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***John Anderson's Data Mining Mission to Sumatra in 1823:
When Method Creates the Object***

Farish A. Noor

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Singapore**

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ABSTRACT

Today the term 'data mining' is used in both academic and non-academic circles, though the practice is neither novel nor new. This paper looks at the data collection mission led by John Anderson on behalf of the British East India Company in 1823, and considers if it is possible to collect data in a purely objective, neutral manner. Though John Anderson was careful in his writing, and sought to communicate his findings in a dry, objective fashion, his own subject-position as a functionary working for the East India Company stands out in his account of the mission to Sumatra. This paper argues that the process of data collection is seldom ever a truly neutral enterprise, and that in the framing of the object of analysis, the cultural and socio-economic subject-position of the researcher/analyst is always present, rendering it impossible for there to ever be a truly objective work of research/analysis. In this respect, an appraisal of Anderson's work today is also relevant for contemporary scholars who may likewise attempt an 'objective' approach to their work, and it reminds us that the method often constructs the object under scrutiny.

Dr **Farish A. Noor** is presently Associate Professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University; where he is the Head of Doctoral Studies. He is the author of *Islamism in a Mottled Nation: The Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party 1951-2013* (Amsterdam University Press, 2014), *Moving Islam: The Tablighi Jama'at movement in Southeast Asia* (University of Amsterdam Press, 2012), *The Madrasa in Asia: Political Activism and Transnational Linkages*, with Martin van Bruinessen and Yoginder Sikand, Eds. (Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008), and *Islam Embedded: The Historical Development of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS: 1951-2003* (Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI), Kuala Lumpur, 2004).

I. *Not another book on the Exotic East: The epistemic problem of knowing the Other*

“The idea of travel as a means of gathering and recording information is commonly found in societies that exercise a high degree of political power. The traveller begins his journey with the strength of an empire sustaining him (albeit from a distance) militarily, economically, intellectually; he feels compelled to note down his observations in the awareness of a particular audience: his fellow country-men.”¹

Rana Kabbani

Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of the Orient

“The British may not have created the longest-lived empire in history, but it was certainly one of the most data-intensive.”²

Thomas Richards

The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and Fantasy of the Empire (1993)

Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978)³, there has been much work done by successive generations of scholars who have looked at the manner through which Asia has been imagined and reconstructed in the popular imaginary of the West. Much of this work has been focused on the romantic imaginings of those poets, writers and artists whom Said summarily lumped together as Orientalists, whose domain of artistic-cultural production was in the East. Critical scholars like Said, McClure (1994)⁴ and Kabbani (1988) have argued that in many instances of writing and painting about the Orient and the Far East that were done in the 19th century, the authors and painters of these works had presented Asian landscapes and societies in a manner that satisfied the needs of the Western world then, framing an Asia that was laden with “sexual expectancy and promise”,⁵ and providing a bare tableau where figurative language, metaphor and reverie informed their understanding when “ordinary description has been overworked”.⁶

While it cannot be denied that the re-imagining of Asia was sometimes done through the lens of a somewhat romantic Eurocentric perspective that tended to paint the Orient in exotic, mysterious and even lurid hue, it has to be remembered that not all writings on the East was done in the same tone and tenor. For it has to be remembered that apart from the artists who painted the East, and the novelists who wrote about it, there were also many professionals of other backgrounds – bureaucrats, security personnel, surveyors, cartographers, academics – who were likewise occupied with the study of the Orient, and whose contribution to knowledge of the East cannot be ignored. Crucial to the imperial enterprise was the accumulation and processing of data, which would be transformed into useful knowledge, instrumentalised for the purpose of extending and holding on to power. As

¹ Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of the Orient*, Pandora-Harper Collins, London. 1988. p. xi.

² Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and Fantasy of the Empire*, Verso Press, London. 1993. p. 4.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London. 1978.

⁴ John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance*, Verson Press, London. 1994.

⁵ Kabbani, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11.

Richards (1993) has noted, “the narratives of the late nineteenth century are full of fantasies about an empire that was united not by force but by information”.⁷ While scholars like Said, McClure and Kabbani were (rightly) concerned about the distortion of the reality of Asia in the work of Orientalist artists and writers, Richards correctly notes that the project of Empire could not have succeeded the way it did had it been founded upon layers of myth and fantasy; and that imperial power was built not on imaginary fantasies of the exotic East, but rather on detailed, precise and correct data about distant lands, people and commodities: Imperial power was as much epistemic as it was military, in the manner that it charted foreign seas, mapped out native lands and categorised subject native communities within the rubric of the colonial census, leaving nothing to chance.

The focus of this paper is an instance of such precise research and data collection that was done by John Anderson⁸ – a functionary working for the British East India Company – on the subject of the communities and polities of East Sumatra; where the aim of the author was to picture the realities on the ground in as factual a manner as possible.

Our contention here is that the work of John Anderson provides us with an early example of data mining done in earnest, though it was still problematic for the simple reason that this was an exercise where the methodology used had invariably created the object that was under scrutiny itself. Notwithstanding Anderson’s aversion to all forms of literary flourish, hyperbole and drama, he could not remove himself and his own interests from the research project. This, in turn, raises a more serious question about the role of the researcher/analyst in any kind of academic endeavour, and whether the *Other* can ever be studied, talked/written about and understood from an Archimedean point radically outside the economy of knowledge-production.

II. A-data-mining we will go: John Anderson embarks on his fact-finding mission to Sumatra⁹

“How far I have successfully executed the laborious task assigned to me, I leave to an indulgent government to determine, disclaiming any pretensions to scientific acquirements, and boasting of nothing more than a moderate share of industry and perseverance”.¹⁰

John Anderson
Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra 1826

⁷ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 1993. p. 1.

