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Communicating Amok in Malaysia

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This article analyzes the different messages communicated in Malaysia by violent acts labeled amok. In the colonial period, English-language uses of the term represented the presence of an anti-modern remnant among the peninsula's Malay population, one that led to a medico-legal understanding of individualized violence. Malay-language uses of amok represented, in contrast, the presence of modern changes amid the collective peninsular society. These two vectors of interest combined in the post-colonial period, where amok became a primary ingredient for analyzing Malaysian politics and national security, from the pivotal urban rebellion of May 13, 1969, to the Reformasi protests of 1998. Critically reexamining these representations of amok helps us to rethink the efficacy and power of violent acts in Malaysia and elsewhere.

Key Words: Malaysia, violence, colonialism, representation, modernity

Understanding violence is a critical question for the social sciences. The ways that we have come to analyze violence have continued to shift over the past century, as both the means to perpetrate and to witness violence proliferate. The media frenzy following the September 11th attacks in the United States is perhaps the most notorious recent example of this, as are the multiple forms of violence engendered by the Bush administration's "War on Terror" waged in response to those events of 2001. The domestication of violence and the economy of its application continue to dominate our political discourse.

The spectacular quality of terrorism and war are of course not the only forms of violence that social scientists examine. Sociologists and anthropologists in particular analyze more routinized forms of violence, from Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 167) to Paul Farmer's critique of "structural violence" (1996). Both of these "violences of everyday life" (Kleinman 2000: 228) emphasize the multiplicity of pain and suffering experienced by human beings, and indeed their horrific banality. If state

formation, in Weber's formulation, came out of the state's monopoly of violence in the guise of the police and the military, managing (and denying) these more mundane kinds of violence also have been crucial to state power. Thus, the very definition of violence is a key part of the state's arsenal. To Christian Krohn-Hansen, "the nature of a particular authority can be grasped through interpretations of what constitutes violence" (1994: 378). Therefore, what gets named as violence (and what does not) is another key site of struggle.

In this essay I look between this division of the spectacular and the everyday and think about their mutual imbrication in Malaysia. Incidents of "running amok" have been a dramatic part of life on the Malay peninsula for 150 years, for as long as there has been a mass media to publicize violent events and a rationalized bureaucracy interested in regulating them. Because such amok incidents have shaped social life in the peninsula throughout the modern era, it is not surprising that amok violence has been prominent within the realm of psychopathology. In his recent "anthropology of mental illness," psychiatrist Roland Littlewood points out that amok is "the most notorious of the culture-bound syndromes" (2002: 26), in a series with *latah*, *kuru*, *windigo*, and *kifafa*. Thus, amok is fixed as a scientific category: Robert Winzeler defines amok as "institutionalized patterns of 'crazed' homicidal attack" (1990: 119). John Spores divides the phenomenon into two modern forms: "reactive-motivated solitary amok" and "spontaneous-unmotivated solitary amok" (Spores 1988: 106, 108). Indeed analysts argue that such violence makes possible a "search for the true amok" (Carr and Tan 1976). Therefore, in the realm of cultural psychology amok appears to be an entity that is quantifiable, locatable, and capable of dissection, and the violence labeled amok fixable as a kind of "thing."

Categorization is a critical aspect of human thought. Yet the tendency to fix amok as a quasi-biological category has made it difficult to think about the concept as a social phenomenon, with a meaning that has changed over time. Sometimes amok is written as if it is an instinct, without history, something committed by "man outside culture" (Wazir 1990: 17). Michel Foucault argues for historical analysis "in the most unpromising place, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (1977: 139). How might we look at amok violence not as a something hidden within the individual or circumscribed within an ethnic group, but rather something that shapes the society that uses the term to define certain kinds of behavior? The first part of my article is thus historicist, examining how colonial medicine and policing in the Malay peninsula reorganized the concept of amok. In Foucauldian terms, during the

colonial period a discourse of amok was started, creating an analytic category and determining who could and who could not speak about it. Defining what violence was and how to regulate it was a key part of colonial domination.

However, such a discourse was not total: the term amok had a life outside of its colonial circumscription. In the second part of the article, I analyze the usage of amok in a place that has gone unexamined by scholars, the Malay newspapers of the colonial period. In the dominant British usage, amok was psychopathology. But in the vernacular Malay press amok described the violence of modern life itself. In many ways these usages were in dialogue with each other, for after all, newspapers reported on (and created!) the public sphere of colonial Malaya. I am most interested in the different semantics of amok created by Malay journalists, and the ways it differed from the psychologizing and regulatory interests characteristic of British writers. In the heterogeneous colony of British Malaya, whose resources were extracted through the labor of migrants from all over Asia, amok in Malay newspapers often described the confusion produced by language differences, urban life, and the flood of information.

