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Historical versus Practical Pasts? Enrique de Malacca in Malaysia's Historical Imagination

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Abstract:

The commemoration of the 500th year anniversary of Magellan-El Cano expedition in 2019-2022 reinvigorated the discussion about Enrique de Malacca in Southeast Asia. As Magellan's slave of Malay origin, Enrique's importance rests on the claim that he may be the first circumnavigator of the world. Using how historical and literary accounts, as well as public memories of Enrique, are appropriated in Malaysia, this paper aims to illuminate the efficacy of the distinction between the concepts of historical and practical pasts. It argues that despite the existence of overlapping concepts such as popular vs. academic history, the historical vs. practical past differentiation is more analytically efficacious because of the ontological and epistemological parity it grants to both categories, eschewing the *a priori* assumption of the superiority of one over another that is widely upheld. The notion of practical past and how it applies in different local and national settings needs to be further examined.

Keywords:

Practical Past. Hayden White. Michael Oakeshott

A prominent philosopher, Michael Oakeshott, made a distinction between the historical past and the practical pasts (OAKESHOTT, 2015). Historical past refers to the past which is “what the evidence obliges us to believe” in (OAKESHOTT, 2015, p. 111-112). It is independent of what we consider useful or relevant today and coincides to a great extent with what professional historians do and produce when they write history. The practical past, on the other hand, is what people regard as important “in relation to ourselves and our current activities” (OAKESHOTT, 1991, p. 162 *apud* AHLKOG, 2016, p. 2). As Hayden White paraphrases well Oakeshott’s idea, practical past is “made up of all those memories, illusions, bits of vagrant information, attitudes and values which the individual or the group summons up as best they can to justify, dignify, excuse, alibi or make a case for actions to be taken in the prosecution of a life project” (WHITE, 2010, p. 16). As a concept, practical past seems to overlap to a varying extent with the idea of the “usable” past (TULEJA, 1997; ZAMORA, 2009), “mythistory” (MALI, 2003; MCNEILL, 1986), popular history and public history (DE GROOT, 2009; ROSENZWEIG; THELEN, 1998).

Many historians often ignore this distinction while other scholars had critiqued it for various reasons (cf. AHLKOG, 2016; MACFIE, 2009). A few, however, hailed the idea as illuminating. Robin George Collingwood (COLLINGWOOD, 1934) and Hayden White (WHITE, 2010b; 2012; 2014) are among the most prominent thinkers who appreciated and engaged with this conceptual differentiation. In White’s view, this “distinction is useful for distinguishing between modern professional historians’ approaches to the study of the past and the ways in which lay persons and practitioners of other disciplines call on... as a basis for all kinds of judgments and decisions in daily life” (WHITE, 2010b, p. 16). The “populist reason” that Ernesto Laclau (LACLAU, 2005) alluded to seems to permeate various aspects of human endeavor. Given the upsurge of populism in recent decades in a wide range of areas including science and medicine (LASCO; CURATO, 2019; MEDE; SCHÄFER 2020; ZACHER; RUDOLPH, 2020), it is timely to examine how populist reason operates in history. The notion of practical past, as distinct from the scholarly historical past, offers this opportunity. It democratizes knowledge production by accommodating popular conceptions and uses of history as a legitimate object of balanced analysis. As noted, it overlaps with other more common concepts, such as academic-vs-popular history. Despite such an overlap, the historical-vs-practical past differentiation seems more analytically efficacious because of the ontological and epistemological parity it grants to both categories. Whereas popular history is often viewed as the inferior or deficient “other” of academic history, positing that the latter is ideal or superior, the notions of historical and practical past do not presume hierarchy; they are comfortable with identity and functional differentiation. Hierarchy may be imputed, but it is not presupposed at the outset.



This paper seeks to examine the long-standing fascination among Malaysians with Enrique de Malacca using the conceptual frames of practical and historical pasts. Enrique was the name given to a Malay whom the Portuguese captured possibly in 1511 and became Magellan's slave. He accompanied Magellan on his voyages and he seemed to have developed a good-natured relationship with his master. Knowing European and Malay languages, he served as a translator on the voyage that sailed in 1519 to find for the Spanish crown the spice islands, the Moluccas. This expedition found itself in parts of the future Philippines in March-April 1521 where Magellan met his death. Soon after, Enrique was not heard of again in the pages of history. Over four centuries later, his memories were resurrected and nurtured in the national imagination in Malaysia, Philippines and, since a few years ago, also in Indonesia. The claim he may be the first circumnavigator of the world impelled this development. Alongside the recent commemoration of the 500th year anniversary of this voyage, we can see renewed and resurgent interests in Enrique. The increasing, though still limited, recognition by the international community of this claim pushed the stakes higher (e.g. ZWEIG, 1938; TORODASH, 1971; BERGREEN, 2004). It intensifies the competition among the three countries over the "ownership" of Enrique.

