *Melayu*, *Utusan Zaman*, 31 Aug. 1940, p. 12.

As this paper argues, competing local traditions and other more proximate (that is, different but related and not totally unfamiliar) external cultural influences had an important role in mediating and determining the dynamics of the interaction processes. 'Mediating' influences and actors are defined in this paper as those which occupy an intermediate or middle position and serve as an intervening agency – not only as a kind of passive filter, but also as an autonomous agent active in shaping outcomes. They add a further layer in the interaction/ transfer process and can serve as bridges (facilitating transfer); as barriers (resisting transfer); as filters (selecting elements transferred); or as prisms (enabling but diverting flows in new directions with new complexions; perhaps also adding further possible outcomes). It is suggested that such mediating agents are perhaps most evident when looking at the micro level of specific interactions rather than at the macro level of generalised theory or broader historical and social processes.

The media via which intellectual exploration and contestation were pursued and the local traditions in which they were embedded also shaped the outcomes in significant ways – in this case not always directed towards either acceptance or rejection of 'colonial' or 'Western' influences. Closer examination reveals that it is not always clear, which were the initiating, mediating and receiving agents and what exactly

were the asymmetries of power and agency that were operating. Indeed, it may be instructive to view the colonial (British) contribution more as a mediating influence than as the dominant and dominating actor. Rather than being involved in a simple 'bilateral' transfer process from metro-pole to periphery, British colonialism was just one of a number of 'actors' operating in what was a 'multilateral' arena of interaction.

Wak Ketok is, thus, a 'window' through which to view such micro-level interactions between multiple and complex – with competing and sometimes contradictory motivations – actors and agents at a specific site (the British Straits Settlement of Singapore, the *Utusan Zaman* magazine, in the Malay community) at a particular time in history (1939-41). Wak Ketok is engaged in a discourse about racial identity. The specific terms used at this time – before the discrediting of racialist projects such as German National Socialism and European colonialism and orientalism – were 'race' (in English) or *bangsa* (in Malay, translated variously as race, people, nation) rather than the more contemporary term 'ethnicity'. This paper will briefly explore the roles played by specific contending and mediating actors (the cartoon character Wak Ketok, editor and writer A. Rahim Kajai, cartoonist Mohd. Ali Sanat, Malay-Arab elites, the newspaper readership and Malays more generally) and other agents and influences (the *Utusan Melayu/Zaman* newspaper, the Malay language and Jawi (or Arabic) script, traditional Malay culture and forms of humour and satire, the religion of Islam, British colonialism and European 'modernity') with a view to exploring the role of mediating actors and agents in transfer or interaction processes.

The Actors

The name of leading 'actor' Wak Ketok ('Uncle Knock') reflects his Javanese origins and his tendency to be critical of people and situations around him. Readers get to meet him in the first issue of *Utusan Zaman* on 5 November 1939. Thereafter, he appears in each issue of the newspaper, sometimes on the front page, and often as much as four or five times per issue. He is a complex and chameleon-like figure changing in dress and appearance from that of a person from the Javanese *bhupati* (upper or ruling class in the then Netherlands East Indies), to a middle or upper class Malay, to a rural Malay peasant to a wealthy Arab or to a westernised persona, etc. His many guises change according to the issues he is addressing. According to A. Samad Ismail, his Javanese name and attire reflected 'the cosmopolitan nature of Singapore whose

Malay population were of Javanese descent from Java, [and from] Sumatra, and the Malay Archipelago'.³

Singapore at this time was a bustling, cosmopolitan port city, the administrative hub of the British colonies in this region and an important staging post for *haji* travellers. Within its shores lived Malays, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, etc., as well as peoples from various parts of the adjacent Netherlands East Indies – as is indicated by the names of its streets and quarters: Kampong Jawa, Kampong Sumbawa, Kampong Bencoolen, Palembang Road. Furthermore, it was a 'centre of intellectual activity among the Malays',⁴ with other centres – Penang, Melaka, Kuala Lumpur and Kota Bahru – playing a somewhat lesser role at this time. It was the centre of a vibrant newspaper and publishing industry, which attracted Malays and others with literary and journalistic ambitions. Thus, Wak Ketok's somewhat fluid racial identity reflects the cosmopolitan realities at that time.

Wak Ketok was not only an ongoing feature of the newspaper; in many ways he *was* the newspaper. He was the *alter ego* of the *Utusan Zaman*'s editor Abdul Rahim Kajai. An examination of photos of Kajai and of sketches of Wak Ketok reveals a superficial likeness – his moustache, his receding chin, his approximate age at that time. Moreover, Wak Ketok is sometimes depicted actually sitting at an editorial desk and 'speaking' through the editorial column. Cartoonist Mohd. Ali Sanat was in fact the one who first created and named him. He would prepare the sketches based on contemporary developments and then Kajai would 'bring him to life' by writing the accompanying commentary.⁵ Thus, Wak Ketok came to embody Kajai's personality and thinking. Kajai and fellow editorial panel member and writer, Ishak Haji Mohamed (c.1909–1991), were the doyens of Malay journalists and writers at that time. Malay readers were said to buy the newspaper because they wanted to know their opinions on issues of the day.⁶

Abdul Rahim Kajai (1894–1943), often regarded as the 'Father of Malay journalism', was not actually of Javanese origins. He was born at

3 Cited in Mulyadi Mahamood, *The History of Malay Editorial Cartoons (1930s–1993)*, Kuala Lumpur 2004, p. 40. Samad, who joined the newspaper in 1941 as a cub reporter and, after the war, became its editor, was himself born in Singapore to parents who came originally from Banyumas in Central Java and who were looked upon as community leaders by Javanese living in, and visiting, Singapore. See Hamidah Hassan in: Cheah Boon Kheng (ed.), *A. Samad Ismail Journalism and Politics*, Kuala Lumpur 2000, p. 40.