Through both British and Malay usage of the term amok, a social space was constituted "where violence seems to be the foremost means of communication" (Khron-Hansen 1994: 377). In the last part of the article I examine how the meaning of amok changed yet again in the post-war period, as Malaya gained its independence. References to amok became a crucial feature of modern state-formation. The rapidly expanding late-colonial state used the specter of amok as part of its counter-insurgency campaign, and the newly independent state labeled any threat to its power as an incidence of amok. In an age of media saturation, the different ways of rendering amok violence shifted yet again. The psychopathology of British colonial writing mixed with the critique of modernity characteristic of Malay colonial newspapers, and any protest of modern Malaysian life could be dismissed as an outbreak of amok. Each major crisis in post-colonial Malaysia (1969, 1987, 1998) has been described in the Malaysian press and by the Malaysian state as an incident of amok. Through labeling dissent as an illness called amok, the state effectively hides its own violence.

At the heart of my article is an analysis of the communicative potential of amok violence. To quote Valentine Daniel, "the politically dominant institution does not have full control over the master narrative, especially in the context of violence" (2000: 363). Any violent act, as David Riches makes clear, communicates between the perpetrator, the victim, and the witnesses (1986: 3). But what it communicates,

like any form of communication, is full of ambiguity. At the end of the article I analyze in detail three instances of violence in post-independence Malaysia labeled as amok and show how their depiction in the media focused on problems of communication. Thus, I aim to connect disparate interests in amok violence in order to gain a better understanding of the politics of this potent term. Bringing together a category of cultural psychology with its use as a political language might open up space to reconsider the representation of violence in the Peninsula and beyond. I conclude with remarks about the ethnographic and analytical complications of understanding violence.

Amok's colonial translation

The public life of amok is tied to a history of translation. Indeed, a decade ago a Malay literary journal published an article entitled "Amok, the Word That Cannot be Translated into Another Language" (Aripin 1991). The term gives continuity to Malay society, via an etymology that can be traced back to the old Malay chronicles. Aripin writes "'running amok' did not occur only during the age of the Malay dynasty of Melaka, or in the age of the Majapahit dynasty, but it also happens in the modern age" (Aripin 1991: 46). The claim that amok cannot be translated and that its representation is outside of history is a good place to begin a political etymology of the term. There is a long path to creating a term that could not be translated. R. O. Winstedt's 1939 Malay-English dictionary, completed the tautology between the Malay and English words: "Mengamok" in Malay simply meant "run amok" in English (1939: 16). The erudite Winstedt was noting the linguistic practice of people like adventurer Ashley Gibson, who wrote in 1928 that "there is one Malay word that has a world-wide currency. Nobody requires to be told what 'running amok' means" (1928: 29). Even older dictionaries attempted to find semantic connections between Malay and English through the term. The wonderful colonial compendium *Hobson-Jobson* noted in 1903 that amok had been a part of the English language "since the days of Dryden and Pope" (Yule and Burnell 1903: 20). A century before that, William Marsden's 1812 Malay-English dictionary defines the term "amok" as "to engage furiously in battle" and "to run amuck" (Marsden 1984: 16). The inter-lingual complexities of the term point to its cosmopolitan heritage.

The belief that amok's meaning appeared familiar and self-evident did not quench colonial interest into the causality of amok violence. Through the nineteenth century, as Europeans encroached on the Malay peninsula, the possibilities of colonizing the territory hinged on the colonial capacity to subdue its inhabitants. In an article by a

Dr. Oxley in the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago* in 1849, the Singapore physician reports that:

these amoks result from an idiosyncrasy or peculiar temperament [sic] common amongst Malays, a temperment which all who have had much intercourse with them must have observed, although they cannot account for or thoroughly understand (1849: 463).

In a footnote the *Journal* includes that:

With reference to our notice of amoks in the last number of the *Journal* we insert the following remarks, extracted from an official Medical Report on Singapore by Dr Oxley. They are of very great practical value, and we hope some of the other medical gentlemen in the Straits will favour us with the results of their observations on this deeply interesting subject. The importance of the diffusion of correct views respecting it cannot be overrated (1849: 532).

The desire for “correct views” suggested that amok violence was meant for scientific analysis and that Europeans would learn about the term through scholarly communication. Proper knowledge of amok would help Europeans contain the indigenous capacity for violence and expand colonial control in this distant outpost of Empire.

