

Across Frontiers of Language, Authority and Culture: A French Geologist's Travel Journal of Malaya

ANNE VANESSA VINCENT *

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
annevanessavincen@gmail.com*

SHANTHINI PILLAI

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia*

SUZIANA MAT SAAD

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the translated travel journal of Jacques de Morgan, originally written in French in 1884 during his expedition to Malaya to survey land for tin mining prospects and translated into English in 2020 for an Anglophone readership. While such expeditions were embedded within colonial structures of governance and resource extraction, Morgan's account reveals a more complex process of negotiating boundaries of language, authority, and culture. Drawing on Ann Laura Stoler's concept of the "interior frontier," understood as shifting internal boundaries of belonging and differentiation, this paper analyses how Morgan's position is constituted through three forms of boundary crossing. First, it considers the movement of the journal from its French context to its 2020 English translation, examining how the text is repositioned across temporal, linguistic, and cultural frameworks. Rather than treating translation as linguistic equivalence, it approaches it as textual mobility through which the journal is re-situated within new interpretive regimes and Anglophone scholarly infrastructures. Second, Morgan's engagement with the British colonial administration, particularly under Hugh Low, demonstrates his navigation of institutional structures required to secure access to mining concessions and field mobility. Finally, his interactions with Malay society, including the adoption of language, food, and clothing, indicate forms of embodied adaptation within the colonial landscape. Read through this framework, the journal reframes interior frontiers as sites where adaptive crossings simultaneously reproduce epistemic asymmetries, rendering the text a space in which colonial knowledge production becomes visible through practices of observation, translation, and encounter.

Keywords: Jacques de Morgan; tin mining; travel writing; boundary crossing; decoloniality

INTRODUCTION

Travel journals produced during late nineteenth-century scientific expeditions in Southeast Asia are often read as records of observation shaped by colonial epistemologies of extraction, classification, and control. Yet such texts are not transparent windows onto colonial reality. They are unstable narrative artefacts shaped by movement across languages, institutions, and interpretive regimes. This article examines the travel journal of Jacques de Morgan, a French geologist who travelled to Perak in 1884 in search of tin deposits, as a site where knowledge is produced through shifting positionalities rather than fixed observational authority. Originally written in French and translated into English in 2020 (Jaunay et al., 2020), the journal offers a case for rethinking how colonial scientific writing circulates and accrues meaning over time. Morgan's

journal, written from his position as a French scientific traveller operating within the British colonial context of Perak complicates a straightforward understanding of colonial knowledge production. In bringing together French scientific observation and economic interests through its intersections with British colonial, the journal becomes a salient text for the examination of negotiations of knowledge across competing imperial, linguistic, and institutional frameworks.

This study reads Morgan's journal as a situated narrative shaped by continual adjustment to overlapping colonial, local, and transnational contexts. Drawing on Ann Laura Stoler's concept of the "interior frontier," it conceptualises identity and authority as shifting configurations produced through affective, institutional, and epistemic boundaries (Stoler, 2009). Colonial encounters are not fixed oppositions between "European" and "indigenous," but processes in which access, belonging, and knowledge are continuously negotiated. Complementing this, Shanthini Pillai's concept of the "mobility of texts" foregrounds how colonial writing is reconstituted as it moves across languages and readerships, acquiring new meanings in different epistemic systems (Pillai, 2020). Translation, in this sense, is epistemic re-situation rather than linguistic transfer.

Existing scholarship on colonial knowledge in Malaya has been shaped significantly by British colonial archives and British-produced forms of knowledge. At the same time, scholarship from postcolonial studies and the history of science has challenged an exclusively imperial understanding of colonial knowledge through attention to representation, scientific circulation, and intercultural encounter. Within this Anglo-centric framework, colonial knowledge is frequently equated with British knowledge, marginalising other European actors and obscuring a broader transnational field of imperial epistemology (Harper, 1999; Andaya & Andaya, 2017). British rule in the Malay Peninsula was therefore both political and epistemic, producing systematic ways of seeing, classifying, and organising land, labour, and population.

Across this broader debate, different perspectives have emerged on colonial scientific and travel writing. Apart from Edward Said's foundational text on Orientalism (1978), there is also other scholarship on the history of science emphasising the circulation and co-production of knowledge across geographical and cultural boundaries (Livingstone, 2000; 2019; Raj, 2007). These perspectives suggest that colonial scientific texts can be understood both as instruments of imperial knowledge and as sites where knowledge was produced through movement, encounter, and negotiation.

Within the context of Malaya, there are the writings by British administrators, naturalists, and ethnographers. Sir Stamford Raffles combined natural history, spatial planning, and moral governance in early colonial Singapore, embedding European epistemic authority into urban and botanical space (Bastin, 1990; Cangi, 1993). John Crawfurd's linguistic and racial classifications reinforced hierarchical systems of knowledge that naturalised European superiority through comparative ethnology (Crawfurd, 1848). Hugh Low linked botanical collecting to territorial exploration and economic facilitation, aligning environmental observation with extraction and expansion (Low, 1848). Sir Frank Swettenham integrated governance with ethnographic observation and mapping, systematising British rule as both political structure and epistemic order (Swettenham, 1893; 1906).

There is also Walter William Skeat who extended colonial knowledge into the realm of cosmology and practice. He documented Malay belief systems, ritual practices, and environmental engagements and its integration into mining. By showing how mining was embedded in ritual systems governing land and mineral extraction, Skeat extended colonial epistemology into belief

and ontology, showing that classification encompassed both material and spiritual economies of extraction.