4 Cheah Boon Kheng, *A. Samad Ismail* (see note 3), p. 76.

5 A. Samad Ismail, *Memoir A. Samad Ismail di Singapura*, Bangi 1993, p. 75.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Setapak near Kuala Lumpur to a Malay mother and a father who had wealthy Minangkabau origins (in Sumatra). Thus, he did, however, come from a well-to-do family in keeping with Wak Ketok's ascribed social background. His father worked as a Syekh (supervisor of *hajj* pilgrims) in Mecca, a role which Kajai took over after his father's death in 1913. Kajai had received his initial schooling at the Setapak Malay School, before going to Mecca for three years of religious studies in Arabic. He learnt English by self-study. With World War I in progress and the flow of *hajj* visitors drying up, he returned to Malaya and wandered between various jobs until he began to take an interest in journalism, submitting articles to newspapers at the time. In 1920 he returned to Mecca where from 1925 to 1927 he became the Special Mecca correspondent for the weekly newspaper *Idaran Zaman* based in Penang. He returned to Malaya in 1928 and was to become the editor of *Saudara* (based in Penang; 1930-1); the editor of *Majlis* (based in Kuala Lumpur; 1931-5); the editor of *Warta Malaya* (based in Singapore and owned by Syed Hussein Al-Sagoff of Arab-Hadhrami origins; 1936-39) and finally the editor of *Utusan Melayu* (1939-41).⁷

There is much less information available concerning Wak Ketok's cartoonist creator, Mohd. Ali Sanat. Except for his photograph and a few comments made about his political views and associations (a strong supporter of Malay causes and the *Utusan Melayu*) and his working relationship with Kajai,⁸ very little is known of his background, which may in fact provide the key to Wak Ketok's Javanese origins.

Wak Ketok was to have a colourful but brief life. *Utusan Melayu* ceased publication activities in January 1942 during the battle for Singapore between Allied and Japanese forces. By the time the reconstituted *Utusan Melayu* resumed publication in 1945, the former editor had passed away and the cartoonist had also either retired or passed away. There was an attempt in the 1950s by *Utusan Melayu*'s new editor to bring back the 'ghost of Wak Ketok' as a column without illustration. It did not last long. The political climate had changed. Furthermore, readers were uncomfortable with the title 'Hantu Wak Ketok' – did this mean that Kajai had become a ghost?⁹

7 Abdul Latiff Abu Bakar, Abdul Rahim Kajai: Wartawan dan Sasterawan, Kuala Lumpur 1984, pp. 8-23.

8 Ibid., pp. 72-3; Muliyadi Mahamood, The History (see note 3), p. 40.

9 A. Samad Ismail, Memoir (see note 5), p. 75.

Wak Ketok's Context and Mediating Role

Cartoon character Wak Ketok played an important mediating (bridging or enabling) role between the editor and the newspaper readership. A rather complex 'personality', he was someone readers could get to know with succeeding issues of the newspaper. He was entertaining, familiar, opinionated and from all accounts he was immensely popular, thus helping to boost struggling newspaper sales, while also serving to mediate between rival parties in a contest over influence over the Malay community.

After the *Utusan Melayu* was launched in May 1939, it faced vigorous competition from rival (Malay-Arab owned) Malay-language dailies *Warta Malaya* (in Singapore) and *Lembaga* (in Johor). Mainly sold in Singapore, Johor and Selangor, with small numbers making their way after three or four days of travel to more distant states such as Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan, *Utusan Melayu*'s circulation dropped from an initial c. 1000 copies per day to around 600 copies. Nonetheless, it held its own and quickly established itself as the 'leading voice in defence of Malay interests.'¹⁰ Malays, who had traditionally seen themselves as subjects of a particular ruler, were in the 1920s and 1930s beginning to see themselves as a cohesive pan-peninsular or pan-Nusantara (archipelagic) *bangsa Melayu* (Malay race or people). The Singapore Malay Union (*Kesatuan Melayu Singapore*, KMS), which was responsible for raising the finance for and establishing the *Utusan Melayu*, was itself founded in 1926 so that Malays could 'take the lead in playing some part in politics, in the affairs of government, so that our rights and welfare shall not be surrendered to non-Malay Muslims.' They defined 'Malays' as persons born in the peninsula and archipelago whose male parent was of pure 'Malaysian' (a term which then referred to the peninsula and archipelago) stock.¹¹ This identity was increasingly being defined against both a 'Chinese' and a 'Malay-Arab' or 'Malay-Indian' Muslim racial 'other'.