⁸ John Anderson (b.1795-d.1845) was born in Scotland and had begun his career in the East Indies early in his life. He joined the East India Company in 1813, and slowly made his way up the company hierarchy by becoming a warehouse-keeper and also a Malay translator by the early 1820s. By 1823, the year that he set out on his expedition to East Sumatra, he had obtained the rank of Junior Merchant of the company and was able to negotiate deals on behalf of the board of directors based in Penang. He was later promoted to Senior Merchant, and eventually made the Justice of the Peace in Penang. In 1830 he returned to England, where he died in 1845. Apart from his *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra*, he had published a short account of the political and economic considerations of the East India Company with regard to the Malay states of the Peninsula, in 1824.

⁹ ‘Data mining’ has become a common term used these days, but in effect it refers to the mundane process of fact-finding which is what John Anderson and other company functionaries like him were directed to do.

¹⁰ John Anderson, *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra In MDCCCXXIII, under the direction of the Government of Prince of Wales Island*. William Blackwood, Edinburgh, and T Cadell Strand, London. 1826. p. xxi.

To fully appreciate John Anderson's contribution to the study of Sumatra, and the role that he played in Britain's commercial dealings with the polities of Southeast Asia at the time, we need to place him in historical context. By the time that he was serving as a company official in Penang in the early 1820s, Britain had lost possession of Java – which it occupied between 1811 and 1816 as a result of Holland having come under the influence of France - Britain's enemy - during the Napoleonic wars. Britain's departure from Java meant that the British East India Company's operations were then mainly confined to Penang, Malacca and Singapore. From the vantage point of Penang, where Anderson was based, the prospect of opening new trade relations across the Malacca Straits and exporting British goods to the markets of East Sumatra must have appeared tempting indeed. Anderson lived and worked half a century before Britain's 'forward movement' would propel the British further inland into the Malayan Peninsula and before the British would intervene directly in the governance of the Malay kingdoms there. As such, there was a pressing need for the company to establish as many trading relations with as many local commercial centres as possible.

Anderson dedicated his account of Sumatra to Sir John Rae Reid, whose father had bestowed him 'liberal patronage' for ten years while he was stationed in Penang and to whom he felt some degree of obligation and gratitude. He notes in his dedication that the objects of his mission were manifold, "but the principle were the extension of commerce, and the introduction of British manufactures into regions but little known, though abounding with inhabitants, and rich in the most valuable productions"; and that he hoped that his work would "ultimately prove beneficial to the commercial interests of this settlement".¹¹ Though Anderson's project was ambitious and his interests had a broad scope, the reader is not given any warning of how dull would the following narrative be.

How John Anderson came to be chosen for the expedition was one of the rarer instances of radical contingency that enter his work: In May 1820 a mission was planned to chart out the coast of East Sumatra, and to gather more information about the kingdoms that lined the coast. The expedition was led by Mr Ibbetson of the company and Captain Crooke.¹² As fate would have it, the mission was called off, and as Anderson notes: "The best planned schemes, however, are often defeated by unforeseen accidents".¹³ Ibbetson fell ill and the mission was halted, after having visited only the ports of Jambi, Assahan (Asahan) and Delli (Deli). (Ibbetson was rushed to Singapore for medical treatment while the ship that carried him returned to Penang.)

Ibbetson's unfinished report did not impress the Head Commissioner based in Penang, for it was "altogether of a most discouraging nature, and represents the state of all the countries, both those

¹¹ Ibid, pp. xviii-xix.

¹² The full transcript of the company's mission for Ibbetson was included in the second appendix at the back of Anderson's work. (pp. 361-386). In the appended document, it was clear that the board of directors of the East India Company had wished Ibbetson to lead an expedition for the expressed purpose of gauging the possibility of enhancing trade with the Malay and Batak communities in East Sumatra, and Ibbetson had been directed to sound out the local rulers on the following points: Their attitude towards the East India Company; their attitude towards the Dutch East Indies Company; their willingness to formally enter into trading relations with the English; common perceptions, for and against, towards the English and the Dutch; the main centres of production and commerce; the state of political affairs in the Malay kingdoms; the power of the local rulers and their courts; the power of rival contenders to the respective rulers, and their military capabilities; the state of political stability and security in the kingdoms; their relations with each other; the state of security in the interior, including in the Batak lands; the state of economic development there; the main articles of manufacture in the local economies; goods and materials produced; goods and materials that were desired and may be exported there by the company; etc.

¹³ Ibid, pp. xviii-xix.

which he visited and those he did not visit, in a very unfavourable light; the inhabitants being, according to this account, universally addicted to piracy, and subsisting wholly on plunder.”¹⁴ Anderson obviously had a point here, when he noted that Ibbetson had pronounced judgement upon *all* the native communities and accused them of piracy – despite the fact that he had not visited some of the communities and was thus unable to provide evidence to back up his claims. It was to make up for this gap in knowledge that Anderson – who confessed of having better knowledge of East Sumatran merchants who visited Penang¹⁵ – volunteered for the task of attempting a second sortie to Sumatra in 1823.

Before he proceeded with his account of the settlements in East Sumatra, Anderson ended his introduction with a solemn vow that he had undertaken the ‘laborious task’ assigned to him – despite his lack of ‘scientific acquirements’ – and that he would relate the information he obtained ‘as directed by the instructions of the former agents, “in the most simple language, so that the supreme authorities may have the opportunity, as well as this government, of forming their own conclusions”’. The net result was an account of East Sumatra filled to the brim with detail and acute observations, but almost entirely devoid of humour, drama or flourish; and a work that has gone down in the history of writings on Southeast Asia as perhaps one of the driest ever produced, which must have tested the nerves of many a reader since its publication.