Alongside administrative and ethnographic writing, literary and travel narratives further shaped colonial knowledge. Isabella Bird's *The Golden Chersonese* (1883) constructs the peninsula as a landscape of exploration, foregrounding geography, movement, and encounter. William Somerset Maugham's Malaysian fiction, by contrast, transforms colonial experience into narrative form, reproducing and at times unsettling imperial hierarchies (Maugham, 1969; Sibar, 2012). Together, these works show how colonial knowledge circulated beyond bureaucratic institutions into literary and popular culture, shaping European imaginaries of Southeast Asia as a space of observation, ambiguity, and difference.

However, alongside this Anglo-centric archive of nineteenth-century Malaya's epistemic field there lay a parallel set of other European knowledge production. Among these were French travellers, missionaries, and naturalists who documented linguistic, religious, and environmental practices across the peninsula, contributing observations that circulated within transnational systems of knowledge. Unlike British administrators, these actors often occupied more complex positions as their movements within the respective contexts of scientific inquiry, commercial opportunity, and field observation were complicated by negotiations with British authority and governance, revealing a dispersed and overlapping field of knowledge production.

It is within this expanded landscape that Jacques de Morgan's expedition is situated. Commissioned in 1883 and supported by French patronage, his geological expedition to Perak was embedded in wider European interest in tin mining and mineral extraction. His work required negotiation with British colonial authorities, particularly Hugh Low and Frank Swettenham, to access mineral-rich territories and secure surveying permissions (Jaunay et al., 2020). The expedition thus illustrates how French scientific actors operated within British-administered space without being fully absorbed into it, occupying a position shaped by negotiation and mediated access.

Recent scholarship on French engagements in Malaya and Southeast Asian mobility emphasises transnational circulation, textual movement, and cultural encounter as key frameworks for understanding non-British imperial presence (Vincent et al., 2026; Pillai, 2008). Rather than treating French actors as marginal to British colonial structures, this work highlights how they operated across linguistic and institutional boundaries, producing knowledge through mobility that complicates imperial categorisation (Pillai, 2017; Pillai & Brown, 2018; Pillai, 2020, 2025). In dialogue with Anthony Reid's concept of Southeast Asia as a "zone of interaction," these studies situate Malaya within a wider regional field shaped by overlapping circulations of people, ideas, and practices rather than singular imperial dominance (Reid & Mansur, 1973). This emphasis on fluid exchange enables a relational reading of colonial Malaya in which French presence is understood through intersecting networks of mobility, translation, and knowledge production.

Morgan's expedition was not solely scientific but also economic and diplomatic. His agreement to produce topographic surveys in exchange for access to mining zones demonstrates the entanglement of knowledge production and extraction that characterised colonial science. His journal records ethnographic observations of the Sakai and Semang, alongside descriptions of Malay language use, subsistence practices, and environmental engagement (Jaunay et al., 2020). These observations combine empirical curiosity with interpretive frameworks that render unfamiliar social and ecological worlds legible. Morgan's position is therefore not stable but relational, as his writing moves across French scientific networks, British colonial administration, and Malay social and environmental contexts. Rather than a fixed observational standpoint, he

operates within shifting structures of access and constraint, where knowledge emerges through negotiation rather than detached observation.

This reframes translation as well. In its original 1884 French form, the journal reflects Morgan's situated engagement with a British-administered colonial landscape for a scientific readership. In its 2020 English translation, interpretive authority is redistributed across author, translator, and reader. Translation thus becomes more than linguistic transfer; it reorganises the conditions under which colonial knowledge becomes legible and authoritative. Read through this expanded epistemic field, colonial scientific texts are not stable repositories of knowledge, but dynamic artefacts shaped by shifting positionalities across British administrative systems, other European engagements, and local Malay environments. Knowledge is produced not from a singular imperial centre but through overlapping and contested fields of observation and interpretation. Building on this, the article foregrounds the textual and positional dynamics of Jacques de Morgan's 1884 travel journal and its 2020 English translation, showing how boundary-crossing operates both as analytic frame and as structuring logic within the text itself, evident in its negotiation with British authority, translation history, and partial immersion in Malay social worlds.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERIOR FRONTIERS AND TEXTUAL MOBILITY

This study presents a postcolonial reading of Morgan's travel journal focusing on how authority, knowledge, and meaning are produced and transformed through scientific, ethnographic, and geographical observation, as well as through writing and translation. In terms of its theoretical approach, it draws first on Ann Laura Stoler's concept of "imperial formations" and "interior frontiers," which reconceptualises colonial power as dispersed, adaptive, and continuously produced through everyday practices rather than fixed territorial control. Colonial authority operates through administrative routines, affective encounters, and classificatory regimes that extend into intimate and mundane spaces of governance. Travel writing therefore functions as part of the epistemic infrastructure of the empire, participating in the production of colonial knowledge (Stoler, 2009). It then moves to integrate Pillai's (2017, 2020) work on colonial and diasporic textual mobilities, which outlines how meaning is structurally transformed through circulation and cross-cultural encounter. Particularly significant are the framing of the intersections of colonial and vernacular knowledge networks in Malaya which highlight how shifting hierarchies of authority are produced when historical actors move across administrative and linguistic spaces. The present study extends this lens to the material life of the text itself; here, translation is approached not as a passive transfer of data, but as an interpretive site where narratives are refracted through the pressures of colonial contact and mobility. The discussion concludes by showing how this reading of Morgan's travel journal ultimately reveals intimations of decoloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), for it becomes a site where competing epistemic orders intersect as local knowledge, colonial classification, and linguistic mediation come into contact. For Jacques de Morgan's colonial travel journal, together with its 2020 English translation, is treated not as a neutral historical record but as a colonial knowledge-producing artefact that can be critically examined through postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. In this way, the framework foregrounds the instability of meaning across linguistic, cultural, and epistemic

boundaries while highlighting how colonial authority is both reproduced and unsettled through processes of textual circulation.