At this time immigrant Chinese and Indian workers were arriving in increasing numbers to supply the manpower for the tin mines and rubber plantations and were beginning to fill the ranks of a more well-to-do urban citizenry. Malays were increasingly feeling that they were falling behind and facing the possibility of being overwhelmed by foreigners in

10 A. Samad Ismail, *Memoir* (see note 5), p. 62; Roff, *The Origins*, (see note 2), p. 177.

11 Roff, *The Origins* (see note 2), p. 174, 191.

their own country – a process which their traditional rulers were not well placed to reverse or contain and in some ways had facilitated.¹²

In the 1930s, Arabs figured as ‘the wealthiest community in Singapore’ owing to their vast holdings in real estate and their trading and shipping interests.¹³ They (for example the Al-Sagoff’s who owned the *Warta Malaya* newspaper) had also figured prominently in the media industry. Many had intermarried with the local Malay Muslim community such that, by the 1930s, only around twenty per cent of Arabs in Singapore had been born in Arabia.¹⁴ The Malay-Arab community¹⁵ had long been active in charitable activities, in sponsoring Islamic education and mosques and in other community organizations, such as the first Malayo-Muslim clubs in Singapore, including the *Persekutuan Islam Singapura* (Muslim Association of Singapore) founded around the turn of the century. However, as Roff reports,

though ‘this institution seems ... to have been active from time to time in advocating the Malay as well as the Muslim cause, it was nevertheless primarily social in its activities and came to be regarded by many Malays as “a sort of rich man’s club,” paying insufficient attention to the kind of practical social welfare needed by the economically depressed Malaysian community.’¹⁶

Thus, the ‘nerve-centre of Malay consciousness’ in the 1920s and 1930s was a growing awareness of the problem of Malay backwardness. As Tan Liok Ee has so succinctly expressed it: ‘The question of *keturunan* [descent] became more salient as the problem of *kemunduran* (backwardness) was perceived to affect *only* the Malays, *not* all Muslims’.¹⁷ Thus, it was this sense of collective difference and grievance directed at the ‘Arab’ community that defined the boundaries of Malay identity

12 The 1931 Census threw such fears into sharp relief. In all except the four northern Unfederated Malay States, the Chinese had come to outnumber the Malay population. In Selangor, there were 23.1% Malays compared to 42.5% Chinese; in Perak 35.6% Malays compared to 42.5% Chinese – ‘Malays’ being defined as ‘Malays and Other Malaysians’; see Roff, *The Origins* (see note 2), p. 208.

13 U. Freitag, *Arab Merchants in Singapore: Attempt of a Collective Biography*, in: H. de Jonge/N. Kaptein (ed.), *Transcending Borders: Arabs, Politics, Trade and Islam in Southeast Asia*, Leiden 2002, p. 113.

14 Freitag, *Arab Merchants* (see note 13), p. 113.

15 Many of them had ongoing links with Hadhramaut (in contemporary Yemen) and in some cases also with Mecca and Istanbul (the capital of the Ottoman Caliphate until the latter’s demise in 1924).

16 Roff (see note 2), *The Origins*, p. 189.

17 Tan Liok Ee, *The Rhetoric of Bangsa and Minzu: Community and Nation in Tension, the Malay Peninsula, 1900–1955*, Clayton Victoria 1988, p. 6.

(*takrif Melayu*), which Wak Ketok was depicted as defending. His 'real job ... was to detect the disguised foreigners or 'DKA' (*Darah Keturunan Arab*, or those of Arab Descent), whom he would "shoot".¹⁸ Wak Ketok was critical of the pretensions of the wealthy Malay/Arab community – their Westernised lifestyle, their assumed piety while at the same time being depicted as engaging in drinking and gambling, both of which are forbidden to Muslims. The significant point to note is that the boundaries of Malay identity were being shaped by collective grievance directed not at the colonial regime in the first instance, but at an 'other' within the local Muslim community.

The use of a 'mediating', invented character – like the medieval European court jester – enabled the writer to say things that perhaps no person could say directly. Humour and caricature help to pierce through people's guards, breaking down their reserves and enabling more direct and pointed critique. Furthermore, Wak Ketok as the spokesman becomes the target for any reaction rather than the writer or cartoonist. Rooted in traditional performance modes and forms of humour and satire, Wak Ketok also served to mediate between a traditional aural/oral performance (largely illiterate) culture and a developing reading (literate) culture. Malay opera theatre (*bangsawan*) thrived in the 1930s, as did more traditional performance forms such as ancient Malay dance-theatre (*makyong*), shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*) and traditional story-telling modes. Kajai (and Wak Ketok) make frequent use of pantuns – the rhyming verse that is so pleasing to Malay ears. Part of the attraction of Kajai's writing was that he could weave such familiar sounds and forms into a contemporary written text using the new media (newspaper and cartoons) available to him.