The case of Enrique de Malacca seems exemplary to illustrate the tensions in and usefulness of the distinction between the historical and practical past. A very limited historical sources exist about Enrique, as will be shown below. Yet, this does not prevent Malaysians (as well as Filipinos and Indonesians) from creating fully formed images and narratives about him, complete with parentage, itinerary of travel, personality, exemplary skills, fiancée, child, and graveyard, among many others. For observers who are steeped in the historical past, or scientific historical methodology, it is easy to dismiss those claims as fake news or mythmaking, a residue of "traditional" mindset which can be corrected through a "higher" level of modernity and more rigorous scientific approach to history. What we will miss in this approach is the opportunity to examine in depth the basis of the hierarchy between the idea of traditional and modern/scientific in relation to historical knowledge, and to interrogate the very basis of authoritative knowing. Doing so also avoids eliding some fundamental questions like, who has the greater right to define what is history, the subject and consumers of knowledge or the producers of knowledge? For whom and by whom it is, or ought to be, produced, and why?

Malaysia's appropriation of Enrique is illuminating. It seems to reflect the rather long-standing and persistent charitable attitude in Malay/Malaysian historiography towards indigenous literary works like *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) as historical sources. I have the impression that while the separation between literature and history, a hallmark of the "modern" academic historical profession in the West, materialized in, say, the Philippines, owing partly to

the defining impact of colonial scholarship, it seems less so in the case for Malaysia, where both colonial and nationalist official endorsements of the supremacy of Malay language enabled the indigenous literary traditions to exert greater influence on the development of Malay/Malaysian historiography. Sliding between literary and historical seems more tolerated in Malaysia than, say, in the Philippines. In other words, the long-standing prevalence of the practical over historical past in Malaysia may help explain the patterns of public consumption of the memories of Enrique.

Also, the deep-seated and pervasive belief in historicity of a lot of details about Enrique in Malaysia is reinforced by scholarly efforts to prove his origin and purported exemplary characteristics. This raises questions about the supposed clear-cut demarcation between the historical and practical past. While no Malaysian scholars, in particular historians, have so far expressed an openly critical attitude towards this full embrace of Enrique, a sense of ambivalence is discernible in at least some of their pronouncements about him (e.g. NAFIS, 2019). No doubt nationalist fervour plays a significant role in Malaysians' appropriation of Enrique de Malacca, but looking into the interstices of historical and practical pasts promises to generate insights beyond the well-worn out idea of nationalism.

In the next section, I shall first try to illustrate Oakeshott's idea of historical past by reconstructing the narrative about Enrique based strictly on available evidence. In the subsequent section, I shall discuss the historical novel *Panglima Awang* (HARUN, 1970), which laid down the foundation for Malaysians' construction of the practical past surrounding Enrique.

Enrique as Historical Past

Following Oakeshott, historical past refers to our knowledge of the past based on available evidence, not necessarily what exactly happened in the past. In his words, "The historical past does not lie behind present evidence, it is the world which present evidence creates in the present" (OAKESHOTT, 2015, p. 108). By "world", it refers to the realm of ideas or discourses enabled by historical evidence. To note, Oakeshott was an idealist of British tradition (AHLSSKOG, 2016). In his view, we understand the world exclusively through the ideas we have about it. He believed that historical and practical pasts were two different modes of understanding the past.

Pigafetta's account, which is reputed to be the most authoritative account of Magellan's voyage, offers the most details about Enrique (MCCARL, 2019; TORODASH, 1971). Saying "most details" ought not to raise one's expectations about the quantity of such details. The pool of information about Enrique is extremely limited, as will be shown below. I use Henry Stanley's edited and translated version of Pigafetta's account, unless otherwise indicated (PIGAFETTA,



2010). Originally published in 1874 by Hakluyt Society and Cambridge University Press, experts regard this version as among the most reliable (MCCARL, 2019; TORODASH, 1971).

A strict reconstruction of Enrique's historical past based on Pigafetta's account may look like this. On 28 March 1521, Maundy Thursday, with their ships anchored near an island called Mazavva, they saw a boat with eight people in it. Enrique the slave, who was from Sumatra, called out from afar and they understood him and came near the boat, but they withdrew soon after. After two hours, two long boats came with their king accompanied by several men. Enrique spoke to the king, and they understood each other. The following day, Good Friday, Magellan asked Enrique to go ashore to request the king to provide them food and other provisions in exchange for money (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 76).

Two days later, on 31 March 1521, Easter Sunday, Enrique accompanied the chaplain ashore to inform the king that Magellan and his retinue were coming ashore, not to dine but to have a mass. After the mass, he also served as an interpreter in the conversation between Magellan and the two kings (chieftains). In one instance, Enrique asked one of them why so limited food was on the island. The king replied that he and his family did not live on the island. They came here only to hunt and visit his brother (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 80-81)

It was another week later, on 7 April 1521, when Enrique re-emerged in Pigafetta's account as they reached Cebu and he, along with an unnamed young man, went ashore to talk with the king of Cebu about the peaceful intent of Magellan's fleet (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 84-85). They were told it was fine to come and trade provided they pay tribute, like other merchants. Enrique warned the king of Cebu that Magellan, as a representative of the world's most powerful empire, won't do that and that the king risked being attacked if he insisted. The king informed Enrique he would talk to the council and ask him to come back the following day (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 85-86).