Methodologically, the study employs close textual analysis informed by historiographical contextualisation. Morgan's travel journal, as preserved in the 2020 English edition, serves as the primary textual evidence and is read alongside nineteenth-century scientific, administrative, cartographic, ethnographic, and travel materials to examine how observation, classification, and authority are constructed within colonial contexts. The analysis focuses on Morgan's representations of people, environments, and resources, as well as the institutional conditions shaping his access to territory and knowledge. Contemporary documentary sources, where available, are used to contextualise his activities, while secondary scholarship situates these materials within the broader historiography of colonial Malaya. The 2020 translation is examined as part of the journal's later circulation and re-situation rather than through linguistic comparison with the French original, distinguishing between Morgan's representations, historical evidence, and the present study's interpretation.

TRANSLATING AS THE FIRST SITE OF BOUNDARY CROSSING

The analytical discussion begins with the journal's movement across linguistic and textual boundaries, since the version examined in this study is itself the product of translation. As a practice embedded in circulation rather than equivalence, translation constitutes the first site at which the text is reconstituted across epistemic and interpretive frames. Rather than offering a stable transfer between languages, it initiates the conditions under which meaning is reorganised, recontextualised, and made legible within new scholarly environments. Lawrence Venuti's (2018) account of translation as a culturally and institutionally situated practice provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Translation does not preserve semantic stability but participates in rewriting shaped by the norms and expectations of the target-language context. Editorial decisions thus structure how Morgan's nineteenth-century observations are organised and rendered, foregrounding descriptive registers while recalibrating others to meet contemporary scholarly standards. In this sense, translation functions as a mode of knowledge production through which historical texts are reactivated within new interpretive regimes. This aligns with scholarship that understands translation as cultural and epistemic circulation, in which texts are continuously re-inscribed within transnational systems of knowledge production (Baker, 2006; Wolf, 2012).

Building on this, the English version of Morgan's journal can be understood as a mediated archival object rather than a transparent rendering of the original manuscript. Its movement into Anglophone academic infrastructures does not simply extend accessibility but actively reorganises the conditions under which the text is framed, classified, and interpreted. The journal's ethnographic and geographical observations are detached from their nineteenth-century French exploratory context and repositioned within contemporary scholarly discourse, where they acquire different analytical functions. Translation thus produces a layered textual object whose meaning emerges through its movement across linguistic, institutional, and archival formations rather than residing in any singular version. This reconfiguration is particularly significant within scholarship on Malaya, where Anglophone historiography has long been structured by British administrative, literary, and ethnographic archives. The entry of a French scientific and observational perspective into this epistemic field does not simply expand the archive but exposes its historical unevenness and the hierarchical conditions under which colonial knowledge has been assembled. Rather than

operating within a neutral scholarly environment, the translated journal is inserted into an already stratified system in which English functions as the dominant language of classification, authority, and historiographical legitimacy. Within this setting, the question of interpretive authority becomes central. In its original form, the journal reflects Morgan's positionality as a French geologist operating within a British-administered landscape, where scientific observation was already entangled with colonial governance. In its translated form, however, authority is no longer anchored solely in the nineteenth-century authorial voice. Instead, it is distributed across multiple sites: the geological figure of Morgan, the translators who mediate and restructure the text, and contemporary readers who reinterpret it within present analytical frameworks. This distribution does not merely shift authorship but reorganises the conditions under which colonial knowledge is stabilised and made readable in the present.

However, this study does not undertake a comparative linguistic analysis between source and translation. Its focus is instead on the ways in which translation enables the journal's entry into new regimes of interpretation, where it is read simultaneously as historical and or geological document and analytical object. Translation here thus operates as the initial mechanism through which the text becomes available for re-contextualisation within broader scholarly and archival systems. This reorientation also foregrounds the institutional conditions that govern how colonial knowledge is rendered legible as the journal reveals how access, authority, and interpretation were structured through colonial administrative systems, opening a new corridor in Anglophone colonial archives, moving from textual circulation to institutional negotiation. For Morgan's expedition unfurls within British colonial frameworks in Malaya where access to territory, resources, and scientific legitimacy was mediated by figures such as Hugh Low and Frank Swettenham, who were British officers. Rather than treating these administrative encounters as background context, they are integral to understanding how scientific knowledge was produced through colonial governance. The expedition demonstrates how observation, mobility, and documentation were conditioned by negotiated permissions and institutional hierarchies. In this sense, the journal's evidentiary status is inseparable from the colonial infrastructures that enabled its production in the first place, revealing how epistemic authority was co-constituted through administrative and scientific collaboration.