Literacy rates were increasing in the 1930s providing the basis for an increasing newspaper readership. It was estimated in 1931 that 'almost one third of the adult male Malaysian population of Malaya was literate in Malay, and the proportion must have risen considerably during the ensuing decade as vernacular education facilities expanded.' For the same group it was said to be 50.2 per cent in 1947.¹⁹ Nonetheless, many people still had their newspapers read to them. Former academic S. Husin Ali once commented that when he was a small boy, his father used to ask him to read the *Utusan Melayu* to him while he lay down to

18 *Utusan Zaman*, 31 Aug. 1940, p. 12; Mulyadi Mahamood, *The History*, (see note 3), p. 48.

19 Roff, *The Origins*, (see note 2), p. 84, 167.

rest.²⁰ Celebrated Malay writer and intellectual Za'ba (Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad) commented in 1941 that

'[o]ften of an evening, one sees at the wayside Chinese shop some lettered man, perhaps an old *guru* of the local school or perhaps the local *penghulu* [chief], reading one or other of these papers, and a little crowd of elderly people less literate than he eagerly listening, questioning, and commenting around him.'²¹

In the late 1940s, the man who was to become Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, insisted that his fellow students read his legal text-books to him as this was the best way by which he could grasp their contents. Cartoons provided a visual (*wayang*-like) image to gaze upon while listening to the story being related or the text being read. The cartoons complemented the text, helping to animate it.²² These were the times before pop or movie stars in Malaya. However, the journalists and writers of the 1930s were often regarded in such light. They had their followers and fans (including many women), who came to the newspaper office to meet them and to discuss the issues of interest to them.

The medium of the cartoon was actually a recent innovation in Malay-language newspapers – first appearing in the first issue on 7 September 1936 of the weekly pictorial newspaper *Warta Jenaka*.²³ The earlier Malay-Arab owned newspapers were modelled after Arabic-language newspapers in the Middle East 'which did not use much illustration'.²⁴ Indeed, in Islamic art the depiction of people and animals is eschewed as these might be treated as icons or objects of worship. Rather Islamic art is based on Arabic calligraphy, colour and form. The depiction of clearly recognisable people and of animals in a Malay-Arab owned newspaper might be seen as going against such religious mores and prohibitions. Consequently, the cartoon seems to have been a direct borrowing and adaptation from European or more specifically British

20 Cheah Boon Kheng, A. Samad Ismail (see note 3), p. 75.

21 Za'ba 1941, reproduced in Abdullah Hussain/Khalid M. Hussain (eds), *Pendeta Za'ba dalam Kenangan*, Kuala Lumpur 2000, p. 302.

22 A. Samad Ismail once remarked that his illiterate mother and sisters were keen fans of Wak Ketok (and also the short stories and earlier *Hantu Raya* columns of Ishak Haji Muhammad). Samad would be required to read these for later retelling to his mother and sisters in the evening before retiring to bed. See A. Samad Ismail, *Memoir* (see note 5), p. 46.

23 Edited by Sayyid Hussein bin Ali Alsagoff until August 1941; see Muliyadi Mahamood, *The History* (see note 3), pp. 14-5.

24 Lent in 1994, p. 60 cited in Muliyadi Mahamood, *The History* (see note 3), p. 97.

cartooning.²⁵ Nonetheless, its content had deep local cultural roots. Both the *Warta Jenaka* and the Wak Ketok cartoons make direct reference to Malay proverbs or sayings and to the characters and themes of traditional Malay stories. For example, one cartoon refers to the Malay saying '*Kacang lupakan kulit*' ('The bean forgets its pod') and is applied to the 'nouveau riche' who forgets his humble origins.²⁶ Another would appear to be based on the popular story of Man Jenin who tries to rise above his station, not really understanding what it takes to succeed and thus in the end failing to do so.²⁷ Both are examples of critique directed at a small English-educated elite (including those from traditional Malay royalty) by a nascent Malay-vernacular-educated elite from more humble social origins, who felt a connection with the issues facing ordinary Malays.

Malay oral culture is replete with a large store of proverbs that contain not only the wisdoms for everyday life, but also a measure of satire and critique of even their rulers who were to be revered for their almost god-like status and aura.²⁸ Most often critique and satire is expressed in an indirect and figurative manner, but nonetheless such elements are present especially as wry humour. Malays until today are familiar with such clown characters as Pak Pandir, Pak Kaduk, Lebai Malang, Pak Belalang and Si Luncai, who in traditional stories are invariably the village idiots – the objects of humour but also the means for communicating the moral lessons, which the story teller sought to communicate. At times such characters may be totally lacking in intelligence – for example Pak Pandir who is instructed by his wife to pound the rice near the coconut tree. He misunderstands her; climbs on top of the roof of the house so as to pound the rice near the coconut tree with the rather obvi-

25 Mulyadi Mahamood, *The History* (see note 3), p. 97.

26 Drawn by Abdullah Abas in: *Warta Jenaka*, 23 Nov. 1936, p. 18. For the proverb, see K.2 in M. Sheppard, *THE MBRAS Book of over 1,600 Malay Proverbs with Explanations in English*, Kuala Lumpur 1992, p. 90.

27 By Salleh B. Alley in *Warta Jenaka*, 13 Jan. 1938, p. 6. See S. Othman Kelantan, *Pemikiran Satira dalam Novel Melayu*, Kuala Lumpur 1997, pp. 49-50.