The following day, Monday, 8 April 1521, Enrique went ashore again and talk to the king and other officials. They agreed on the protocol governing the exchange of goods and goodwill between the king of Cebu, who seemed keen to uphold traditional obedience to him, and Magellan, whom Enrique knew would not pay a tribute (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 86).

The next day, Tuesday, a representative sent by the king of Cebu coming to the Magellan's ship was noted. As an interpreter, Enrique must have had his hands more than full conveying Magellan's lengthy discourse on Christianity as he tried to entice him to the faith (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 87-89). Afterward, Enrique accompanied the group that paid obedience to the King of Cebu. By far, this was the busiest day for Enrique, according to Pigafetta's account.

On Wednesday, Enrique joined Pigafetta and others to see the king of Cebu once again to ask permission to bury one of their men who had died the previous night (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 90). From Thursday until Saturday, 13 April 1521, Pigafetta made no mention of Enrique. On Sunday, 14 April 1521, he re-emerged, busy as interpreter. It was the day the king of Cebu supposedly promised to become Christian. Pigafetta recorded 800 people were baptised on that day (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 93). In eight days, they converted and baptised the population of the entire island. Enrique was not mentioned, but we may infer that his hands were full as a translator in the process of proselytisation.

The penultimate mention of Enrique came on 27 April 1521, soon after the account of the death of Magellan in Mactan at the hands of Lapulapu's men (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 103). Pigafetta described him as slightly wounded from battle, disobedient and was distraught over the death of his master. The new captain, Duarte Barbosa, berated him saying that he would remain a slave, despite stipulation in Magellan's will (more on this below). Enrique stormed out of the ship and went ashore. Reportedly, he conspired with the king of Cebu. He returned to ship pretending to be dutiful and told them that the king of Cebu was preparing a farewell banquet along with jewelry and others as parting gifts (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 103). Four days later, on 1 May 1521, the last episode where Enrique figured happened. The twenty-five crewmen went ashore to attend the banquet, but they were killed and only the interpreter, Enrique, survived. Fearing for the safety of the ship and the crew, they sailed out and fled. Nothing of Enrique was heard of again.

All in all, Enrique was mentioned by name (Henrique or Anryk) only once ; as slave 8 times, and as interpreter 15 times.¹ In a thousand days covered by the account, he figured only within 35 days, and only in 8 of those days Enrique was explicitly mentioned. Out of 128 pages of Pigafetta's account in Stanley's translation, Enrique was noted in one or only a few lines in each of the 10 pages. How limited the sources are, may be clear in that a one-sentence summary can capture all there is to say about Enrique in Pigafetta's account, as follows:

Within 35 days, Magellan's slave, Enrique, who originally came from Sumatra served as translator/interpreter, obeyed his master, went ashore to talk to or negotiate with the local chieftains and other people, facilitated as translator the conversion of natives, was injured in the battle at Mactan, was distraught when Magellan died, indignant when he was castigated by the new leader and was told he would remain a slave, possibly plotted with the king Cebu to kill the crewmen and was reported to have survived the massacre.

¹Twenty times in James A. Robertson's translation of Pigafetta's *Primo viaggio al mondo* (PIGAFETTA, 1906).



Only a few tiny details can be added from the remaining other sources. The first is Magellan's last will and testament, which was dated 24 August 1519 (appendix in GUILLEMARD, 1890, p. 317-326). This document attests Enrique was Magellan's captive slave, that he was a mulatto and a native of Malacca. It also stipulated that he was entitled to be released from bondage once Magellan died, besides a compensation of 10,000 maravedis (GUILLEMARD, 1890, p. 322-323). Note that Pigafetta's account and Magellan's last will offer contrasting places where Enrique originated. Pigafetta claimed he was from Sumatra, while Magellan stated he was a native of Malacca. Being both first-hand accounts, this raises potentially disputatious questions that can fuel further the ongoing heritage war between Malaysia and Indonesia (I have written a separate paper on this).

Gines de Mafra was a crew in the voyage, so his account may be considered as an eyewitness source, but because it came out two decades after the event (1542), and it may have been dictated to a scribe from his recollection, it is not of the same level as Pigafetta's in term of reliability and validity (SCHREURS, 2000). The only passage about Enrique was a note that he was "of little use as an interpreter, because after coming ashore he was so well received by the people that he got drunk from all the wine which they gave him" (*apud* SCHREURS, 2000, p. 94).

Another source was Maximilianus Transylvanus's account, which Stanley's translation/edition was compiled along with Pigafetta's (2010). It was drawn from the interviews of the survivors who came back to Spain in September 1522. Called the *Moluccis Insulis*, it was originally written as a very long letter to a high-ranking Cardinal. It was remarkable for having been completed by October 1522, just a month after the survivors arrived, and it was published by January 1523. It circulated not only earlier but wider than Pigafetta's account, thus shaping the understanding of voyage in Europe possibly more than Pigafetta's account did, whose more complete version came out only in 1800. Maximilianus' account of Enrique was similar to Pigafetta's except on two points: that Enrique was born in the Moluccas and that it was Serrano, rather Barbosa, who castigated Enrique harshly after Magellan died (PIGAFETTA, 2010, p. 200-201).