III. *Carefully does it: Anderson’s scrupulous research approach*

“You’ve got to be careful if you don’t know where you are going, because you might not get there.”¹⁶

Yogi Berra

Anderson was at pains to state again and again that he was no expert, and that he had no specialised knowledge as a historian or sociologist. Careful to a fault, he covered his bases by opening his work with copious references to the most well-known expert on Sumatra then, William Marsden – whose work *A History of Sumatra* was then perhaps one of the very few works of any note on the subject.¹⁷ Footnotes 1 to 7 between pages xi to xvii of his introduction refer to Marsden’s work, and outlines the discoveries that had been made by Marsden with regards to the kingdoms of Aceh, Butar, Deli and Siak. Anderson was careful not to tread on hallowed ground where Marsden’s imprint was still visible to all, and he chose instead to focus on areas that had been hitherto under-studied at the time, preferring to quietly go where few had gone before. (It is also interesting to note that Anderson does not accord the same respect or acknowledgement to the two leading English writers on the East

¹⁴ Ibid, p. xix.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. xxi.

¹⁶ Yogi Berra, *When You Come to a Fork in the Road, Take It!: Inspiration and Wisdom from One of Baseball's Greatest Heroes*, Hyperion, 2002. p. 53.

¹⁷ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra - Containing An Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners Of the Native Inhabitants, With A Description of the Natural Productions, And A Relation of the Ancient Political State Of that Island*. Printed for the Author, London. 1783.

Indies at the time, Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd, whose works on Java and the East Indies had been published by then.¹⁸⁾

The expedition began in Penang with the purchase (and re-naming) of the Brig *Jessy*, that was armed with eight guns (two of them twelve-pounders) and crewed by more than sixty men of twenty different nationalities. Anderson was given his letter of commission and letters of introduction to 'the Kejuman Muda, Rajah of Langkat; Sultan Panglima of Delli; Sri Sultan Ahmut of Bulu China; Sultan Besar of Sirdang; Nunku Bindihara and Pangulus of Batu Bara; Jang de per Tuan, or Rajah, of Assahan: King of Siack; rajah of Salengore'.¹⁹ The *Jessy* embarked without fanfare on its mission, and in keeping with its understated departure, Anderson's narrative at this stage of the journey was replete with references nautical and navigational, hardly designed to affect any enthusiasm on the part of the reader.

Bookish Anderson did not have to wait long before he found reason to complain: Four days into the journey he discovered that his Portuguese captain and his pilot did not, after all, understand English and had no idea of where they were going and what they were doing along the East coast of Sumatra. (An odd admission on Anderson's part, considering that they had been at sea for several days and that he was the one who hired the captain and the pilot.) The captain's maps proved to be inaccurate and out-of-date, though Anderson smugly noted that he had brought his own English maps that were up to the task.²⁰ Admonishing his Portuguese captain for his 'gross ignorance' and his 'perfect inability to carry the vessel in safety', Anderson begins to plug the epistemic gap as soon as they land at Deli and begin to move up-river.²¹

Here is where Anderson's data collection began: His account of Deli was comprehensive in the sense that it touched upon the internal politics of that kingdom that seemed, to him, on the verge of a 'disastrous revolution' and where the Ruler – then facing internal opposition from errant local lords – was keen to seek trade with Britain.²² Anderson took note of the local economy of Deli, the condition of its markets, and jotted out its products and imports. But Anderson also surveyed the lay of the land, and charted the waterways and the river that connected Deli to the interior, having embarked on a small expedition upriver with a small band of men. He measured the depth of the river and estuary at several points, noting in his text parts of the river that would be dangerous for larger vessels, and where entry could be gained by smaller boats.²³

Undeterred by the fact that a civil war was in full swing, Anderson proceeded inland to meet the other lords and nobles who had risen up against the Sultan Panglima of Deli. From Kampung Ilir to Kampung Besar to Kota Bangun, Anderson parleyed with as many local leaders and warriors as he

¹⁸ Re: Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, Black, Parbury and Allen, printed for the East India Company, London, 1817; and John Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago, Containing an account of the Manners, Arts, Languages, Religions, Institutions and Commerce of its Inhabitants*. Archibald Constable, Edinburgh. 1820.

¹⁹ Anderson, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 7.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

²² *Ibid*, p. 10.

²³ *Ibid*, pp. 10-13.

could, while noting that many of their troops were of Batak origin.²⁴ Despite having previously made overtures to the ruler of Deli, Anderson – forever the East India Company man on the lookout for new commercial partners for the firm – also negotiated on the side with some of the local rebel leaders who had likewise expressed a desire to do business with the British.

Anderson reported his findings with an air of detachment throughout, and even when he encountered a Batak cannibal – who boasted that he had eaten four of his enemies – Anderson’s description of the man-eating warrior focused less on the man’s dietary preferences and more on the details of his clothes, down to his blue cotton shirt and Acehnese trousers.²⁵ A little further on, he gives an account of the Sultan of Kota Bangun’s personal army, which consisted of around four hundred men, ‘one-third of them at least such savages as I have been describing. Their food consists of the flesh of tigers, elephants, hogs, snakes, dogs, rats, or whatever offal they can lay their hands upon. Having no religion, they fear neither God nor man. They believe that when they die, they shall become wind. Many of them, however, are converted to Islamism; but the older people, who have been accustomed to feast upon human flesh, and other delicacies of that sort, have an aversion to the Mahometan faith, as they cannot afterwards enjoy themselves.’²⁶ Without a pause, Anderson moved effortlessly from cannibalism to horticulture and described in turn the pepper plantations nearby, ‘that are kept beautifully clean, and clear from grass’; the merits of the Jahar, Binjai, Mentubong and Kallumpang tree – the wood of the last being favoured for the making of coffins (though presumably coffins would have been no use to the Bataks who did not bury the dead but ate them instead) as well as the Bunga Dedap tree, whose stem was pounded to make charcoal for gunpowder.²⁷ Novel though the gruesome menu of the Bataks might have been, Anderson was clearly more interested in the agricultural products that Sumatra had to offer.