28 For example, 'Like an elephant entering a village/kampung', according to Maxwell, is a proverbial description of a calamitous event, such as the arrival of a raja and his followers in a village (G.10 in M. Sheppard, *THE MBRAS Book* (see note 26), p. 66). Also according to Maxwell, the proverb 'If the sky were about to fall onto the earth, could one keep it off with the forefinger?' can be understood as 'Can the oppression of a raja or chief be successfully resisted by one in a humble position?' (K.51 in M. Sheppard, *THE MBRAS Book* (see note 26), p. 97).

ous consequences.²⁹ Such a relationship between a 'stupid' husband and an assertive wife has some resonance in the Wak Ketok character, who is at times seen as 'under the thumb' of one of his two wives. However, such 'village clown' characters can at times display superior intelligence and craftiness, the latter being a trait associated with intelligence and held in high regard.³⁰

The multi-talented P. Ramlee, who was a popular actor, singer, songwriter, musician, film director and screenwriter in the 1950s and 1960s, produced a film in 1959 with the title '*Nujum Pak Belalang*' (Astrologer Pak Belalang). While Pak Belalang (Father Grasshopper, or Daddy Long-legs) was the traditional village idiot, his son whose name was Belalang was very clever. Pak becomes a court astrologer because of his son's interventions and cleverness. Although this film has been replayed many times, people today still enjoy watching it because of its comedy and humour.³¹ It is said of P. Ramlee that he 'had a unique way of criticising and showing the weaknesses of human beings and social issues ... in a light hearted manner, but the projection was accurate and impression lasting'.³²

Thus, the cartoon character Wak Ketok would seem to be standing in a long-established tradition of village humour and comical, clown figures. Furthermore, there would appear to be clear Wak Ketok precedents in Malay puppet play (*wayang kulit*). This today is a dying art form due to prohibitions on its performance because it is now no longer seen as appropriate Muslim entertainment due to its origins in classical Hindu

29 A. Sweeney. The Pak Pandir Cycle of Tales, in: JMBRAS, 49 (1976) no. 1, pp. 15-88.

30 An example is the story of Si Luncai who is sentenced by the ruler to be bound in a sack and drowned in the river. However, he manages to convince a hapless Indian passer-by to take his place, by claiming that the reason he was sentenced was that he had refused to marry the ruler's daughter (see S. Othman Kelantan, *Pemikiran Satira* (note 27), pp. 55-9). Then there is the story of Pak Kaduk in which the Raja Indera Sari is addicted to gambling, especially over cock-fighting. Pak Kaduk, who like most of the people was poor, has an old but presentable rooster, Si Kunani. The Raja sees Si Kunani, wants him and requests that he be exchanged for another bird. Bets are placed and to the surprise of Pak Kaduk, Si Kunani actually wins the contest. Thus, despite his craftiness, Pak Kaduk who was seeking to profit from the Raja's weakness ends up losing his money to him (see S. Othman Kelantan, *Pemikiran Satira* (note 27), pp. 52-5).

31 Personal correspondence with Rosidah bte Endot, 1 Dec. 2005.

32 Farah Aqil, Website designed and created by farah aqil creations, 9 Sept. 1998 <<http://members.xoom.com/farahaqil/history/h6.htm>>, accessed Dec. 2005.

stories. One study of the puppet play in Kelantan³³ traces the development of two comedian characters (Pa' Dogol and Wa' Long) in the hands of successive generations of puppeteers (*dalang*). Pa' Dogol ('Mr, Father or Uncle Hornless'³⁴) is described as 'a rustic character with authority over the rural population', whereas his foil, Wa' Long ('Uncle Long'³⁵) is 'mischievous and rather a busybody, and he is often remarkably well informed about local gossip in the place where the performance is given ... he provides the humour which the audience is waiting for, and he is popular on that account'.³⁶

A striking feature of Wa' Long is his 'grotesquely long' nose, 'resembling the bill of a duck'. Furthermore, '[h]is mouth is small and he has a receding chin.' This, perhaps fortuitously, seems much like the features of Wak Ketok. Wak Ketok's nose is also a prominent feature. A little like that of the cartoon character Pinocchio, Wak Ketok's nose seems at times much longer and more pronounced (when shown in profile) – especially when he is in the guise of an Arab or a Western (-ised) person or when he is in situations of moral laxity or danger. When he is Malay he is invariably shown so that we look at him front on and his nose seems to be the flatter, more typical Malay nose. In Malaysia, Westerners are commonly seen as possessing sharp, pointed noses (*hidung mancung*) and so this is a familiar, well-understood representation of 'foreigners'. However, there is a further dimension. Wa' Long's duck billed nose could be moved along with his lower jaw, thus synchronising with his speech, providing a 'mirth-provoking nose'.³⁷

The medium of the cartoon in the case of Wak Ketok – with its kampung-oriented proverbs and wisdoms, its use of Malay codes and signifiers, humour and satire, and with its links to Malay oral story-telling traditions, performance and entertainment traditions – served as a 'bridge' not only between a performance and a reading culture, but also between literate, urban newspaper elites and a wider, only partly literate mass readership. Elements of traditional culture thus served as a 'bridge' between the 'familiar' and the 'new'. In the process, such a medium was able to bring change – both intended and sometimes perhaps unintended. For example, styles of humour have changed. While Wak Ketok had many links with traditional Malay culture, he always came across as

33 M. Sheppard, Pa' Dogol and Wa' Long, *The Evolution of the Comedians in the Malay Shadow Play in Kelantan*, in: JMBRAS, 38 (1965) no. 1, pp. 1-5.

