

The Lure of the Tropics and the Colonial Emporium: The Study of Book Illustration and Newspaper Advertisement in Colonial North Borneo

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Introduction

Many historians use “Gold, God, and Glory” to describe the motives generating the overseas exploration, expansion, and conquests of the Western power over the East. In this paper, we intent to revisit those shorthands, the 3 G’s above, in rather different ways: the first part of the title of this paper, ‘The Lure of the Tropics and the Colonial Emporium’ could be used to summarise similar colonising motives of the West. The ‘lure’ indicates the temptation the colonial officers faced in the tropics, and this indication serves as an interpellation of colonial ideology, which makes use of the tropics and its inhabitants (i.e. colonised people) as its consumers and seize control of the means of production. Hence, the second part of the title, ‘The Book Illustration and Newspaper Advertisement’ would serve as a few examples of how the natives are being treated as well as how the colonial advertisement messages help to promote the idea of selling western products in the tropics vis-à-vis colonial emporium respectively.

The notion of ‘lure’ in the context of the Western and Eastern worlds often is associated with exoticism. The Eastern world is strange to the Westerners, hence the exoticism. Cutajar (1987) describes the lure of the Orient as being fascinated to things that are strange and exotic, portraying through are animals such as zebras, lions and monkeys. Cutajar’s description of the lure of Orient correlates with one of the data discussed in this paper.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research; therefore, we conducted textual and visual analyses on a book illustration from Agnes Keith’s book, *Land Below The Wind* (1939/2010) and an advertisement of a tonic drink by *Wincarnis*. The book illustration and the advertisement are analysed using Kress and van Leeuwen’s framework (1996/2006) in order to analyse visual image. We also analysed the ideologies behind the illustration and the advertisement.

Discussion

In her book, Keith provided the following illustration entitled “white men resisting the lure of the tropics” which endorses what this paper intends to do.

Figure 1: White man resisting the lure of the tropics
Source: Keith, 1939/2010



In general, the above illustration provides mildly humorous sketch of a scantily-clad and nubile native woman who is tugging at the coat of a portly, bespectacled and dinner-suited white man, as he walks obliviously through the jungle. The man's incongruously formal attire, and also perhaps his aloofness, signifies his Englishness. What is also made obvious in the illustration is that the white man's ability to overcome (even neglect) such an alluring sexual provocation by the native girl as if to suggest that the man in the sketch is a business-minded person, and his sole interest in the tropics (ie. the North Borneo) is purely business.

Besides the man and the woman, Keith also illustrates two monkeys (possibly male and female). In some cultures, such as Egypt and Mesoamerica, specifically the Maya, monkeys are associated with sexual connotations (Werness, 2004). The sexual symbolism of monkey reinforces the meaning of the illustration, indicating the potential sexual relationship between the native woman and the white man.

The native woman and the male monkey interestingly are positioned behind trees. The tree on the left side partially covers the woman's belly and nether region. Meanwhile, the male monkey is hiding behind the tree, probably from the woman's view. It seems to peep at her behind the tree, reinforcing the idea of the white man's inner desires. The positioning of the woman and the monkey behind the trees may also indicate what is happening behind closed doors. Although it is not evidently displayed in the illustration, it can be suggested that sexual relationships between female natives and white men do happen. What Keith does here in her illustration is to brazenly joke about a highly sensitive issue of empire, that of inter-racial relations between the coloniser and the colonised, an issue around which gather anxieties of

contamination, or assimilation of the supposedly superior, civilised white race into the savage, Oriental other (Kerr, 2008).

The advertisement of the tonic drink from a brand called *Wincarnis* is published in a colonial newspaper, *The British North Borneo Herald* on 1st April 1940 (Refer Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Wincarnis* advertisement
Source: *The British North Borneo Herald* (1st April 1940)

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YOU WILL BE SURPRISED HOW QUICKLY YOU PICK UP

If you have been ill in bed for several weeks, you will feel very weak and depressed, even after you begin to recover. The best and surest way of having a quick convalescence is to take WINCARNIS regularly once or twice a day.

From the very first glass, WINCARNIS starts to purify your blood-stream and to soothe your nerves. Rich, young blood courses through your veins, and in a very short time you will find yourself on your feet again, ready to work and play with your old energy and enthusiasm.

WINCARNIS has had more than 25,000,000 recommendations from the medical profession and for more than 20 years it has been regarded as the proved standby for convalescence, anaemia, weakness and nerves. WINCARNIS has never failed; it will not fail you.

WINGARNIS
NUTRITIOUS TONIC AND RESTORATIVE

In the first image, the man appears to be alone and his downcast gaze somehow sends a message of a solemn and sombre state, and he is also alone. However, in the second image, the man has a brighter and happy expression on his face, and he is also with another person which is a woman. The advertiser of the product is not only selling the product itself, but the advertiser also is selling a healthy and happy lifestyle. When he is sick, he is unhappy and alone. But, when he takes the drink, he does not only gain strength, he also gains a partner.

The copy of the advertisement provides information on *Wincarnis*. Although it is promoting a product, the message somehow seems to be that the consumer should be aware of this product in the market. In the last paragraph, the viewer is given information on the number of recommendations that this product received, indicating that if the consumer is aware of what is currently popular in the market, he or she should know the existence of *Wincarnis*. The last sentence of the paragraph contains a stress on the phrases “has never failed” and “not fail”, stressing that this product will provide an ultimate recovery to the person who takes it. The consumers are manipulated in the form that they must buy this product because it is highly recommended, and it is claimed to be able to restore health to those who consume it.

Another aspect that we are looking for from the advertisement page is the aspect of *text* and *ideology*. The advertiser works in the notion of making profits by manipulating the wants and needs of the audience and they are given the task to turn the audience into the consumer. To turn the audience into the consumer, first of all, the advertiser must ‘invite’ them, and this is done by directly addressing the audience of the advertisement, which is the *text*. The advertisement opens with the headline “YOU WILL BE SURPRISED HOW QUICKLY YOU PICK UP”. The word ‘you’ in the headline indicates that the viewer is addressed directly and specifically by the advertiser. It is important to note that the word ‘you’ is used throughout the entire advertisement, reinforcing this idea. Therefore, the audience somehow is ‘forcefully’ invited to be the consumer of the product through the direct address.

The headline, accompanied by the image of a sick man, presents a ‘problem’ to the audience. The audience then look at another focus of the advertisement, which is the brand label. The brand label, *Wincarnis* is the solution to the problem presented by the headline and its accompanied image. If the audience is interested to find out more information on the product, they will view the image and the copy which are positioned in the middle of the advertisement. However, these two elements are inviting enough for the audience to be the consumers. The brand label, *Wincarnis* and its semiotic representation kept appearing in the newspaper repeatedly, and it became the text itself. Thus, this helps to reinforce the ideology of the advertiser.

On that note, the expansion of the western products into the eastern world, and with more local people receiving education in English medium schools in North Borneo, the local people then had access to the advertisement and be influenced by it, making the brand like *Wincarnis*, and other Western products popular. Despite this newspaper was not available at the newsstand, that it was subscribed by individuals and companies, the colonial advertisement message of its product’s usefulness, continues to influence/stylise the masses through the words of mouth.

Conclusion

As what we have seen above from both book illustration and colonial newspaper’s advertisement, both published around 1940’s in North Borneo, the author, Agnes Newton Keith and the advertiser of the *British North Borneo Herald* seem to uphold and promote the British Empire on the grounds that colonial officers have the ability to control themselves as well as to dominate the market in colonised lands, and in doing so, create the colonial emporium par excellence for the British products to flourish.

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