Of course many such categories were created during the colonizing of the Malay peninsula and rapidly forgotten (“Malay piracy” earned substantial interest through the middle nineteenth century but little after). Several factors made amok strategic as the “British forward movement” gathered strength in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Most importantly, the term became crucial to understanding why the first British resident sent into the peninsular sultanates, a man named J. W. W. Birch, was killed in the Pasir Salak rebellion of 1875. The term “amok” appears over and over in the lengthy trial transcripts of the Pasir Salak conspirators (Plunket 1876). The familiarity of amok helped British officials interpret and organize the meaning of this event, and what might have occurred at Pasir Salak is tangled in this web. In its curious place between languages, amok was only partially mysterious—in the trial transcripts of those accused of killing Birch, every usage of the term “amok” appears in quotes, though the term is absent from the appended glossary (Plunket 1876). “Amok” explained what happened at Pasir Salak, but the term “amok” itself did not need to be explained. McNair’s *Perak and the Malays*, one of the first books to write of the attack, noted that:

physiologists attribute this uncontrollable fury to disease—in fact, to a kind of monomania induced by disorder of the digestive organs; but there are occasions when the practice is made subservient to the will, and a Malay will “run amok” to gratify revenge . . . in fact, it will be seen that on the occasion of the murder of Mr. Birch, the cry of “Amok, amok!” was raised, and a savage rush was made by all present, who seemed to be animated with but one desire—to kill (McNair 1878: 213).

The contagious possibilities of amok described by McNair spread, appropriately enough, almost verbatim to other accounts of the killings (see Bird 1967 [1883]: 356). Hence, the traumatic death of Birch was immortalized as a particular kind of violence, a group attack against the new colonial regime.

It is not surprising therefore that “amok” became a centerpoint of British colonial fascination. The colonial state grew in both size and knowledge as it sought to wrest the monopoly on the legitimate use of violence from the peninsula’s Asian population and prevent further resistance. Preventing Malay rebellion was especially critical to colonial strategy as the peninsula flooded with Chinese and Indian immigrants. Understandably, amok stories became a part of the colonial press, circulated throughout the English-speaking parts of Asia. The *Perak Pioneer*, the first English newspaper in the Federated Malay States, helped disseminate a trove of “cases” identified as amok. The newspaper put them in a list with other violent acts that cited a similar chain of events and connected its readers into a wider world of newspapers. In 1895 the paper reprinted an amok story from Pahang via Singapore, noting “the Pahang correspondent of the *Straits Times* reports a pitiful case of amok from the Temerloh District” (*Perak Pioneer* 1895a). Lengthening telegraph lines and the newswires that flowed through them made amok coverage an international phenomenon. The *Pioneer* ran a story about an amok attack in Malaya that its editor culled from an Indian newspaper, writing that “the following is an account of the Kaiser-I-Hind tragedy as it appeared in the *Times of India*” (*Perak Pioneer* 1895b). The newspaper circulation of amok cases shaped the representation of violence in the peninsula.

In much the same way as it became a topic of journalism, “amok” grew into a medical category. Periodicals like the *Journal of Tropical Medicine*, *The Journal of Mental Science*, and the *Lancet* created an etiology of amok cases and explained their variety. Yet unlike the collective experience of the Pasir Salak rebellion, and reflecting the increasing strength of the colonial state, this medical attention focused on the individual. Ian Hacking writes of the modern notion “that one can improve—control—a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and

classification" (Hacking 1990: 3). Colonial medicine defined amok as murder committed by solitary Malay men acting in a fit of passion. Gimlette (1901) fixed amok as:

- (1) a sudden paroxysmal homicide in the male, with evident loss of self control; (2) a prodromal period of mental depression; (3) a fixed idea to persist in reckless homicide without any motive; and (4) a subsequent loss of memory for the acts committed at the time (Gimlette 1901: 197).

These articles produced elaborate lists of symptoms, even looking within the body itself: the spleen, the brain. Indeed doctors claimed that amok violence was something beyond understanding. An article in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* laments that some doctors have "extended [amok] from its proper and limited meaning of *sudden and inexplicable murderous attack* to all sorts of murder, deliberate and premeditated as well" (Van Loon 1927: 438). J. Johnston Abraham's *British Medical Journal* article reports that "many totally erroneous ideas are held, even in the Far East, both as to the genuineness of the condition and as to its cause" (Abraham 1912: 439). As a rebuttal Abraham argues that "even allowing for the condition having been frequently simulated as a cloak for private revenge, there remains a genuine substratum of real amokers for whom we have to account" (Abraham 1912: 439). The presence of "real amokers" suggests the presence of a violent practice which is beyond volition, consciousness or memory, which only colonial medicine would be able to define.

Along with newspaper stories and medical research, amok violence became a matter for the police and the law. In many cases these overlapped. The *Perak Pioneer* carried an 1896 story about one of the District Magistrates in Perak state. Mr. Hulbert "throws new light on amok cases" by claiming "I have heard it more than once stated by Malays that in these cases of amok, the man often is not really mad" (*Perak Pioneer* 1896). A *Pioneer* column called "Legal Intelligence" tracked the debates about whether amok constituted insanity or not, and how the police and the courts should best deal with the phenomenon. The professionalizing of police crime statistics further solidified amok as a category of jurisprudence. The annual reports of the colonial police force distinguished murder incidents by their motive, which in 1935 ran from "robbery" to "revenge" to "amok" (*Supplement to the F.M.S. Government Gazette* 1935: 5). Amok even became a focus of literary life of the Malayan police. Lavish description of amok incidents appeared in places like the *Malayan Police Magazine*. The fears and fantasies evoked by such reports made Malaya one of the most heavily policed of the British colonies.