34 Someone whose 'bark is worse than his bite'.

35 Long can be a derivation from '*sulong*' meaning the first born in a family.

36 M. Sheppard, Pa' Dogol and Wa' Long (note 33), p. 1.

37 Ibid.

sharp and highly intelligent. Indeed, the complete village idiot is today seen as typical of village humour in the past. Audiences in the present expect something a little more sophisticated and less irredeemably 'stupid',³⁸ and perhaps the newspapers and characters such as Wak Ketok (and writer/editor A. Rahim Kajai) were part of the process of bringing about such change.

Newspapers and the Role of Kajai and the Malay Literati

Newspapers such as *Utusan Melayu* and *Utusan Zaman* (and others) mediated between traditional Malay courts, which once served as the political, cultural and intellectual foci of disparate Malay communities in various states, and a new pan-regional Malay 'public' in which was growing a new awareness as a 'people' (*rakyat*) – no longer just subjects of a ruler, but a citizenry which could pass judgement on political power and traditional elites. Shaping such public opinion were nascent vernacular Malay literati who were beginning to arise from the rural kampongs, ironically as a result of the vernacular Malay education system established by the British to 'produce better farmers and fishermen'. The brightest of the students after four or five years of primary education could be selected to train as teachers at the Sultan Ismail Training College in Perak, opened in 1922. Coming from all corners of the peninsula and speaking their different Malay dialects, the boys were given basic liberal arts education in Malay, and, in the process, were subjected to 'a common and unifying experience'.³⁹ They imbibed from their teachers a love for the Malay language and literature and gained some exposure, because of the shortage of local literature in Malay, to the literature and political developments in the Netherlands East Indies. Later as teachers and journalists they began to participate in the new public sphere enabled by 'print capitalism'⁴⁰ and by a previous generation of Muslim Arab, Indian and Peranakan (local born, mixed blood) writers and publishers who had pioneered Malay language journalism.

This earlier generation of writers had also been at the fore-front of challenging the *status quo* within Islam by advocating a reformist Islam whereby Muslims should return to the fundamentals of their faith as found in the Quran and the *Sunnah*, discarding the cultural accretions that they claimed were hindering 'progress' among local Muslims. Kajai

38 Personal correspondence with Rosidah bte Endot, 1 Dec. 2005.

39 Roff, *The Origins*, (see note 2), p. 143.

40 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991.

had been a leading spokesman of this cause while serving as a correspondent for the *Idaran Zaman* and as editor of *Saudara* – the latter being owned and operated by prominent Malay-Arab Syed Sheikh Al-Hady. Both Mecca (Arabic)-educated and Malay-educated, Kajai served as a mediating link or bridge between the reformist (Arab/Indian) Islamists and the nascent vernacular-educated Malay (or ‘Malaysian’) elite seeking to assert their right to speak on behalf of the ‘Malays’ and striving in particular to encourage Malays to overcome their backwardness and poverty. The *Utusan Melayu* itself was the direct outcome of a nascent ‘Malay’ consciousness and the desire to found a newspaper that would proudly defend Malay interests and assert Malay ability to make it on their own merits.

While Kajai (through Wak Ketok) was critical of the Arabs for their moral shortcomings, their extravagant lifestyles, their presuming to lead the Malay-Muslim community, he was equally critical of Malays for their deference to the Sayyids (as descendents of the Prophet Muhammad), for their lack of Malay pride and support of fellow Malays. By mid-1940 Wak Ketok had strengthened his ‘Malay identity’ and was becoming increasingly angry and strident in his criticism of those whom he labelled in derogatory fashion as D.K.A (those of Arab descent) and the D.K.K (those of Indian descent). What precipitated this anger was the boycotting of the *Utusan* newspapers by those of this background – the *Jawi Pekan* or those of mixed Malay-Arab-Indian descent – in Penang. In the context of this newspaper war, Malays were encouraged to support their newspaper and those who were ‘fighting’ on their behalf. The battle lines were coming into sharper focus with a distinction drawn over the issue of leadership of the ‘Malay’ community and the claims of the reformist Muslim Malay-Arab and Malay-Indian intelligentsia to lead and be identified with it.