The translation and circulation of Morgan's journal thus serves as a continuum between textual mediation and colonial governance. What begins as a linguistic transformation ultimately opens onto the broader institutional structures that regulate knowledge production in British colonial Malaya. The journal's movement across languages thus mirrors its movement across administrative and epistemic regimes, demonstrating how colonial knowledge is not only recorded but continuously reconstituted through the intersecting logics of translation, classification, and governance.

NEGOTIATING BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AS THE SECOND SITE OF BOUNDARY CROSSING

The second boundary crossing in Jacques de Morgan's travel journal emerges through his engagement with the British colonial administrative system in Malaya, particularly under the authority of Hugh Low. Within this context, Morgan's geological survey work is inseparable from the institutional frameworks that regulated access to land, resources, and mobility in the colonial territory. His expedition required negotiation with colonial officials to secure permission for

exploration and mining activity, situating his scientific practice within a broader administrative and political economy of resource extraction.

Rather than operating as an independent scientific observer, Morgan's position is shaped through these encounters with colonial authority, where access to tin-rich areas is mediated through bureaucratic approval and diplomatic exchange. His agreement to undertake mapping and surveying work in exchange for mining concessions illustrates the entanglement of scientific knowledge production with colonial governance. In this sense, the British administrative structure functions as a second interior frontier, one in which mobility, access, and authority are continuously negotiated rather than granted unconditionally.

The tin mining landscape into which Jacques de Morgan entered in Perak was already structured by long-standing indigenous and regional systems of extraction prior to intensified European intervention. As noted in the historical framing of the region, mining activities in Malaya were historically operated by Siamese, Malay, and Chinese communities using established traditional methods, before the introduction of European capital and industrial technologies (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvii). This pre-colonial and early colonial configuration complicates any linear narrative of European "discovery," instead revealing a layered history of resource exploitation already embedded within local economies and regional trade networks.

The subsequent transformation of the mining sector in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is characterised by the increasing introduction of European technological systems and capital investment, including mechanised equipment such as dredges, which significantly expanded the scale and intensity of extraction (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvii). This shift marks not only a technological transition but also a restructuring of authority over mineral resources, as European actors progressively repositioned themselves within existing extractive landscapes.

Within this context, Morgan's expedition must be understood as entering a field already shaped by competing regimes of extraction and knowledge. Rather than operating in an unclaimed or undeveloped space, his geological survey work took place within a historically layered environment in which local and regional actors had long-established forms of mining practice. This foregrounds the extent to which European geological inquiry was embedded within, and often dependent upon, pre-existing indigenous and Asian systems of resource management.

Read through the lens of Stoler's concept of the interior frontier, this historical layering can be understood as part of a broader colonial process in which territorial and epistemic boundaries are neither fixed nor singular but continuously negotiated. The mining landscape of Perak thus constitutes an already stratified frontier space, where competing forms of authority, labour, and knowledge intersected prior to and during European scientific intervention.

Building on the pre-existing extractive landscape of Perak, Jacques de Morgan's work demonstrates how scientific investigation was shaped through sustained engagement with colonial and local administrative knowledge. Upon arriving in Malaya, Morgan actively gathered information from local officials before narrowing his focus to specific regions within the Kingdom of Perak identified as potentially rich in tin-bearing alluvia (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvii). This initial phase of consultation indicates that his geological survey was not conducted in isolation but was instead dependent upon pre-structured informational networks already circulating within the colonial administration.

Morgan's selection of investigative sites reflects a process of filtering and validation in which local administrative knowledge informed the direction of scientific inquiry. His focus on areas believed to contain rich tin deposits illustrates how geological exploration was guided by a

combination of empirical assessment and institutional guidance. It also reveals how epistemic authority is produced through interaction rather than independently asserted. The frontier here is not a space of unilateral observation, but one in which scientific practice is continuously shaped through administrative contact, local mediation, and institutional framing. Morgan's geological surveys thus emerge as the outcome of negotiated access to knowledge, where the boundaries between observation, consultation, and authority remain fluid. In this sense, the production of geological knowledge in Perak cannot be separated from the colonial infrastructures that enabled it. Rather than simply mapping an unknown territory, Morgan's investigations participated in the consolidation of already partially known spaces, where information was distributed across local officials, colonial administrators, and scientific actors. This positions his work within a broader colonial epistemology in which knowledge is assembled through layered acts of selection, confirmation, and territorial focus. The culmination of Morgan's engagement with colonial administrative structures is most clearly visible in his strategic interactions with governing authorities upon reaching the Malay Peninsula. Morgan's careful consultation with leading authorities guided the direction of his research toward the Kingdom of Perak, identified as a region containing some of the richest tin reserves in the Peninsula (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xix). This process of selection demonstrates how geological investigation was closely aligned with institutional knowledge, where access to information and territorial opportunity was mediated through colonial networks of authority.

Within this framework, Morgan's identification of Kelian Lalang in the Kinta Valley reflects both scientific assessment and calculated economic anticipation. The site is presented not only as geologically promising but also as commercially viable, indicating the extent to which geological reasoning was embedded within extractive logics. His subsequent publication on the mining industry of Perak in the *Bulletin des annales de l'École supérieure des mines* in 1886 further reinforces the circulation of this knowledge within metropolitan scientific institutions, linking fieldwork in Malaya to European centres of industrial and academic authority (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xix).