Throughout the narrative, Anderson’s penchant for commerce is clearly evident: He desired to meet the Rajah Sebaya Lingah in order to persuade the ruler to accept the use of British currency;²⁸ and was keen to go deeper inland than any Englishman before him to espy what the landscape had to offer in terms of local produce. On the way to Kampung Ilir, he came across Sumatran elephants, and was convinced that ivory could be collected if only the civil war would come to an end and if men from Queda (Kedah) could be brought over – for Kedahans were known for their elephant-snaring capabilities.²⁹ Along the way, he noted the various uses of the local plants and trees that he came across, such as the Sukkat (or Salimbar), Bubua and the Daun Ibas.³⁰ Again, Anderson’s interests were primarily commercial, as he noted the value and uses of these woods and plants and how they could be traded for British goods.

Again and again, Anderson repeats the same tiresome ritual of greeting the local rulers whom he bestows gifts of European cloth, such as Sri Sultan Ahmad of Kullumpang.³¹ But it is clear that these

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 22-32.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 34.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 35.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 36.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 40.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 41.

³¹ Ibid, p. 60.

rites and rituals were not merely ceremonial, for Anderson was also attempting to gauge the extent to which the natives of Sumatra were attracted to European chintz and other products. Slowly, as his narrative proceeds, the reader begins to realise the intention of Anderson, who was basically on a scouting mission to ascertain to what extent Sumatra could be opened up for trade with England, and whether English cloth could be used as a means to break into the local market. Anderson lamented the 'indolence of the natives' who 'gained a subsistence with little trouble or exertion',³² but noted that should the land be opened up for commercial cultivation, the natives of East Sumatra would have the means to spend their earnings of cloth and other goods imported from Britain, for "almost all the Battas (Bataks) whom I saw here were dressed in these cloths; and some few had *bajoos* or jackets of European chintz or white cloth. Nothing but the want of means prevented them from all wearing European cloth, to which lately they have all become very partial."³³

Anderson's account plodded along its own laborious pace as he navigated the Bulu China, Terusan Dulmanack and Belouai rivers. Again, as in the case of his earlier survey of the river delta around Deli, his account was full of nautical references and measurements related to the depth and width of these rivers at different points. At Batubara he noted that civil unrest was still a problem that remained unsolved, but that the local population was eager to see hostilities come to an end. As he surveyed the state of the local economy then, Anderson soon came to the conclusion that British trade with East Sumatra would be favourable indeed, and that Britain would be able to export its cloth products to the area in exchange for precious commodities such as gambier, pepper and other spices, as well as precious woods and ivory. At Siak he was pleased to learn that the Rajah had not reneged on the promises he had made with Colonel Faruhar in 1818, and that, better still, the Dutch had not been given an opportunity to set up a trading post there.³⁴

By his own account, John Anderson regarded his mission to the East coast of Sumatra a success.³⁵ The human cost was borne by the crew of his ship the *Jessy*, not least by the pilot (who could not read English maps) who died along the way. The death of the pilot did irk Anderson somewhat, for it compelled him to direct his vessel to Selangor, and then Malacca, in search of a replacement; but the short detour did not detract him from accomplishing his mission. Throughout the journey, the *Jessy's* guns had never been fired in anger, and despite the rumours of cannibalism and piracy that were said to be widespread, all he had to face were the mosquitoes of Sumatra.

In his journal, Anderson noted with an air of quiet triumph that he had succeeded in going further than any company official before him. (Nearly seventy years later, the same self-congratulatory tone would be detected in the writings of the young Hugh Clifford, who, after his grand survey-tour of the Malay kingdoms of Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan, would proclaim that he had single-handedly added

³² Ibid, p. 51.

³³ Ibid, p. 52.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 165.

³⁵ The final entry to Anderson's account of the mission reads thus: 'Made all sail for Pinang (Penang), which we reached by the 9th of April (1823), having been absent exactly three months. Only one casualty happened during the voyage, and not a single accident of any kind; and I had occasion to punish only two men slightly, for sleeping during their watch. Though we encountered some severe weather, and the navigation in some parts was extremely difficult, the vessel did not touch ground, lose a spar, or split a sail; and in all these points, I may with truth say that no expedition was ever brought to a termination under more happy circumstances.' (p. 190)

forty thousand acres of territory to the British Empire.³⁶) For both Anderson and Hugh Clifford, the extension of the horizon of knowledge was also an extension of British commercial influence and colonial power; and the march of epistemology and Empire went hand-in-hand. Of the Deli river region, Anderson noted that ‘this place has never been visited by Europeans, nor is its name to be found in any chart extant.’³⁷ And of the Bulu China river region, he remarked that “during the seventeen days that the vessel has been in the river, I have visited the principal places in Delli (Deli), have gone up the Bulu China and Sirdang rivers, and have penetrated into the pepper countries in three different directions; have seen and conversed with all the principal chiefs in these districts, both Malays and Battas (Bataks). I have collected all the information I possibly could from intelligent natives, comparing it as I had an opportunity.”³⁸

Self-contented as he was, there was some justification for Anderson’s gentle boast, for he had indeed pushed back the horizon of knowledge of Sumatra at that time. This was ground-level fieldwork and data collection of the first order, done by a data collector working on the field. Yet despite his detailed account of the dozens of types and species of flora and fauna that he discovered, precious little was ever written about Anderson by the man himself.

