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Simon Soon

NOTES ON AFTERLIFE AND REPRESENTATION OF ENRIQUE DE MALACCA

These are notes and reflections that transpired from an online panel discussion called “Representations of Enrique de Malacca,” organized as part of *Contacts and Continuities: 500 Years of Asian-Iberian Encounters*. The panelists were documentary filmmaker Pedro Palma, artist and filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik, playwright Luis Francia, and visual artist Ahmad Fuad Osman.

Collectively, their works intervene artistically on our historical consciousness in order to reveal the contested meaning-making processes that underlie the legacy of Enrique. For Pedro Palma, the process of knowing Enrique was one of discovery. As a Portuguese with a strong interest in Lusophone Southeast Asia, Pedro recognized in Enrique the possibility of reimagination. He clarified that claims of Enrique being the first circumnavigator around the world needed to be understood as essentially a combination of two journeys that Enrique undertook. The first involved Enrique’s enslavement and capture after the fall of Malacca in 1511, where he was brought to Portugal and subsequently met the king of Spain. The second half was his participation in the Magellan-Elcano expedition in 1519, which took him to the New World before crossing the Pacific to arrive back in the Philippines (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Film still from the documentary “Henry of Malacca, a Malay and Magellan” (Photo credit: Pedro Palma)

Yet, Enrique was only scantily referred to in Magellan’s account. Our story begins with a disappearing act. In Magellan’s last will, he stated that his enslaved sailor by the name “Enrique” should be made a “free man” upon his death. As it turns out, Enrique was a slave who Magellan acquired during the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511. Over the years, Enrique became an important interlocutor for Magellan as interpreter as well as teacher of the different cultural worlds that existed in the Malay archipelago. In historical records, Enrique was last sighted on Mactan island, shortly after Magellan’s passing.

In light of the absence of evidence, we now pass into the realm of speculation. Could it be that upon gaining his freedom, Enrique did make it back home to Malacca? If that was the case, was Enrique the first person to successfully circumnavigate the earth? What would the image of the world in formation look like if we were to explore it through the perspective of Enrique, an enslaved person from the Malay archipelago who became an explorer of foreign lands, and a go-between of different cultures?

Having lived with Enrique de Malacca for more than forty years, Kidlat Tahimik came to regard Enrique as more than just a film project that

he undertook in 1979. Unlike other panelists, Kidlat was less concerned with historical veracity and took outright artistic license in his interpretation, boldly casting Enrique as belonging to the Ifugao people from the northern Luzon, rather than following scholarly attribution that tended to describe Enrique as Malaccan or a Sumatran. Kidlat prefers to call Enrique an Austronesian. He then reminds us that Pigafetta only mentions Enrique on a few occasions in his account. Yet, Kidlat notes that the gray areas are what make Enrique a fascinating subject for an artist to play.



Figure 2. Film still from *Balikbayan #1: Memories of Overdevelopment*. Enrique looks at the sun with the lingling-o. (Photo credit: Kidlat Tahimik)

Luis spoke of Enrique as the undiscovered indigenous self overshadowed by Philippine colonial history. Enrique as the prototype of the modern global Filipino. He figured importantly when Magellan arrived in Cebu. He spoke the lingua franca of trade of the Malay archipelago, and therefore was a go-between figure facilitating interaction between the West and the East.



Figure 3. Still from the virtual presentation of Luis H. Francia's *Black Henry* directed by Claro de los Reyes and produced by NYU King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center, Sulo: Philippine Studies Initiative at NYU, and Atlantic Pacific Theatre. (Photo credit: Atlantic Pacific Theatre)

Ahmad Fuad Osman's discovery of Harun Aminurrashid's 1957 novel *Panglima Awang* spurred his imagination. Though fictional, the novel offered a window to imagine the world through the perspective of a protagonist from the Malay archipelago. By way of assembling and staging a wide variety of *artefacts, images, and objects*, the artist draws on the collage principles that underpin the museum's display operation. The artist directs us to pay closer attention to the different types of voices, claims, and meanings that images and artefacts can activate (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Ahmad Fuad Osman. 2019. Enrique de Malacca. UV print on paper. 28 x 25cm. (Photo credit: Ahmad Fuad Osman)

Moving beyond the simplistic binary of East versus West, the panel discussion underlines the *keramat* of images as powerful containers of memories, visions, and ideas, which do not simply represent but actively shape collective historical consciousness. In doing so, as artists, our panel of discussants exceeded even as they explored the contours of history writing, to underline Enrique's relevance precisely because we know so little about him. Yet from what little we know, and despite competing claims on Enrique's identity and geographic affiliations, across Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, he has persisted through the ravages of time in magnified form.

Perhaps thinking of Enrique as representation, we might like to consider him along three points of discussion:

1) Art and the historical imagination

Whether home was in Sumatra or Melaka, the close distance that separates Enrique in Mactan from his place of birth is magnified, appearing as a chasm in the history of globalization. Yet this chasm between veritable historical record, and speculative conjecture, opens up new possibilities for us to revisit the history of globalization.

If Enrique did achieve freedom and found his way home, his homecoming would have been a bittersweet experience. More than a journey around the world, it was also a journey from servitude towards freedom. Freedom would mean he could now chart his own future, but all we know of this future is that Enrique disappeared from the records of history.