The most significant boundary crossing emerges in Morgan's negotiated exchange with the Acting British Resident of Perak, Frank Swettenham. Morgan agreed to produce a detailed map of the Perak watershed in exchange for mining rights to the Kelian Lalang concession (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xix). This transaction highlights the convergence of scientific labour, cartographic production, and colonial governance, where mapping operates as a form of currency within the concession economy. Rather than a simple administrative agreement, it shows how authority in the colonial frontier is produced through reciprocity between knowledge and access. Cartographic practice thus becomes both representational and instrumental, securing territorial control while enabling Morgan's entry into the region's extractive economy. From the perspective of Stoler's concept of the interior frontier, this marks a liminal zone where scientific expertise, administrative power, and economic interest converge, producing negotiated mobility rather than fixed authority.

Morgan's engagement with the British administration is further evident in his meeting at Kuala Kangsar, the royal capital of Perak, where he formally applied for the concession from Swettenham (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xxii). The interaction reveals the practical limits of colonial authorisation, as Swettenham initially granted only half the requested area, underscoring administrative constraints over access to mineral-rich land. Knowledge and authority are rapidly negotiated within a compressed institutional exchange. Swettenham's remark on the absence of a topographic map of the Kinta Valley exposes a gap in colonial cartographic knowledge that Morgan immediately turns into a strategic opportunity. By offering to produce a detailed watershed

map in exchange for full rights to Kelian Lalang, he converts scientific expertise into a transactional instrument. The agreement, reached within fifteen minutes, underscores the speed at which cartographic labour, administrative authority, and economic entitlement converge within the colonial concession economy. In this moment, Morgan moves beyond consulting authority or selecting sites of inquiry to actively reshaping the conditions of access through knowledge production itself. Mapping thus functions simultaneously as representational practice and mechanism of territorial acquisition, linking epistemic labour directly to material control over space.

At the same time, this rapid convergence of negotiation and exchange signals a transition point in Morgan's trajectory within the journal. Having moved through consultation and administrative bargaining, his position begins to extend beyond institutional engagement toward more immediate forms of embodied presence in Malaya. This shift prepares the ground for the next stage of analysis, in which increasing interaction with local Malay society, through language, food, and clothing, signals a further reconfiguration of positionality beyond formal colonial administration into everyday cultural immersion. This instant can thus be read as a threshold: one in which administrative negotiation begins to give way to lived proximity, setting the stage for the third boundary crossing of cultural immersion in Malaya.

CULTURAL IMMERSION IN MALAYA AS THE THIRD SITE OF BOUNDARY CROSSING

The third boundary crossing in Jacques de Morgan's travel journal emerges through his increasing immersion in everyday life in Malaya, where his engagement extends beyond institutional negotiation and scientific observation into embodied forms of cultural and environmental adaptation. As his journey progresses through the administrative structures of the British colonial system and the exchange of cartographic and ethnographic knowledge, Morgan's presence in the Malay Peninsula becomes increasingly shaped by direct interaction with local conditions rather than mediated colonial infrastructures alone. The journal records his engagement with Malay language for practical communication, his incorporation of local dietary practices, and his adaptation to environmental and logistical constraints as part of daily field existence. These shifts signal a reconfiguration of his positionality within the colonial landscape, where observation is no longer confined to detached recording but becomes entangled with the routines, material demands, and social proximities of fieldwork. In tracing this movement, the section examines how Morgan's evolving engagement with Malay society complicates earlier institutional and textual boundaries, marking a transition toward a more situated and embodied mode of encounter within the colonial field.

An early indication of Jacques de Morgan's cultural immersion in Malaya emerges through the practical arrangements required to sustain mobility within the field. As noted in the travel account, Morgan negotiated access to domestic elephants for the transport of baggage, scientific instruments, and food supplies in the lowland regions, while also recruiting Sakai porters and guides to accompany him into more inaccessible mountainous terrain (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xv). This passage signals a shift from institutional negotiation to embodied dependence on local logistical and human infrastructures. Although Morgan retains the positional authority of a European scientist operating within a colonial context, his mobility is materially contingent upon engagement with local systems of knowledge, labour, and environmental expertise. The

procurement of elephants and the recruitment of Sakai guides indicate that movement through the landscape is neither autonomous nor purely observational but mediated through negotiated relationships with local actors who possess situated knowledge of terrain and conditions.

This juncture foregrounds the affective and practical dimensions of boundary crossing, as everyday logistical dependence blurs the distinction between observer and participant. The field is not simply an object of scientific observation, but a space in which authority is enacted through continuous adjustment to material and social conditions. This reliance on local labour and environmental expertise thus marks an early stage in Morgan's embodied engagement with Malaya, where the conditions of travel necessitate forms of interaction that exceed administrative or cartographic negotiation. It sets the foundation for further forms of cultural immersion in which language, food, and dress become additional sites through which positionality is gradually reconfigured within the colonial landscape.

Morgan's increasing immersion in Malaya is evident in the everyday practices of travel and co-presence that structure his fieldwork. The journal records how Morgan not only led his expedition but also shared daily meals of rice and participated in the construction of temporary shelters when accommodation in local villages was unavailable (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvi). These practices indicate a mode of travel that is sustained through collective effort and shared material conditions rather than the usual detached observation often found in British colonial writings. Thus, while Morgan continues to maintain his scientific routines, recording observations, updating topographical notes, and documenting the landscapes he traverses, his scientific inscription is interwoven with the practicalities of survival, communication, and collaboration. Knowledge production thus comes embedded within interpersonal exchange rather than solely derived from an authoritative or detached observation.