Enrique was also listed (possibly erroneously) among those who died in the massacre in Cebu on 1 May 1521 (NAVARRETE, 1837 *apud* RAHMAN et al., 2010, p. 90). Enrique is listed as a native of Maluku in Chapter 15, page. 85 of Volume 4 of Navarrete's compendiums and that he received 1500 Maravedis as salary (NAVARRETE, 1837 *apud* RAHMAN et al., 2010, p. 90-91). The final bit of information about Enrique, the only one before Magellan's last will and testament dated 24 August 1519 and Pigafetta's account from 28 March 1521, revealed that he was among those presented by Magellan in his meeting with the advisers of Charles V on 20 January 1518. The biography of Magellan written by Guillemard (1890, p. 102) cited Francisco Lopez de Gomara's *La Historia General de las Indias* (1749).

Including the additional information, the one-sentence summary earlier may be revised and expanded as follows:

Between 20 January 1518 and 1 May 1521, Magellan's Malay slave called Enrique, who may have originated in Sumatra, Malacca or Maluku and may be a mulatto, was presented as interpreter before the King of Spain and later joined the expedition as translator with a salary of 1500 Maravedis; he obeyed Magellan, talked to the local chieftains and other people, facilitated as interpreter the conversion of natives, was injured in the battle at Mactan, was distraught when Magellan died, indignant when he was castigated either by Serrano or Barbosa, who was the new leader, and was told he would remain a slave, possibly plotted with the king Cebu to kill the crewmen and was reported to have survived or died in the massacre on 1 May 1521.

This revised sentence hardly differs in substance compared with one earlier. It expands the period of coverage from 35 days to over three years, but the number of actual days Enrique figured in narrative increased only from 8 to 9 days, the additional day being 20 Jan 1518, when he was among those presented to the advisers of the king of Spain. It is Enrique's place of origin that has become more confusing, with three possibilities: Malacca, Sumatra, and Maluku, which underpins the heart of the dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia. This extremely limited information about Enrique did not prevent the Malaysian public from knowing so much about him, even reserving a hallowed place for him in the pantheon of Malay heroes.

Enrique as Practical Past

Michel de Certeau once declared that "(f)iction is the repressed other of history" (DE CERTEAU, 1986, p. 29, apud WHITE, 2010b, p. 10). In my view, the reverse may be true in two senses: first, rather than being repressed, fiction has greater freedom than history to explore wider-ranging issues, even politically sensitive ones. This is partly due to literature's freedom from the strict evidentiary requirements of history. Second, as more people read fiction, they can exert more influence on peoples' thoughts and behaviour than history. History may be the repressed other of fiction. This section will demonstrate this point in relation to Enrique. At the same time, I shall show how populist reason operates in the novel as an exemplification of practical past.

In the preface of possibly the most scholarly work on Enrique in Malaysia, the leading author Nik Hassan Shuhaimi admitted that the limited details about Enrique forced them to trace his life through that of his master, Magellan (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, p. VIII). The book also notes that it was through the historical novel *Panglima Awang* that generations of Malaysians got to know about him and his supposed exemplary exploits (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, 19-31, 200). Packaged as



a historical novel, it was written in 1957, the same year Malaysia gained independence. Penned by a nationalist, Malay writer Harun Aminurrashid, the novel is suffused with nationalist spirit pervasive in the 1950s (HOOKER, 1999; KOSTER, 2009). Soon after its publication the following year, it was widely read and made a required reading in schools. It constituted part of examinable areas in key school exams, such as Senior Cambridge (SC) and Malayan Certificate of Education (MCE) (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, p. 20).

Outside observers may be quick to query to what extent the so-called historical novel captures the historical past. One may guess a simple answer from the long sentence summary above. Anything beyond that one-sentence summary is likely to be already in the realm of the non-historical past or fictional, or what we call here the practical past. In the 235 pages of the edition which I examine (HARUN, 1970), the fictional parts can be as high as 80%-100% of each chapter. That said, I should be quick to point out that the significance of the distinction between historical and practical past lies not in the question of (in)accuracy. If we dismiss off-hand the non-historical or fictional contents in the novel for being inaccurate, we shall miss the important insights about the aspirations, attitudes and values that reflect the practical past envisioned by the author and imbibed happily by generations of Malaysians who read it. We may overlook, in other words, what matters more to the greater number of people. Below, I examine several chapters to give a sense of how the historical and practical pasts are interwoven in this novel.

The first chapter paints a chaotic, violent, even gory picture of Malacca weighed down by the attack of the Portuguese in 1511. The Sultan and his retinue had escaped, and they left people to fend for themselves. Women were being raped or made concubine, men being tortured or killed, dead bodies were strewn all over. A band of young men under the leadership of Panglima Awang, as Enrique is named in the novel, gathered, mourned, and talked about what to do. The overall atmosphere *feels* realistic with the commotion of the fall of Malacca at the backdrop and the mention of identifiable places and key historical figures like the Sultan and the Portuguese leader Albuquerque. I underscore the atmosphere that "feels realistic" to highlight the fact that populist reason has emotion or feeling as the operational anchor point. In the whole 21 pages that consist of the chapter, however, only three things are backed by historical sources: that he existed as a real human being, that he was called Malay, and that he originated from Sumatra. Everything else is conjectural or plain imaginative inventions: that Enrique was captured in the wake of the attack of Malacca in 1511, that he was a good sailor, inspiring leader, and a brave fighter to deserve the role of Panglima, and that he served and was loyal to the Sultan and wanted to inflict damage on Portuguese, all these cannot be supported by extant historical sources. The possibility of contrary interpretations that Enrique may not be loyal to or was not working for the Sultan, that he may not