While a large part of the Enrique de Malacca project is informed by historical thinking, the contemporary art project takes off at the point where historical methods have reached its limits to understanding the past.

An artistic practice can build on this limitation, by drawing on the threshold concept of creativity. In the creative space, one is open to asking questions that might otherwise sound ridiculous, explore connections that are absent, and speculate possibilities that have not been ventured. When informed by historical thinking, artists exercise their artistic license through their work to enrich, broaden, and enliven our historical imagination. As much as it is an invitation to ask “what if,” it is also an opportunity to find new perspectives, discover new voices in marginalized subject-positions, and animate the lessons of history that remain presently relevant and meaningful to many of us today.

2) Do we need another hero?

We live in a world filled with political uncertainties and ethical ambiguities. Not surprisingly, modern society is easily seduced by savior narratives. After all, heroes and their heroic feats offer moral and political clarity to guide us through a messy reality.

In 1980, scholar Shahrudin Maaruf wrote his master's thesis "Conception of the Hero in Malay Society." The thesis points to the cultural significance of hero narratives rooted in the Malay cultural fabric that has informed public and political discourse in Malaysian society. The hero image has contributed to national myth-making, and, as such, has had a decisive hold on the imagination of the populace—functioning as an icon for a shared ideal and serving as a beacon of hope.

Panglima Awang, a novel written by Malay reformist Harun Aminurrashid in 1958, fits easily into Shahrudin's argument that the hero-complex responds to modern-day anxieties and needs. If we look back a little further into history, older belief systems that animated Southeast Asia did not merely see heroes as "representation" but also as a class of ancestral spirits capable of intervening in the affairs of the living. In this sense, the persistence and popularity of hero figures can be traced back to an older Malay-Austronesian concept of the "potent dead." It is here that heirlooms, oral traditions, and legends serve as repositories to transmit the lessons of history, even if the formal characteristics of the media suggest that historical accuracy would have been sacrificed in the process of transmission.

3) Acting on remembrance

As statues of prominent colonial officers are now being pulled off their pedestals in a public spectacle of decolonization, it pays to remember that decolonization is a complex process and has a history beyond its currency today. The fictional retelling of Enrique de Malacca in the novel *Panglima Awang* in 1958 can be situated within this important historical juncture. In this sense, the novel is symptomatic of a de-colonial ambition. The renaming speaks to the context of nation-building, in search of predecessors and heroes that could serve as an ideal image to guide the new nation toward not just prosperity but also glory.

Today, our society is a lot more critical of such an idealistic promise. Perhaps, instead, we now understand decolonization not as an end goal, but a process and conversation that needs to take place over a long period of time.

In what ways can we take part in this global conversation on decolonizing history? Skola Gambar proposes an approach. More than determining the right historical answer, the exhibition invites us to entertain all plausible outcomes and scenarios. In doing so, we might be more open to the perspectives from different subject-positions, and this could alter the very meaning we gain from a historical narrative.

Enrique as Panglima Awang may appear to be the ideal Malay hero—the polymath, the warrior, the cosmopolitan explorer, the prodigal son. However, we need to remember that Enrique was a cultural go-between who necessarily moved between cultures. In addition, his enslavement had long historical roots in the Indian Ocean world during a time when great inequalities existed. Moreover, Enrique converted to Christianity. We do not even know his original name.

In a way, he possesses irreconcilable qualities that make him an anti-hero in the modern image of the historical Malay world of our imagination. Enrique de Malacca is not of titled origin, but an everyman whose fortunes changed overnight when the city he grew up in was razed to the ground. In this sense, Enrique as a go-between has attributes that we recognize as important in today's society—he was a cosmopolitan traveler who challenged his fate in life, expanded the horizon of his mind through travel, and ultimately earned his freedom in the world. It is the story of modernity. We are heirs of Enrique.

4) Addendum

** In the story about the circumnavigation of the earth, one striking absence is the role of women in the story of Enrique. By and large, the story of seafaring, of exploratory merantau, of humanity's coming-of-age is a story about men and told by men. Yet the historian Barbara Andaya reminds us that, even if women were not always regarded as equal in most Southeast Asian societies, they lived in and participated in a much more equal society as compared to their counterparts in many parts of the world, including Europe and China. Is it possible to write a story of Enrique de Malacca that

might be sensitive to the gender biases of history? What are some of the sources that we can use to retell this story from a gendered perspective?

** Enrique lived through a time of immense social inequality. Historically, slavery was part of Southeast Asia's diverse social system. It was not something that European colonists introduced to this part of the world. Within Southeast Asian language families, different words existed for slavery, and within the region, different languages modulated these terms for both slaves and the institution of slavery. Today, slavery is a seldom discussed aspect of Malay World history. However, concepts of social hierarchies so fundamental to Southeast Asian culture continue to exist, since people automatically place themselves in vertical social relationships in relation to one another. In light of recent social-justice calls to end systemic forms of oppression, what could the story of Enrique teach us about freedom from both his culture that legitimized his enslavement and the life of enslavement he led? Did he find his freedom only when he was between cultures, at sea, or when he disappeared from history?

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