Clearly, while this ‘war’ had real commercial implications, it was primarily being fought in the realm of the rhetorical and symbolic. Not only was the visual image important, the language that was used also had a crucial role in determining the type of influences which came to impinge upon the newspaper readership. As with other Malay language newspapers of the time, they were printed in the Jawi (Arabic) script. Za’ba explains:

The language of the Malay newspapers has been, and is being, very much affected and conditioned by the necessity of having their material translated from a foreign language. The impossibility of finding exact Malay equivalents for such English words as *local*, *financial*, *professional*, *personal*, *personality*, *economic*, *cultural*, *constitutional*, *diplo-*

macy, totalitarian, democracy, and hundreds of others has produced a crop of tentative equivalents in the form of new loan-words from the Arabic or even of hybrid words coined for the occasion. ... The Dutch Indies Malay journalists generally show no scruples in adopting the European terms, as their papers are produced in Latin script. But in Malaya all seem to agree not to use the original English words which, when presented in Jawi garb would be hardly recognisable.⁴¹

Thus, borrowings in terms of new ideas and terms (from English, Arabic and even German in the context of reporting on war-time developments in Europe) were filtered and mediated by Arabic language and concepts. Wak Ketok, for example, uses the Arabic terms for 'you' (*ante*) and 'I' (*ana*). It was a living language and, as Za'ba has indicated, new terms had to be created in keeping with modern developments, sometimes stretching the creativity of the newspaper's journalists and writers. They had to develop a language that was direct and without the formalities of traditional court language.⁴² Wak Ketok spoke with the language and voice of 'the people'. It was deliberately intimate, sometimes referring to bodily functions that would not normally be discussed in polite company, so as to engage with his readership on familiar terms. Whilst Wak Ketok could move in the circles of the elite and wealthy, and though he had a tinge of the 'Javanese upper class', he also purported to speak for ordinary Malays. He was in this regard very much the product of the nascent vernacular Malay-educated elite – addressing the issues that might have once been regarded as the prerogatives of the traditional ruling elites.

Thus, while Kajai with his knowledge of English and Arabic served as a bridge between these languages and Malay, he also stood at the confluence of various discourses involved in the contest over leadership and influence over the Malay community and involved in shaping the Malay worldview and identity. A new Malay identity was being shaped against a discourse associated with the *ancien régime* (centred around identification with a raja or ruler and with his sphere of influence) and against a discourse of, and primary identification with, the broader worldwide Islamic community (*umat*). The Malay-Arabs, in particular,

41 Za'ba reproduced in Abdullah Hussain/Khalid M. Hussain, Pendeta Za'ba (see note 21), p. 301.

42 Ishak Haji Muhammad, for example, has been credited with having rescued Malay journalism and the Malay language 'from the suffocating influence of Arabic scholasticism' through his 'robust' writing style with its 'earthy simplicity' that smacked 'of his *kampung* background'; see A. Samad Ismail in Cheah Boon Kheng, A. Samad Ismail, (see note 3) p. 188.

had been at the forefront of efforts to advocate and inculcate reformist Islamic (*kaum muda* or 'Young Group') doctrines, that were a direct challenge to both the traditional Malay rulers and Islamic scholars (*ulama*), who were regarded as the Old Group (*kaum tua*) and who sought to maintain the *status quo* and their leadership in matters relating to Islam. Furthermore, drawing upon Western-derived notions of 'modernity', a new ethno-nationalist discourse was emerging, involving a new awareness (*kesedaran*) as individuals and as a people (*rakyat*), not just as subjects of a ruler, but as citizens and as a *bangsa* (people, race or nation). Malay identity would, thus, come to be comprised of somewhat disparate (even contending) elements associated with being 'Malay' or 'Malaysian' (the latter as understood in the 1930s context) and 'Muslim', along with elements of traditional custom, association with the Malay language, identification with a homeland, a racial (biologically derived) and ethnic (socially-constructed) identity and a locally filtered and constructed 'modernity'. These were to be the pre-requisites for a nationalist awareness that would eventually lead to calls for independence.

With his chameleon-like, shifting racial (and class) identity, Wak Ketok reflects the variegated possibilities; the shifting and multi-layered identities; the politics involved in the construction and representation of a Malay identity that was fluid and in the process of definition. He, along with the *Utusan Zaman* in which he featured, are both mediating and contending actors, shaping the discourse, perceptions and understandings of the Malay readership and the outcomes in terms of identity formation and elite influence.

But where in all this are the Western actors and influences?

Mediating or Contending Actors?

It is apparent in this micro-level case study that Malay identity was being shaped in the mirror of a 'foreign other', which in the first instance was not a European 'other'. The British tended to live apart in their separate quarters socialising at their European-only clubs. There were not so many of them and not all could speak the local languages, even to their Asian servants. Rather it was more local and proximate Arabs or (mixed) Malay-Arab-Indian Muslim Peranakan as well as the Chinese and Indian peoples – those with whom Malays rubbed shoulders on an every-day basis and who threatened in various ways to dominate and overwhelm them – who were the 'foreigners' (*orang asing*) and foreign traders (*orang dagang*) or 'others' against which Malay identity (*takrif Melayu*) was defined and contested. As we have moved from the macro picture of European colonialism and conceptions of 'race', to the

micro picture of local rivalries, concerns and perceptions, the picture became more complex and layered. Colonial power and influence receded to the fringes as the local collective rivalries and grievances that shaped perceptions of difference and marked the boundaries between 'us' and 'other' or 'foreign' became more apparent.