be of military or seafaring background, and that he may not be of leader-type, cannot be ruled out. The author simply assumed that because Magellan brought him and later mentioned in the last will, Enrique must be important and have had exemplary qualities noted above. The probability that Magellan might have seen something else in him, about which available historical sources are silent about, was easily set aside. What may have prompted the author of the novel to choose one possible interpretation over other possibilities was the pragmatic and nationalist proclivities that drove or informed the narrative.

Magellan also appeared to have brought other slaves, not just Enrique, such as the woman from Sumatra, who was also presented before Charles V's advisers (GUILLEMARD, 1890). The truth of the matter is that very little historical sources exist to account for exactly what Magellan was doing, let alone thinking, in 1511-1512. Scanty references to this period in the well-regarded biographies of Magellan (e.g., GUILLEMARD, 1890) suggest that he was hardly an important person to merit more than a passing mention in contemporary sources. That one cannot be sure what happened to the planned Magellan's participation in the expedition to Maluku (from Malacca) in late 1511, or why he may not have joined in the end, and when and why he sailed back to return to Lisbon, clearly shows how little was known about Magellan in the extant pages of historical sources. If contemporary sources barely mentioned Magellan, so much less was the case for Enrique. As already noted above, he won't appear in a historical source until 20 January 1518, when he was among those Magellan presented to the influential advisers of Charles V.

This is why practically everything in the succeeding richly detailed six chapters, traversing the years 1511 to 1518, is also fictional (HARUN, 1970, p. 22-280). I use the term fictional not in the sense of being necessarily untrue, but following Hayden White, as "a construction or conjecture about 'what possibly happened' or might happen at some time and some place, in the present, in the past, or indeed even in the future" (WHITE, 2014, p. X). Besides the information that Magellan returned to Portugal and later went to Morocco, the only other things in these chapters that we may infer to be historical, even if no explicit historical source say it, is that Magellan and Panglima Awang had met, Magellan made the latter his slave and he converted him to Christianity, with the name Enrique. The imaginative exemplary qualities imputed by the novel's author upon both Magellan and Enrique—their intimate friendship, tolerance and respect for each other's differences, mutual admiration, family-like treatment of Enrique by Magellan's family, Enrique's faithfulness to Islam and his fiancée back home in the face of Mariam's (Magellan's sister) romantic advances—are needed by the author to underscore the values he envisioned the younger generations of Malaysians to emulate, such as patriotism and respect for racial and religious diversity, as well as equality (HOOKER, 1999; RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010). Such aspirations were understandable given



the challenges posed to the incipient Malaysian nation by the sharp ethno-linguistic, economic, political and religious divisions.

By adding textured flesh to the barest bones of very limited verifiable information, aided by familiar metaphors and believable plotlines drawn from broadly shared human experience, the novel *Panglima Awang* conjures up images that enlivened and humanised the otherwise long-dead Enrique and makes him not only knowable but also relatable to generations of readers. Herein lies the power of literature that history finds difficult to match. While historical past restricts the range of the possible to what verifiable evidence can prove, literature or practical past is bounded only by what is useful for certain groups and individuals, and by the limits one sets to her imagination.

Chapter 8 and chapter 9 narrate the story of the voyage from the time they left Spain until they reached islands in today's Philippine where Magellan met his death. These chapters are the least fictional of all parts of the novel. The author's free exercise of creative license is clear in the dialogues and choice and arrangement of details, but the author follows the broad contour of Pigafetta's account. Chapter 10 keeps some effort to keep with this narrative arc, but the details are too different from what the sources can support, particularly about the plot to massacre the Spaniards on 1 May 1521.

The last two chapters, Chapters 11 and 12, are purely fictional. They deal with the return of Panglima Awang to Tanah Melayu (Malay homeland), about which absolutely no extant historical evidence can support. As noted above, nothing was heard of again from Enrique after the massacre on 1 May 1521 in Pigafetta's account. Even Malaysian scholars (RAHMAN *et al.* 2009; 2010) had to settle for the claim that while Enrique did not return to Malacca, he nevertheless returned to the Malay world.

The novel *Panglima Awang* fits the characteristics of historical fiction that Amy Elias identifies, as follows: "(1) specific historical detail, featured prominently, is crucial to plot or character development or some experimental representation of these narrative attributes; (2) a sense of history informs all facets of the fictional construct (from an authorial perspective to character development to selection of place); and (3) this sense of history emerges from and is constructed by the text itself and requires the text to participate in and differentiate itself from other discourses of various generic kinds that attempt to give a name to history" (ELIAS, 2001, p. 4-5). What I may add to this list is the approbation by its readers, mainly the Malaysian public, that indeed what it narrates is historical. The readers' reception completes and validates the text and consequently gives rise to another text.