This coexistence of scientific labour and embodied participation signals a further augmentation of boundary crossing, where the distinction between researcher and participant becomes increasingly unstable. Morgan's admiration of the "superb panoramas" (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvi) encountered during travel also introduces an aesthetic and affective dimension to his experience, suggesting a stage in which scientific observation is accompanied by sensory and emotional engagement with the landscape. These practices illustrate how colonial fieldwork operates within shifting affective and material boundaries. The expedition becomes a site in which knowledge production, labour, and everyday coexistence are continuously negotiated, further repositioning Morgan within the lived conditions of the Malayan landscape.

Morgan's engagement with Malaya is most clearly articulated through his ethnographic attention to the Sakai (Senoi) and Semang communities in Perak, where his notes register a marked shift from geological and logistical observation toward a sustained focus on "civilisation," including questions of human origins, social organisation, and cultural development (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvii). This expansion of interest signals an amplification of his perceptual field, in which human communities are incorporated into a systematic mode of description alongside the natural environment. Within this framework, Morgan situates these groups in close relation to their surroundings, depicting them as intimately bound to environmental conditions through customs, dress, and everyday practices, while also documenting dimensions of family organisation, social norms, reasoning, and material culture, including decorative practices in everyday objects (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xvii). These descriptive choices reflect a broadened ethnographic gaze in which social life, environment, and cultural expression are rendered as interconnected objects of observation. Nonetheless, this representational mode remains structured by classificatory logics associated with nineteenth-century scientific and colonial thought, which position Indigenous

societies within hierarchies of knowledge production; thus, even as Morgan's field engagement becomes more embodied and attentive, his written account preserves a sustained epistemic distance between observer and observed. His ethnographic findings thus become a site where proximity and differentiation operate simultaneously producing new configurations through which cultural difference is articulated, recorded, and woven into scientific discourse.

This is again seen through Morgan's recording of journeys undertaken with Malay guides, without baggage or formal provisions. He tells us that he relied on locally available food sources such as pineapple, bananas, and papayas, drinks coconut water, and stops in villages where he consumes rice in the customary manner using his hands (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xxi). This mode of travel signals a marked reconfiguration of expeditionary mobility. The absence of logistical infrastructure indicates a temporary suspension of conventional expeditionary support systems, requiring adaptation to the rhythms, resources, and constraints of the Malayan landscape, where field travel is shaped as much by material necessity as by deliberate practice. Nevertheless, these embodied practices should not be read as straightforward cultural assimilation; rather, they point to the situational adjustments required for survival and movement within specific environmental conditions, in which practices of eating, resting, and moving become integral to the conduct of fieldwork itself. The everyday routines of sustenance thus illuminate how boundaries of distinction are continuously negotiated through ordinary material practices, as cultural proximity is produced less through formal affiliation than through the sensory and practical demands of inhabiting space, further extending Morgan's trajectory of embodied engagement with Malaya established in the preceding sections.

Morgan's immersion in Malaya is evident in his increasing linguistic and social integration within village settings. The travel account notes that, while staying in villagers' houses and engaging in conversation with them, Morgan participates in everyday activities such as building overnight shelters, during which he no longer performs the distinct role of a European observer apart from the visible markers of his profession, field equipment and notebooks (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. xxi). This description signals a notable shift in his positionality within the field. The separation between observer and participant becomes less clearly maintained in everyday interaction, as Morgan moves through the boundaries of local forms of sociality. His rapid acquisition of fluency in Malay further reinforces this movement toward communicative integration, enabling direct engagement with locals without reliance on mediated interpretation. Admittedly this process of adaptation is framed as functional rather than transformative, grounded in the practical demands of communication and movement within the environment. However, his inclination to engage with "social rules and costumes" reflects an accumulation of situated knowledge acquired through a gradual alignment with the rhythms of local life, even as traces of his European scientific identity remain symbolically present through his instruments and field tools. This specifically highlights how boundaries of social engagement are not simply crossed but partially suspended and renegotiated in practice. Social integration here does not erase difference but instead produces a liminal condition in which positional identity becomes situationally fluid. In this sense, Morgan's linguistic and social adaptation extends the trajectory of embodied immersion developed in earlier sections, further complicating the distinction between detached scientific observer and situated participant within the Malayan landscape.

This trajectory unfurls further in Morgan's description of the shifting configuration of his expeditionary party and the practical adaptations required for survival across different terrains. He notes that the composition and size of his group varied throughout the journey, including a European colleague as second-in-command, alongside an escort of local soldiers and armed Malay

men from Sumatra to ensure protection in the event of attack. Elephants and Sakai porters were responsible for transporting provisions and ammunition, underscoring the layered logistical and human infrastructure that sustained movement through the interior (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. 2). This configuration reveals the expedition as a fluid assemblage of European, Malay, and regional actors whose roles were distributed across labour, protection, and knowledge of terrain. Rather than a fixed scientific entourage, the group is assembled and reassembled according to shifting environmental and security conditions. Within this arrangement, mobility is made possible through interdependence, where survival depends upon coordinated engagement between different social and cultural groups operating within the same spatial field. Morgan's account also indicates a further heightening of embodied adaptation. He states that he had long become accustomed to eating local food and abstaining from alcohol, with mountain water providing sufficient sustenance, while also adopting Chinese and Malay clothing as the most suitable attire for the climate (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. 2). These practices signal a pragmatic alignment with environmental conditions, where bodily adjustment becomes integral to sustained field presence.