IV. *Where is the author?* The Perceptible Gaze of the Invisible John Anderson

“The Rajah asked me if I was not afraid. I replied that I was rather a predestinarian.”³⁹

John Anderson
Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra 1826

Apart from his own admission that he possessed a ‘moderate share of industry and perseverance’⁴⁰ at the beginning of his work, we learn almost nothing about John Anderson, the company official and author of *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra*. Whatever fears, hopes and prejudices he may have harboured are absent in the text, as he guided the reader along his own expedition to Sumatra. Perhaps the only instances where the author revealed a little of himself is when he expressed his irritation of the mosquitoes that plagued his journey across Sumatra – though even then, the

³⁶ The similarities between John Anderson and Hugh Clifford are striking indeed: Both men started out as low-ranking functionaries of the East India Company; Clifford beginning his career in his late teens as a mere cadet. Both of them were meticulous in their research, and both were keen on pushing back the horizon of knowledge at the time. Like Anderson, Clifford was also worried about the political disturbances in Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan; and like Anderson, he too felt that commerce could be encouraged if hostilities would cease. Clifford is credited for being one of the first Englishmen to map out the territories of Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan – which he did with a company of 23 Malays from Pahang. But unlike Anderson, who evidenced no literary flair whatsoever, Clifford also dabbled in fiction-writing and produced a string of short stories that were set in Pahang. Clifford’s fictional stories set in the Malayan Peninsula contrasted starkly to his official reports and surveys that were monotonous and factual in character. His fiction is full of romantic allusions to Pahang as the ‘final frontier’ between the British-controlled territories of the Peninsula and the ‘darker’ realms of the Malay kingdoms that were still independent. Again and again in his short stories Clifford emphasised the vastness of Asia and the ‘frontier mentality’ that was prevalent among the first Western explorers and traders who ventured into Pahang, treating the state as if it was the ‘Wild West’ of the Malay world. [See: Hugh Clifford, *A Journey to the Malay States of Trengganu and Kelantan*, Royal Geographical Society, London, Vol. IX, January 1897. For a detailed account of British intervention into Pahang, see: Aruna Gopinath, *Pahang 1880-1933: A Political History*. Malaysian Branch of the Royal Geographic Society, Monograph 18. Kuala Lumpur, 1996.]

³⁷ Ibid, p. 79.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 90. Also: p. 97.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. xxi,

indefatigable data collector in him could not help but deal with the subject in some detail, enumerating the number of their nightly attacks, the size of the mosquitoes and the varying degrees of viciousness of his winged tormentors.⁴¹

The 'distancing effect' that Anderson affected in his writing was hardly accidental, and he maintained it even in his accounts of his interactions with the people of Sumatra. Constantly down-playing his own agency and will, he continued to maintain the air of a detached observer, a passing witness to events that unfolded before his eyes. When the *Jessy* arrived at Siak, the last major port of call during the expedition, Anderson was greeted by the King and his court. His account of the interview he had with them revealed something of Anderson's own unassuming nature and his reluctance to admit his private feelings:

'The greatest surprise was expressed by all the chiefs, and the King in particular, on being informed that I had penetrated into the Batta (Batak) country. He said, addressing the surrounding multitude, "Ah, this is the way the English manage: The Dutch dared not do this." Even many of the old chiefs who were present, and had been engaged in the wars at Assahan, Delli, and other places conquered by the Rajah of Siack (Siak), had never ascended as far as I did, and made very particular enquiries relative to the population of the Batta states, etc. *The Rajah asked me if I was not afraid. I replied that I was rather a predestinarian, and that there was a time appointed for all to die; that as I went with pacific intentions, and merely to devise means for improving the commerce and the condition of the countries I visited, I felt no apprehensions, conscious that my motives only required to be known to be appreciated; and that, being fond of travelling, I wished also to satisfy a rational curiosity.*⁴² (*Emphasis mine*)

Scholars of Southeast Asia who hope to gain deeper knowledge of the history, culture and norms of Sumatran society may be sorely disappointed by Anderson's offering, for the author had failed to deliver in that regard. But in his defence, Anderson himself had clearly stated from the outset that he was no historian or expert on Sumatran society; and nor was his account of the mission to East Sumatra meant to be taken as an authoritative work on the subject. (In this sense, his homage to the doyen Marsden at the introduction of his work serves as a useful literary device that shielded him from any accusation of having scholarly pretensions of any kind; for he had made it clear that he was not attempting an academic work of the same erudite level.)

Anderson's account of the mission to Sumatra was precisely that: an account of an exploratory mission to a part of the East Indies that was little known, and with the objective of ascertaining the viability of trade with the native polities there. All he offered was an account of the trip to Sumatra in a dry, matter-of-fact, humourless manner. Even his treatment of the political crisis affecting the kingdom of Deli leaves much to be desired, for he offered next to nothing when it comes to the history of Deli, the causes of the revolt against the Sultan Pangiran, and the motivations of the rebellious lords and

⁴¹ The vexing topic of mosquitoes and other pesky insects pops up again and again in Anderson's work, and it was clear that there was no love lost between them. References to mosquitoes are found on pages 20, 27, 43, 54-55, 56, 81, 141, etc.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

nobles. The same holds true of his account of Siak, and the intrigues among the local chiefs against the Rajah there. True to his word, he collected the various accounts of the conflicts and rivalries as they were related to him by the lords, chiefs and kings he interviewed and presented them at face value, with no judgement on his part – preferring instead, as he noted in the introduction, to allow the directors of the East India Company to come to their own conclusion. (Whether the directors of the company were any wiser after reading his report is something we can only speculate.)

Beyond Anderson's superficial observation that the natives were generally indolent and unenterprising, and the Bataks superstitious, he does not offer us a study of the people and communities of East Sumatra either. Though, here it should be noted that Anderson's judgement was *economic* in tone and tenor, and formed as a result of commercial calculations that were taking place in his mind.⁴³ In this regard, Anderson's moral universe was similar to that of his contemporaries, like Raffles – who likewise disapproved of wasteful habits and pursuits like gambling on the grounds that they contributed to the weakening of local economies.⁴⁴ Anderson's concern then was that the people of Sumatra were not economically productive, and that as long as they remained so they would not have the capacity to purchase goods that Britain may wish to offer them, in order to open up the local markets for foreign capital penetration. Even when confronted by the Bataks and their human-munching ways, Anderson seemed less bothered by their habits and customs – that struck other European explorers and missionaries as barbaric and evil – than by the fact that they were not earning enough to buy the chintz that Britain was so keen to sell them. (Presumably even cannibals deserved the best that British manufacturing could offer.)