An examination of comments by Malaysian netizens reveals they ignore the distinction between fiction and history where Enrique/Panglima Awang is concerned. Practically everything they take for granted as historical about him derived from the novel *Panglima Awang*. Not only ordinary people do this but also scholars. This is clear in the passion shown by some Malaysian scholars who are trying to find his graveyard or to prove that he was such a skilled sailor and that he created the first compass (MSAR, 2018; ZAIDAN, 2016). This despite the fact, as noted above, that nothing in extant historical sources can suggest that he returned to Malay peninsula, let alone that he was a skilled sailor or navigator. The cue they took derived from the narrative offered in the novel.

A cursory read through the rigorously researched and generously illustrated book, *Panglima Awang@Enrique de Malacca: Melayu Pertama Mengelilingi Dunia* (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010) easily reveals that even well-trained historians do not, or cannot, transcend the complex interplay between the historical and practical past. In the looks of a very well-appointed coffee-table-sized book, one can hardly miss the huge intellectual and financial resources invested in it, made possible by the sponsorship of the Museum of Malacca. Clearly implied as well is authority and historicity it confers upon Panglima Awang, both as a novel and historical figure. Authored by Malaysian historians and literature and language scholars, with PhDs from respected universities in the UK like SOAS/University of London and Kent, it is possibly the most scholarly book on Panglima Awang. What amounts to a short version of the over 230-page book appeared as a 31-page article in the journal *Sari: International Journal of Malay World and Civilization* (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2009)

This book carefully scoured through all the known historical sources that say something about Enrique. It is transparent about the conflicting information on Enrique's possible birthplace and about the very limited sources available that made it impossible to write an account about Enrique without extrapolating things from Magellan's biography (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, n.p. preface). It does not hide the possibility that he may be a native of Sumatra, rather than of Malacca. Interestingly, the book is blunt in stating in the preface that Enrique did not return to Malacca (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, p. VIII) and a milder version in another chapter states we cannot know whether Enrique did return (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, p. 212). This is contrary to what the novel narrates in the last two chapters, and which is what most Malaysians know what happened. Intriguingly, "legendary figure" (tokoh legenda) is how a chapter in the book describes Panglima Awang book (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2010, p. 19). This goes against the claim to his historicity. The book also takes issues with Harun Aminurrashid's 's depiction of Panglima Awang as an exemplary warrior and leader in the opening chapter of the novel, arguing that by 1511, he must have been a



mere teen of 12-15 years old (RAHMAN *et al.*, 2009, p. 193; 2010, p. 212), which meant he could not be a kind of leader and warrior the novelist made him out to be. It also takes exception to Harun's portrayal of Panglima Awang as a devout Muslim, arguing instead that Enrique may be an animist, like many other *orang laut* (sea people) during that time, before converting to Christianity (RAHMAN *et al.* 2009, p. 193; 2010, p. 212), so it should not cause issues.

These things said, the authors of this book themselves imbibed Harun's portrayal of Panglima Awang as an exemplary human being. He was heroic, brave, loyal, skilled sailor, and an ideal warrior. Likewise, as Harun did, they endeavoured to paint a holistic and detailed portrayal of Enrique's personality and experience. Scholars argued that Walter Scott, the founding father of historical novel, influenced historians in the 19th century in, say, emphasising the particular and the use of oral and other sources to fill in gaps in narratives (ELIAS, 2001, p. 10). As a functional parallel, the immense popularity of Harun's novel enabled it to set the authoritative narrative frame well-accepted by the public that even trained historians like the authors of this book dared not deconstruct or veer away from it. Despite knowing full-well that the limited sources cannot really support any detailed characterisation of Enrique and his actions, much less the grandiose ones like being exemplary sailor or warrior, they nevertheless did so in the book.

The preface written by the lead author, Nik Hassan, is explicit about how they skirted around the very limited sources: they traced things through Magellan's experience. Reading through the book, I can see the logic of their approach as relying on the twin-processes of association and reciprocation. Since Enrique was Magellan's slave, by association, he must have gone wherever his master went. This explains why about a hundred pages full of nice pictures and texts of the book are devoted to tracing all the places in Malacca, India, Africa, Europe, South America, and the Philippines that Enrique must have visited, simply because it was likely Magellan also went to these places. Any reader of this book, seeing in nice, enormous pictures these places, cannot but be convinced of Panglima Awang's historicity, despite having no documentary evidence that he, in fact, went and saw those places.

As for the logic of reciprocation, since Magellan appeared considerate of Enrique, as shown, say, in his last will and testament, he must have been so impressed by Enrique's character. This led him to respect him, which paved for mutual respect and friendly intimacy between them. Magellan's goodwill is taken as a reciprocation of the assumed goodness, loyalty, bravery, and other exemplary qualities of Enrique. Magellan treated him very well because Enrique had exceptional qualities, and he was good to his master. Other plausible reasons they ignored, such as what Zweig (ZWEIG, 1938, p.417-418) suggested that the deeply religious Magellan may have felt conflicted by owning a slave and wished not to meet his Creator with such a burden. In short,

Magellan's good will serve as an adequate stand-in for the absence of any historical proof about Enrique's qualities.