Coincidentally, these adaptations do not eliminate the structural asymmetries of colonial expeditionary life. The presence of armed escorts and logistical hierarchies indicates that mobility remains embedded within a security framework shaped by colonial concerns over risk and control. From the perspective of Stoler's interior frontier, this instance underscores how belonging and difference are continuously produced within the same operational space, where proximity and hierarchy coexist rather than resolve one another. Morgan's fully embodied adaptation, through diet, clothing, and expeditionary organisation, extends the gradual enhancement of immersion observed in the preceding sections, marking a point where cultural, environmental, and administrative boundaries are simultaneously negotiated within everyday field practice. The result of Morgan's engagement with Malaya is expressed through his retrospective reflection on duration, familiarity, and the gradual consolidation of his field presence. He notes that after travelling across the Sultanate of Perak for five months, he had become accustomed to Malay customs and had learned the language, indicating that sustained mobility through the region produced a form of practical familiarity grounded in repeated exposure and interaction (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. 2). This temporal dimension is significant, as immersion here is not framed as a single transformative stage but as an accumulated process shaped by time spent moving through different settlements, mining sites, and social environments. The formation of his travelling party, including the recruitment of men at Kelian Lalang and the subsequent organisation of the final expeditionary team at Pengkalan Bahru, further reflects the dynamic and locally embedded nature of his field networks. These arrangements suggest that expeditionary cohesion is constructed progressively through prior interactions within the Malay mining and village landscape rather than imposed solely from an external administrative centre. This passage highlights how boundaries of belonging are not only spatial and embodied but also temporal, emerging through sustained proximity and repeated negotiation of everyday life. Familiarity with customs and language does not erase positional differences, but it does indicate a shifting threshold in which forms of social ease and operational integration become possible within the field. Similarly, this consolidation of familiarity remains embedded within the broader structures of colonial expeditionary practice, where recruitment, movement, and organisation continue to operate within hierarchies of authority and purpose. In this sense, Morgan's extended stay in Perak marks not a resolution of boundary crossings but their deepening over time, as cultural adaptation becomes progressively normalised within the routines of travel and scientific work.

A final dimension, for this article, of Morgan's field experience is revealed in his account of guide relations and the disciplinary structures that underpinned expeditionary travel. He describes how Mr Leech, the magistrate of Kota Bahru, assigned him a guide, Kulup Riau, as "the perfect guide," while simultaneously issuing extreme instructions regarding the use of lethal force should the guide deviate from expected conduct. The magistrate further warned Kulup Riau that his own life would be held accountable should Morgan fail to return safely from the expedition (Jaunay et al., 2020, p. 5). This excerpt exposes the coercive framework that structures mobility and interpersonal relations within the expeditionary field. Although Morgan frames the guide as competent and reliable, the conditions of that reliability are produced through explicit threats of violence and institutionalised accountability. The guide's behaviour is therefore not simply the product of mutual cooperation but is shaped by a system of colonial discipline in which trust is enforced through asymmetrical power relations and the possibility of punishment. However, Morgan's remark that Kulup Riau "behaved accordingly" and that he "could not have wished for finer company" further underscores the normalisation of this coercive arrangement within his narrative. The affective language of satisfaction sits uneasily alongside the violent terms under which that cooperation is secured, revealing the tension between lived experience and the structures that make such experience possible. This event highlights the limits of immersion as a category of belonging. Even at the most embodied and integrated stages of field travel, relations remain structured by sharp asymmetries of authority, violence, and accountability. In this case, proximity does not resolve colonial differences but instead exposes the coercive conditions that sustain it. This tension provides a critical inflection point for the argument developed in this section. As Morgan's journey moves through increasing levels of linguistic, social, and embodied adaptation, the underlying structures of colonial power remain operative within everyday relations. As such, even in moments of familiarity and integration, these relations remain structured by coercive and asymmetrical power, which calls for a decolonial reading of expeditionary authority.

CONCLUSION: INTERIOR FRONTIER TO DECOLONIALITY

This article has examined Jacques de Morgan's 1884 travel journal from Malaya, together with its 2020 English translation, as a layered site of boundary crossings across translation, colonial administration, and cultural immersion. Rather than treating the journal as a stable record of geological exploration or colonial observation, the analysis has traced how Morgan's positionality is continuously reconfigured through shifting institutional, linguistic, and embodied conditions.

Across the three analytical domains, movement through Malaya is never simply geographical. The first boundary crossing, through translation from French into English, demonstrates how the text is repositioned across temporal and epistemic regimes, where authorship and interpretive authority are redistributed across translators, archives, and contemporary readers. Importantly, this movement into English also places the text within the "global shelves" of English-language scholarship, expanding its circulation within international academic readerships and enabling renewed critical engagement with nineteenth-century colonial encounters. In this expanded space of readability, scholars are able to revisit the British colonial context in Malaya through the observational lens of a French geologist working within a British-administered landscape. The second crossing, through Morgan's engagement with British colonial administration, reveals how access to land and resources is negotiated through cartographic exchange, bureaucratic mediation, and imperial infrastructural gaps. The third crossing, through

increasing immersion in Malay social life, demonstrates how mobility, labour, language, and sensory adaptation produce embodied forms of proximity that unsettle the position of the detached scientific observer.