It was in the same vein that he tried to dispel the stories of piracy that had littered the accounts of East Sumatra until then – a backhanded refutation of the claims made by R. Ibbetson, whose mission earlier in 1820 proved to be a failure but whose alarmist report to the board of directors of the company was the cause of much unease. Though he was forced to admit that he personally discovered evidence of cannibalism among the Bataks, Anderson confidently added in his final report (appended to the journal) that its practice 'is rapidly decreasing, as civilisation and *commerce* are advancing'.⁴⁵ He took the same dismissive tone when dealing with Ebbitson's reports of piracy among the Malays of Batubara when he insisted that 'if piracy exists at all, it must be to a very limited extent. *Their chiefs seem very much disposed to trade*, and too much engaged in hostilities in the interior with refractory chiefs, to be able to engage in piratical adventures.'⁴⁶ (*Emphasis mine*) Anderson was less enamoured with stories of murderous cannibals and bloodthirsty pirates, but certainly more excited by

⁴³ John Anderson's economic concerns were not exclusive to himself, but shared by another native company official, the Malaccan-based scribe Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir. Munshi Abdullah was the translator and scribe to Stamford Raffles and other company officials in Malacca and Singapore, and in time he internalised the same values of his employers and superiors in the company. In his work *Kisah Pelayaran ke Timur* (Journey to the East Coast of the Malay Peninsula), Abdullah noted that the kingdoms of Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan were likewise caught in the grip of civil conflict, which in turn rendered their local economies inert. Abdullah, like Anderson, regarded wars as unproductive and calamitous to the economic health of society, and in his account of the kingdoms on the East coast of the Peninsula lamented the culture of feudal politics that allowed petty chieftains to constantly usurp and challenge the power of their rulers, keeping the communities in a perpetual state of unproductive crisis.

⁴⁴A report in *The Times* of London, dated 3 September 1818, stated that Stamford Raffles, upon landing in Bencoolen (on 15 April 1818) had immediately introduced a new law that banned cock-fighting and other forms of gambling; and that his arrival coincided with the establishment of the Sumatran Auxiliary Bible Society, led by a certain Reverend Winter. Despite the role of the East India Company in the opium trade, Raffles himself disapproved of its consumption and was known for his frugal work habits and lifestyle.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 227-228.

the commercial prospects he found there. In contrast to the alarmist tone of Ibbetson's earlier report, Anderson concluded his account of his stay in Siak with a glowing report of the hospitality of his hosts, who hardly cut a piratical figure in his eyes:

'The reception I met at this place has made an impression upon my mind which will not easily be effaced. I never met anywhere with a more hearty welcome, all the people vying with each other in their kindly offices. *How different was the treatment I actually experienced, compared with what I anticipated. I expected to meet with a savage race of pirates, whom would receive me with jealousy and distrust. I must describe them, however, as I found them, hospitable and generous.*⁴⁷ (*Emphasis mine*)

As far as Anderson was concerned, Batubara, Siak and the Batak lands were all ripe for the picking, and the East India Company ought to have made every effort to expand its trading network to East Sumatra. He had presented the company with a broad and detailed survey of the polities he discovered; and rather than an account of the history, people and customs of East Sumatra, what Anderson produced was a political-economic report of the *market* of Sumatra, with all manner of precise information about the resources and opportunities that lay there for trade and enterprise. The anthropologist or sociologist may find his work wanting in many respects, but the goods merchant of his time would have been elated by his detailed account of pepper production, gambier production, list of rice, pepper, chilli and fruit plantations and orchards, locations best suited for the extraction of minerals and ivory, etc.

If Anderson failed in giving us a better picture of the human condition in East Sumatra, it was because he was more interested in, and focused on what those humans were eating, buying, selling and producing instead. *From an economist's point of view – that Anderson adopted – the Sumatran people were economic agents and actors, consumers and producers, first and foremost – and their history, culture and morals were of secondary importance compared to their capacity for consumption and production.* As far as economic data mining is concerned, John Anderson's journal of his mission to East Sumatra is perhaps one of the earliest examples of such a study carried out in meticulous detail, by a company functionary who was in all respects the product of the commercial establishment he worked for. And it was here that the seemingly-invisible, objective gaze of John Anderson stood out in bold relief, where he revealed his own subject-position as a loyal servant of the British East India Company. This was a *company* report, written by a *company official*, for the *company* he worked for; and Anderson was less interested in the opinion of the chattering intelligentsia in their salons in London, but keen to impress his company directors, whose company he kept, and to whom his book was dedicated.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 185.

V. *The method makes the object: Perspectivism in the economic map that Anderson drew*

“When we start to ascertain the thingness of a thing, we are immediately helpless in spite of our well-ordered question. *Where* should we grasp the *thing*? And besides, we nowhere find ‘the thing’, but only particular things.”⁴⁸

Martin Heidegger
The Everyday and Scientific Experiences of the Thing: The Question Concerning their Truth

In her work ‘Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect them and freeze their point of view to be reflective of one’s own kind’ (2013) the Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann sums up, in visual form, the point that Richards was making in his work on the Imperial Archive.⁴⁹ That data collection during the age of Empire was never neutral, was always focused, and sought to organise data into a comprehensive system of ordered knowledge that would serve other, non-academic and often political and economic ends. This was true of many of the scholars whose work in Asia was put into service by colonial governments and companies, and it was certainly true of John Anderson as well. Anderson did not disguise his objectives, and had made it abundantly clear that his data collection mission was one that was intended to serve an economic end: namely, the opening up of markets in East Sumatra and to induce the local rulers to trade with the East India Company. At one point in the narrative he expressed his elation when he managed to persuade the Shahbandar (Shahbandar) of Assahan to accept a payment of 360 dollars in the East India Company’s currency of Penang, for it meant that the local chief was now able to trade with the company, ‘which would afford them wonderful facilities, compared to what they enjoyed.’⁵⁰ The Shahbandar of Assahan was thus transformed from a *native other*, to a *potential customer* in an instant – *for as a result of this transaction he now possessed purchasing power*.