One may say that the entire book, invested as it is with so much scholarly labour, serves as an affirmation of the novel. They differ in several details, but the same narrative arc and similar key ideas underpin both. The big picture is unmistakable: that a native of Malacca called Panglima Awang was the first circumnavigator of the world and he symbolised the greatness of the Malay race, and thus deserves to be admired and be an inspiration to all Malays.

Points to Ponder

What we can see here is the mutually reinforcing dynamics between the historical past, represented by the scholarly book, and the practical past, as embodied in the novel. I agree with Jonas Ahlskog that, rather than being separate, practical and historical pasts are interconnected in that "the historical mode of understanding must be presupposed in practical uses of the past and that practice is a necessary element in historical understanding" (AHLKOG, 2016, 18). Historical novels like *Panglima Awang* are self-conscious of their fictional characters. They do not claim to accurately represent the historical past, but the novelists' use of historical terminologies, persona, places, episodes, and ideas, results in conveying messages that readers may construe as historically true.

From the standpoint of Malaysians who have read and believed in the portrayal of Enrique in the novel *Panglima Awang*, its usefulness lies in the appearance of historicity it lends to Enrique. The details the novel provides about him, despite being purely or largely fictional, make it seem that he was a real historical figure of outstanding personality and capabilities, which reinforce that quest for a Malay/Malaysian national identity and pride. The choice for whatever it is that they consider historical is driven by pragmatic or practical considerations: what is relevant or useful for their purpose and what is meaningful or resonant to their sense of identity. The usefulness or relevance of the practical past, in short, lies in the assumption of its historicity, while the assumed historicity of the historical past makes it practical or useful for society.

One of the enabling factors for this relationship is, borrowing the idea from Ernesto Laclau (2005), the populist reason that he claims inheres in the process of social identity formation. Conceived by Laclau (2005, p. XI) as "quite simply, a way of constructing the political", populism encapsulates the "social logic" that underpins the formation of "any communitarian space" and identity (LACLAU, 2005, p. X, emphasis original).



An outside observer like me can see a distinction or separation between historical and practical pasts and may say that what Malaysians regard as a historical past is in fact “merely” practical one. However, from the standpoint of the consumers of ideas, such as the Malaysian readers of the novel, the two are integral parts of the whole. This raises the questions, “Who has the authority to decide what is historical and which one is “mere” practical, and whether there is a necessarily hierarchical relationship between the two?” These are legitimate questions, but unfortunately, they are beyond the purview of this paper.

From the viewpoint of the producers of ideas, like scholars, we may say the same: the historical and practical past need each other. For professional historians to claim legitimacy for their role as scholar and for the salience of their scholarship, they often have to refer to what is relevant or meaningful in a given context. The authors of the scholarly book noted above for instance, knew how limited verifiable sources were, and it would have seemed impossible to produce a history book about Enrique. But not only they did do so, but they produced an impressive-looking and well-researched, 232-page book that simultaneously confers and conveys the sense of authority on the subject matter. How they did so illustrate the nature of historical methodology, which cannot but resort to the logic of practice (practical past) in filling in gaps; the bigger the hole to fill in, the greater the need for the logic of practice to operate, as they very well demonstrated in the book. Working with a tiny pool of information that can be summed up in one long sentence, the authors had to draw out and build upon layers of interlocking network of inferences, one after another, about so many claims, much of them via association and reciprocation with Magellan. Perhaps unaware of the biting irony, the authors had titled the abridged article *Panglima Awang Sebagai Magellan Melayu* (Panglima Awang as Malay Magellan). With the book saying so much more directly about Magellan, and Enrique is just like a “shadow” (bayang-bayang) hovering and following him, the title is fitting not just to drive home the author’s intended message, but to unwittingly confess that the book talks much more about Magellan than Enrique.

For a novelist who is faced with very limited evidenced-based facts about Enrique, Harun Aminurrashid had to fill in enormous gaps by drawing from his unbridled imagination and from whatever auxiliary historical sources available. Yet, he included not just any information, but those that made the narrative believable and compatible to the hopes and aspirations of the target readers, the Malaysian public. I must note that for many people, what is true is what they *feel* to be truthful, not what is verifiable by empirical evidence and validated by rational justification. Berlant’s idea of “true feeling” resonates here (BERLANT, 1999). The glowing portrayal of the protagonist, his supposed unconditional loyalty to his master and the homeland, his faithfulness to Islam and his fiancée, his admirable personality and exemplary capabilities in leadership, warfare,

and navigation, these are all expected within the historical and literary mental universe to which Malays have been exposed for centuries. Emphasis on them seemed calculated to create the feel-good effects of a historically believable persona that Malays could be proud of and identify with, and that Malaysia, as a young nation, badly needed in its early postcolonial decades (HOOKER, 1999; KOSTER, 2009). The historical and practical are closely interwoven in all these.