Thus, these movements suggest that Morgan's journal is structured not by linear progression from outsider to insider, but by overlapping and recursive adjustments across what Stoler conceptualises as "interior frontiers", unstable and affectively charged boundaries through which difference and belonging are continually produced and policed. While these forms of proximity do not dissolve colonial hierarchies, they do however demonstrate how proximity itself is produced through asymmetrical relations of labour, knowledge, and coercion. At this point, the limits of "boundary crossing" become evident. Even as Morgan adapts linguistically, materially, and socially to his environment, the conditions enabling such adaptation to remain embedded in imperial structures of extraction, surveillance, and authority. This tension points toward the complexities of colonial encounters, as movements across boundaries reveal different European epistemic conditions under which those boundaries are defined in the first place.

In this regard, Walter Mignolo's articulation of decoloniality, particularly in dialogue with Catherine Walsh (2018), is useful in synthesising these dynamics. If decoloniality shifts attention from the management of colonial difference to the underlying "colonial matrix of power" structuring knowledge production, authority, and subject formation, then Morgan's apparent cultural immersion signals not the erosion of colonial difference, but its rearticulation within a system that continues to govern who can know, represent, and move within the colonial world. Morgan's journal becomes not only a record of movement through Malaya, but a site where other conditions of colonial knowledge production are made visible through practices of observation, translation, and encounter. Ultimately, Morgan's travel writing operates within a field of constant negotiation between proximity and separation, immersion and control, adaptation and hierarchy. While Stoler's concept of the interior frontier illuminates the unstable boundaries of belonging within colonial space, one can also see the intimations of Mignolo ensconced within the text, repositioning colonial travel writing not as a transparent archive of exploration, but as an active site where epistemic power is both enacted and revealed.

REFERENCES

- Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. (2017). *A history of Malaysia* (3rd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baker, M. (2006). *Translation and conflict: A narrative account*. Routledge.
- Bastin, J. (1990) 'Sir Stamford Raffles and the study of natural history in Penang, Singapore and Indonesia', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 63(2), pp. 1–20.
- Bird, I. (1883) *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*. John Murray.
- Cangi, E. (1993) 'Civilizing the people of Southeast Asia: Sir Stamford Raffles' town plan for Singapore, 1819–23', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24(2), pp. 171–190.
- Crawfurd, J. (1848) *On the Malayan and Polynesian Languages and Races*. Journal of the Ethnological Society.
- Harper, T.N. (1999) *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jaunay, A., with contributions by Lorre, C., Guerreiro, A. J., & Verney, A., preface by Dollfus, G., foreword by Pelras, C., & translated by Callea, A., Deschamps, M., & Barlow, H. S. (2020). *Jacques de Morgan's explorations in the Malay Peninsula, 1884*. Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.
- Livingstone, D. N. (2000). Putting science in its place. *Nature*, 405, 997–998. <https://doi.org/10.1038/35016655>
- Livingstone, D. N. (2019). *Putting science in its place: Geographies of scientific knowledge*. University of Chicago Press.
- Low, H. (1848) *Sarawak: Its Inhabitants and Productions*. Richard Bentley.
- Maugham, W.S. (1969) *Maugham's Malaysian Stories*. Heinemann.
- Mignolo, W. D., & Walsh, C. E. (2018). *On decoloniality: Concepts, analytics, praxis*. Duke University Press.

- Pillai, S. (2008). *Colonial visions, postcolonial revisions: Images of the Indian diaspora in Malaysia*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Pillai, S. (2017). Modern Asian ecclesiastical interconnections: Catholic Tamil Nadu and its diaspora in Malaysia. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 28(2), 165-179.
- Pillai, S., & Brown, B. E. (2018). The Apostolic Vicariate of Western Siam and the Rise of Catholicism in Malaysia and Singapore. *International Journal of Asian Christianity*, 1(1), 45-63.
- Pillai, S. (2020). French and Diasporic Tamil Catholic Mobilities in Colonial Malaya. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 35(2), 217-242. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26937859>.
- Pillai, S., Wei Wei, A. W., & Tjin Ai, J. T. (2025). Changing Covenants: Sociolinguistic Mobilities and the Transgenerational Discursivities of the Convent in the Malaysian Cultural Imaginary. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 31(3).
- Raj, K. (2007). Relocating modern science. *Circulation and the construction of knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650-1900*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Reid, A., & Mansur, A. S. (1973). The French in Sumatra and the Malay world, 1760-1890. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-en Volkenkunde*, (2/3de Afl), 195-238.
- Sibar, M. (2012) 'Imperial ideology in the fiction of Maugham and Kipling', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47(2), pp. 201-218.
- Skeat, W.W. (1900) *Malay Magic: Being an Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsula*. Macmillan.
- Stoler, A.L. (2009) *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton University Press.
- Swettenham, F. (1893) *About Perak*. Government Printing Office.
- Swettenham, F. (1906) *British Malaya: An Account of the Origin and Progress of British Influence in Malaya*. John Lane.
- Venuti, L. (2018). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Vincent, A. V., Pillai, S., & Saad, S. M. (2026). Frontier Crossings of a 19th Century French Missionary Foundress of British Malaya: Mathilde Raclot. *Kritika Kultura*, 1(49), 8.
- Wolf, M. (2012). *The sociology of translation and its "activist turn"*. In C. Millán & F. Bartrina (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of translation studies* (pp. 78-92).: Routledge.