Here is where Anderson’s mode of economic assessment and analysis turned the people, resources and lands that he studied into economic agents and capital. In contrast to the studies that were then being carried out by European missionaries for whom the natives of Southeast Asia were lost souls in need of salvation through the Church, and whose imminent damnation justified the further penetration of the missionaries into their lands; Anderson’s economic analysis portrayed the natives of Sumatra as a people who were industrially stagnant and wanting, but who could be redeemed into productive economic agents if only trade channels could be opened up and commerce further encouraged. Lockean in his condemnation of idleness – *not as a sin, but as a form of wastefulness* – Anderson’s perspective was one that saw Sumatra in less exotic and romantic terms compared to the other explorers of his time. What he found was a vast land that was rich in natural resources but where commerce had not been able to flourish, and this pained the wandering company official greatly.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Everyday and Scientific Experience of the Thing: The Question of their Truth*. In: Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* University Press of America, Langham, New York. 1967. p. 11.

⁴⁹ Yee I-Lann, *Wherein one surreptitiously performs reconnaissance to collect them and freeze their point of view to be reflective of one’s own kind*, 2013.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 122-123.

⁵¹ Apart from the repetitive mention of mosquitoes and other troublesome insects, Anderson’s narrative is also replete with references to bare and empty markets, fields that were not being worked at full capacity, and wastage in general. Up the Deli

To that end, he appended to his narrative a comprehensive survey of Sumatra and an appendix that were longer than his account of the mission itself, running from pages 191 to 423 of the book. It was here that the pen-pushing Anderson was able to come into his own, as the builder of a great columbarium of economic and financial data. He listed no less than 168 rivers, capes, points, islands, bays and straits that he had visited long his three-month journey;⁵² the names and locations of thirty-six villages that he visited in the Batak lands around Langkat, and the total number of houses contained in all of them (13,560, on his count);⁵³ the types of wood and bamboo to be found for cultivation and sale in the Batak and Malay lands; and other major agricultural goods that can be bought from the Batak and Malay villages – notably pepper, and the location of the best pepper plantations; other common articles of export such as salt, cotton, corn, tobacco, pulse, beans, gambier, rice, fruits of all kinds, resin, gum, wood, etc., and their prices at different centres of production; the major articles of import most needed and wanted in the Malay and Batak lands, such as cloth, iron, brass, utensils, gunpowder, arms, opium (which consumption he did not approve), chinaware, nails, etc., and their prices at different ports; and other bits of information vital to trade. (At one point in the appendix Anderson did mention in passing an old temple in the vicinity of Kota Bangun, but summarily brushed aside its importance as ‘there were no records regarding this ancient fortification’.)⁵⁴

When the modern reader considers the logistical difficulties Anderson faced, working in the age of sail where possession of a good compass and accurate map would make all the difference between success and failure, life or death, his jaunt to East Sumatra does strike one as quite an adventure – despite his sustained attempt to squeeze every drop of excitement out of his arid account of the journey. And contrary to the view of scholars like Kabbani (1988) who saw in 19th century writings about the Orient subliminal traces of European male desire for Asian female bodies, Anderson’s entire account features almost no descriptions of Sumatran women at all – save for an aged female guide he met along the Deli region – and certainly no steamy reports of topless beauties hiding behind banana trees. (Anderson seemed more excited by pepper orchards and paddy fields at any rate.) But the work also raises deeper questions of a philosophical and methodological nature that remain relevant to all scholars today, and it is to these questions that I turn to now.

Reading John Anderson’s account of his mission to East Sumatra today, one is struck by the economic perspectivism of the author that screams through its pages. Though the work has been largely forgotten, and its reputation dimmed somewhat by the works of Raffles and Crawfurd whose writings on the East Indies have assumed canonical status among scholars and antiquarian book-

river region he noted that ‘in the villages there appeared to be an entire stagnation of trade; indeed, I may say, I did not see a single article for sale’ (p. 17). While at Batubara he noted that there was a ready market for English cloth, ‘for the people prefer wearing our European chintzes’ (pp. 116-117); and he came to the same conclusion when he visited the Tubba (Toba) region where he observed that ‘the chiefs had a partiality for our European chintzes, and particularly for scarlet broad cloth, of which they would have made purchase, had there been any for sale’. p. 151.

⁵² Ibid, pp. 229-232.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 242-244.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 269. It is interesting to note that Anderson’s text has no illustrations of ancient monuments whatsoever, in contrast to the illustrations found in the works of Raffles (1817) and Crawfurd (1820). The only illustrations of objects is one that features a rather dull-looking Batak house and the last lithograph that features a graphic representation of the various sorts of weapons used by the Malays and Bataks, including the Malay flintlock musket or *Bedil Istinggar*.

collectors alike, it remains a rare and curious text whose construction ought to be of interest for contemporary researchers of Southeast Asia, for a number of reasons:⁵⁵

Firstly, Anderson's work tells us something about the nature of on-site, ground-level fieldwork and its importance in data collection. From the outset of his narrative, Anderson was keen to insist that his data collecting was done on a first-hand basis, by the author himself. The only other major reference work that he cited in his own was that of Marsden's, who, as we have seen, was liberally cited in his introduction. But Anderson's unstated complaint was that the report done by Ibbetson during the earlier expedition of 1820 was put together from second-hand sources, and that Ibbetson had erred by making general conclusions with regards to the problem of piracy without having spent any time in places like Batubara and Siak himself. Anderson had set out to mine data, and he proposed to do so by going directly to the source himself, with no intermediaries. Living and working as we do in the age of online data sources like Google and Wikipedia, Anderson's impressive body of economic statistics and financial data comes across as a dry but believable account of the state of affairs in East Sumatra then, and can be read as a model of fieldwork done by the analyst himself. Crucially, it was on the basis of his own first-hand experience that he sought to *disprove* the claims made by his peers like Ibbetson, and if Anderson had any justification in his dismissal of Ibbetson's warnings about piracy, it was on the firm basis of his own visit to the place, and his ability to state that *he was there* in person. Inasmuch as he was concerned about providing true and correct data about the subject he studied, he was equally concerned to correct any mistakes or assumptions that were in circulation at the time.