Hayden White examined deeply how closely allied literature and history are, and this idea rings very true in this case (WHITE, 1987a; 1987b; 2010b). It is not only the novelist, Harun Aminurrashid, who extrapolated, imagined, and filled in gaps in narrative; the professional historians who authored the book noted above also do the same things. It is not just historical novelists who need to anchor their work in the historical past, but professional historians also need to draw from the demands of the present, or the practical past, to write history. One can only imagine what would have happened had the four scholars relied strictly on verifiable facts about Enrique. What we would have had is one or two pages of drily enumerated information devoid of life and substantive meaning, rather than 232 pages of a lively and information-packed book. In a sense, following Hayden White's distinction between the truth of history and the reality of fictional discourses, the authors of the scholarly book had opted to venture into reality rather than be constricted by the pursuit of truth (WHITE, 2005, p. 147). By truth, White meant what can be established strictly by historical evidence; by reality, he meant the world that encompasses both what evidence tells us and what other possibilities there might be (WHITE, 2005, p. 147).

One may fault the authors of the book for duplicity in purporting to write a history of Enrique in an impressive-looking book, whereas it is actually mostly about Magellan and his voyage. Yet, some of what they did to accomplish this feat are not uncommon even among professional historians. The scale varies, depending on the subject and availability of sources, but filling in gaps through inferences and interpreting sources in ways sensitive to sensibility of the target audience, are common practice in historical methodology. Scholarly history has been published, say, about the Rosetta Stone, the bible, founders of key religions, nationalist heroes, among many other things, and they all contain varying number of conjectures and debatable interpretations. Hayden White (WHITE, 2005) seems right in asserting that despite the distance many professional historians seek to drive history away from literature, history remains largely about narrative telling, and there is nothing to be ashamed of it. It is simply its nature.

Conclusion

If historical and practical pasts, as reflected respectively in scholarly work and historical novels on Panglima Awang, are in practice closely connected, what is the point of making the



conceptual distinction? Perhaps the more immediate and productive question is who makes and upholds such distinction, and for whom it matters? For many common people, what is history, is what matters in their daily life about whatever it is that happened, or thought to have happened, in the recent or distant past. It does not mean truth or reality does not matter to them; it certainly does. They feel and think (possibly in that order) that what they believe in is truthful. This is in line with the idea of "populist reason" (LACLAU, 2005) or "true feeling" (BERLANT, 1999), which both foreground the intuitive and emotive, rather than evidentiary, aspects of knowing. The appeal for many people of literary works, such as historical novels, lies partly in the populist reason that underpin them. For many Malaysians whose knowledge about Enrique came from the novel *Panglima Awang*, the lack of evidence and conflicting information about his origin hardly matters. What matters is that he was a source of national or ethnic pride: a Malay from Malacca, of admirable qualities, faithful to Islam and the homeland, and that he accomplished wonderful things including being the first to circumnavigate the world. Whether things were accomplished through literature or history, or any other ways, hardly matters.

That it does matter to an extent to the scholars who authored the book may be glimpsed in their effort to be transparent about the limited historical sources available. They did not hide nor distort any of them. At the same time, they interpreted them in ways affirmatory of the master narrative that has long been established by the novel. They also did not conceal that it was mainly through Magellan that they did an inferential reconstruction of Panglima Awang's life. In the end, the scholarly book, by defying the seemingly insurmountable odds and daring to imagine what is possible, subsumed the truthfulness under the realistic, following yet again Hayden White's conceptualization. Whether it was the historical past or the practical past, the output has superseded the distinction. It is simply what it is.

The conceptual distinction between historical and practical pasts remains useful as a heuristic analytic device. The two may in practice be locked in a dialectical relationship, but conceptual separation between them allows us to see the artificiality and underlying intents of the attempts to separate the two, as exemplified, for instance, by the long and persistent tradition in history writing represented by Leopold von Ranke. For Oakeshott, this distinction is important to uphold the academic historians' aspiration for understanding the past unfettered by pressures from the present. For White, it is useful precisely to highlight the limitations of academic history (ALSKOG 2016). I lean towards White's position, but with a qualification. This conceptual distinction is useful as a reminder that the historical is more multi-faceted and encompassing than the idealised definition of what history is or should be, as often asserted by the community of professional historians. It also flags the unequal power relations that enable hierarchy to be

piggybacked in this distinction. The word “idealised” is key here. The vanguards of historical profession have arrogated upon themselves the right to set the strict evidential requirements as central in the historians’ Hippocratic Oath. In daily practice, however, academic historians, like the authors of the book discussed here, exercise the freedom to navigate through the interstices between the ideal and the possible.

Finally, the historical-vs-practical past distinction is also useful in flagging the different rationalities that drive them. Earlier, I have alluded to the populist reason as a driving force for the practical past. Both have pragmatic, intuitive and presentist orientations. Both are contingent or sensitive to the local contexts. They foreground what feels good and what feels right at the moment, rather than what is evidently true for all time. On the other hand, what may be called “intellectualist reason” is operative in historical past. It prefers timeless or universal truth, logical validity and evidence over intuition; detachment and consistency over context and contingency. Further elaboration of these complicated ideas is beyond the scope of this paper. An important point to note is that despite the blurring of boundaries between the notions of historical and practical pasts, the distinction is worth keeping as they reflect the diverse and non-hierarchical ways of thinking, feeling and living, which is a hallmark of modern aspiration for what it means to be human.

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