If we are to regard 'Western' actors and influences as major contending actors, it is instructive to examine the role played by such mediating actors and influences as the cartoon character Wak Ketok standing between 'Western modernity' (and his puppeteers) and the newspaper readership. What elements were 'transferred' and what elements were not? What determined whether 'mediating' actors served as bridges facilitating transfer; as barriers resisting transfer; as filters selecting elements transferred or as prisms diverting flows in new directions?

What eventually came to be accepted had to have resonance within the Malay and Islamic culture and society of that time. It was easier to borrow from the proximate culture of the Arabs, while nonetheless rejecting their leadership claims. Specific aspects associated with the 'West' and 'modernity' were rejected; for example, those aspects of the 'other' that were seen as morally permissive and 'orientalist'. Significantly, there was a growing sense of oneness not with the British Commonwealth, but with the wider international Islamic community.

What was 'transferred'? Was it predominantly British or European notions of 'race' and 'nation' and the Enlightenment-derived understandings of 'modernity' and 'progress' in which they were framed? Certainly, it would seem that such concepts and frames including others such as 'development', the 'public sphere', the 'West', etc. and the medium of the editorial cartoon were taken up. However, this begs the question: 'what were the understandings before the colonial presence?' This is important for this was the base stock into which newer understandings had to be grafted and against which borrowings should be measured. Alternatively, rather than focussing on interaction with European influences and agents, was it not primarily ideas concerning Islam that were being re-presented in the modern twentieth century context, thereby influencing the Malay sense of identity? Were the Malay-Arabs merely mediating actors filtering a 'Western modernity'; or should they be seen rather as contending actors advocating 'Islamic modernity' filtered through its interaction with 'Western modernity'?

It would seem more realistic to view the Malay-Arab, the vernacular Malay and the English-educated Malay (royal) elites as well as Western colonial actors as among a number of contending actors (including Abdul Rahim Kajai) whose 'battle' for influence over the Malay readership

and constituency was fought using the media of Malay-language, Jawi-script newspapers, Malay humour and satire, the cartoon (and the medium or perhaps 'mediating actor' of Wak Ketok). Thus, what was occurring was not a simple bilateral transfer process. It was an arena of contest with multiple, contending actors located variously with respect to transfer/interaction processes and strategically employing the various media at their disposal. The Mecca (Arabic)- and Malay-educated editor Abdul Rahim Kajai was part of a new educated elite, which was arising to not only stand (or mediate) between traditional ruling and religious elites and 'the people', but also to challenge and, to some extent, supplant their role and influence as contending actors. Thus, actors may shift roles from being recipient or mediating actors to being contending actors.

The Southeast Asian region at the intersection of the trade winds has had a long experience of cultural 'interaction' and 'localisation', which in itself has been seen as an integral element of its identity and a part of its 'genius'.⁴³ Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Western secularism have been encountered, contested and assimilated at various times, to varying degrees and in varying quarters. Seen in this light this latest encounter with Western ideas and organisational forms becomes less imposing and seems possibly less permanent, particularly in the context of a resurgent Islam that has more recently become a more dominant marker of Malay identity and thought. To better understand such processes of intellectual encounter, they need to be 'located' or 'situated' sociologically and politically; and through identification of the contending and mediating actors along with the factors which filtered or enabled the transfer of the 'foreign' into the language and understandings of the 'local'.

Not only are these questions about local 'knowledge of identity', but they are also about the 'identity of knowledge',⁴⁴ and its dynamics. How do elements 'detached' from one worldview (*weltanschauung*) come to be incorporated into the worldview of a recipient? At what point in the process of 'transfer' or 'borrowing and adaptation' does something cease to be 'foreign' and become 'one's own', even 'indigenous'?

The hibiscus flower (*bunga raya*) was originally brought to Malaya probably some time before the 12th century via trade from its original

43 O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, New York, Singapore 1999.

44 Shamsul A.B., *A Question of Identity: Knowledge and the Formation of Post-colonial Nation-states*, in: Asia in Riaz Hassan (ed.) *Local and Global: Social Transformation in Southeast Asia*, Kuala Lumpur 2005.

home in China, Japan or the Pacific islands, but now features as Malaysia's national floral symbol. The chilli plant (originally from South and Central America) and the rubber tree (indigenous to Brazil) were both brought to Malaya by its former colonisers, but have now become an integral part of the nation's cuisine and economy and landscape, respectively. But at what point did they become 'Malaysian'? The religion of Islam is a further example. The gradual process of assimilation from the 13th century onwards has been such that Islam is now regarded as an integral part of Malay (and Malaysian national) identity, even though it has also been in contest with other elements of that identity. Perhaps more significantly, can an intellectual framework with non-indigenous origins – especially, one which facilitated colonial rule, exploitation and intellectual subjugation – ever be deemed 'indigenous' or 'Malaysian', even though it has been an integral element of Malaysian intellectual life as well as government policy formation? What would be the processes involved in such a completed 'indigenisation' process? Clearly, mediating actors and other proximate external cultural influences can facilitate, filter and even drive such processes. But when it comes to discerning the distinctions between 'ours' and 'theirs' in terms of the outcomes of such processes, the more important aspects would appear to be political and psychological. They have to do with how one sees oneself in relation to the 'other', of which one is in fact also a part; and also whether it is 'politic' to make the distinction.