Secondly, Anderson's work shows us precisely how and why it is so difficult for scholars in general to escape the trap of academic perspectivism and solipsism, which in turn jeopardise any claims to objective distance in analysis. Anderson's narrative is crammed with data and observations, though he was conscious of his desire to remove himself from the stage of data accumulation and data processing. But as we have noted, he was himself a functionary of the East India Company and thus a product of the company's own regime of knowledge and power. Tried as he might, Anderson could never really assume the subject-position of the neutral, universal observer, for his data searching eye and pen focused on matters that were of greater interest to the company he served: The absence of information or descriptions of monuments and antiquities of the past are not the indicators of a philistine sensibility at work, but they tell us something about the mindset of a company official for whom pepper and ivory had more market value than some forgotten statue of a Hindu-Buddhist deity slowly sinking into a swamp in the middle of nowhere. Anderson had not gone to Sumatra to study butterflies, restore the relics of its ancient past, or to save the souls of its heathen natives – he had gone in search of market opportunities and his market-oriented eyes found them precisely as he wanted them to. *The company official that he was tried to remove himself from his own narrative account, but he could never remove the company from the official.*

Thirdly, Anderson's narrative demonstrates clearly how knowledge – which has always been bound to epistemic power and control – is never *sui generis*, and is instead shaped and produced by the

⁵⁵ There was, as far as I know, only one edition of the work by John Anderson, that of 1826, published by William Blackwood and T. Cadell.

academic tool that manufactures it. Anderson's tool of analysis was economics, and in his writing what we find is not Bourdieu's *homo academicus* at work, but rather a *homo economicus* intrepidly labouring away. From a Foucauldian viewpoint this was a case of a marriage between economics and epistemology: where Anderson was identifying, sifting, categorising and compartmentalising elements of raw data – names, places, dates, figures – within a vast system of interpretation where data was being turned into knowledge, and *useful, instrumental* knowledge at that. In the same way that the discursive economy of missionaries of the time could only view the Bataks as heathens whose culture and beliefs were necessarily imbued with negativity (that would only be reversed through conversion), Anderson's discursive economy could only view that land and resources of Sumatra as capital, and its people as economic agents – albeit ones who were not as productive and enterprising as he wished them to be. The discursive economy of missionary activism, that had its own logic and teleology, finds a counterpart in Anderson's own market-informed discursive economy that was likewise guided by its own logic and values, and which in turn could only result in its own perspectively-determined *idea* of Sumatra. Both the missionary and Anderson may have been writing about Sumatra, but in their writings we are left with two very different views of the same thing – reminiscent of Heidegger's point about the sun being different things to different people, and prompting the question: 'which of these is the true sun? The sun of the shepherd, or the sun of the astro-physicist?'⁵⁶ (The answer of course, is both – depending on perspective.)

In summing up, it could be said that as far as *epistemic* claims go, John Anderson did indeed come to *know* Sumatra; but that his knowledge of Sumatra was never an entirely objective one that was formed outside of any discursive economy or knowledge-building analytical system. The age-old problem that has bedevilled philosophy since the beginning remains with us, which is the challenge of being able to claim knowledge of what Heidegger termed the *thing-in-itself*. That holds true of all analysis, and is as relevant today as it was when Anderson published his *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra* in 1826.

Anderson certainly *knew* what Sumatra was, for in his perspective Sumatra was a *market* that was ready to be tapped. His epistemic claim to knowledge of Sumatra was one that was necessarily shaped by the tool that he used to see and analyse the object – economics – but this was and remains true of all other accounts of Sumatra that were written before and after him as well. Whether it be the historian's lens (of Marsden's for example) or the missionary's, *Sumatra could only be known through some mode of analysis*; and there were as many Sumatras as there were (and are) approaches to analysis available, then and now. In that sense, Anderson's work is instructive for all data collectors, field workers and analysts: It reminds the contemporary scholar that scholarship – even of the driest variety – is fraught with subjectivism and perspectivism, and that claims to objectivity are easier to make than to accomplish.

John Anderson's description of Sumatra may strike some readers as being a more lucid and sober account compared to the romantic fluff that has been written by scores of romantic novelists in love with the 'exotic East', and perhaps less judgemental than the damning accounts of missionaries who

⁵⁶ Heidegger, 1967. p. 13.

saw in the land and its people nothing but evidence of devilry; but it was, nonetheless, his own account of Sumatra that was written by a company man, and whose pen was guided by considerations of profit and loss. Anderson had, in the end, mapped out the whole of Eastern Sumatra, but his was an *economic map* that pointed to the most vital centres of trade, the most important areas of production, as well as the most populous areas that would be the biggest market for British goods. Even if Anderson had been careful in his research and analysis, and had taken steps to withdraw himself well into the background of the narrative he weaved, his presence could be read throughout the text: *for this was a company man's view of the world, and the Sumatra that we see in his work has 'Anderson of the East India Company' written all over it.*



Map of the Sumatran Coast from John Anderson's work, 1826

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