Finally, amok cases became part of colonial artistic life, a sign of the anti-modern. Along with newspapers, and often drawing from them, European travel narratives, short stories, and novels typically contained amok scenes. Frank Swettenham, a man of many fancies, claimed that amok “is with many English people their only idea of the Malay” (1895: 38). As colonial rule solidified into the entity called British Malaya, writers included a striking degree of pleasure in their narration of amok violence. Ambrose Rathbourne noted that some writers “entertain a spurious sentimentality respecting amuck runners” (1898: 234). Such a description appears in one of Hugh Clifford’s essays, which deadpans “the following story . . . is only worth telling because it affords a typical example of a Malayan *amok* conducted upon a really handsome scale” (1916: 322). The preponderance of this casually ironic, pleasurable tone was noticed by R. Desmond Fitzgerald of the Colonial Medical Service, whose 1924 survey of amok literature concludes “the minute attention to detail which most of those wove into their story almost led one to infer that the task of telling was not wholly unpleasant to the narrator” (1924: 171). Where did the pleasure come from? Violence described as an amok attack both reminded of Malaya’s potential danger and also emphasized the strength of colonial power in controlling it. A means to do so was in drawing a line of difference between Europeans and Asians. John Russell’s short story “Amok” offers an example of how this worked. His protagonist, Mr. Merry, witnesses the “sport” of Malay amok and gives “pious thanks that he owned no share in the fantastic human chemistry that could produce such results. It was the sharpest reminder of essential racial differences” (1926: 300). Such accounts reveal how and why amok became an ornate part of colonial life.

For a colonial state intent on demobilizing peninsular society, it is not surprising that during the years of British control that Malay violence would be represented as something individual and pathological and that amok’s existence was pleasurable to British observers. Colonial power changed British perceptions of violence and the capacity of Malays to unite politically. According to Wildman:

if you run amok in Malaya, you may perhaps kill your enemy or wound your dearest friend, but you may be certain that in the end you will be *krissed* like a pariah dog. Every man, woman, and child will turn his or her hand against you, from the mother who bore you to the outcast you have befriended. The laws are as immutable as fate (1899: 101).

This is a sharp contrast to the story of Birch’s death in 1875. Accounts of the Pasir Salak rebellion suggest that the cry of “amok!”

led to the spread of violence. For Wildman, the cry warns of its appearance to those who would extinguish it. The amok in this case works as a sign of what is not there: the possibility of communication. Amok, according to Wildman, no longer says anything to Malays, except as a kind of negation.

Newspapers, medical journals, administrative reports, and novels worked together to delegitimize a Malay capacity for violence. The Malay population—the indigenous inhabitants of this highly lucrative colony—had apparently lost the capacity for collective violent action. Yet did the continual appearance of amok psychopaths help to justify the intense policing of the peninsula? By the 1930s, the placid Malay states had a police-to-inhabitant ratio four times that of Ceylon. The *Malaya Tribune* warned its readers why: “Amok Running in Malaya: Can Public Safety be Better Insured? Terrible Toll of Innocent Lives” (*Malaya Tribune* 1935). The intense policing made Malaya safe for colonialism. But the spectacular outbreaks of violence also highlighted how tenuous the colonial order might be in this “industrial diamond” of Britain’s imperial crown (Bayly and Harper 2004: 33).

Amok and the modern

To the degree that amok secured a colonial divide between colonizer and colonized, it became something whose meaning was self-evident: the word that did not need to be translated, the one with world-wide currency. European writers had the ability to categorize violence as amok, and the process of categorization sketched above is a key part of amok’s history. Yet for all of the power of European colonial representation, this process of classification did not entirely determine the modern life of the term “amok.” One Malay realm where the term amok grew substantially during the colonial period was in vernacular journalism. If the world of the old Malay chronicles was flattened under the weight of colonial modernity, the language of the venerable writers helped their journalist-successors to describe the experience of becoming modern in the heterogeneous space of British Malaya. In his 1941 survey of Malay journalism, the great linguist Za’ba notes:

There is no doubt the Malay newspapers and magazines are exerting a strong influence in shaping public opinion among their Malay readers, in spreading general knowledge of the world, and in awakening and shaking off the apathy of the Malays towards progress (Zainal Abidin 1941b: 249).

Malay journalists often used the term “amok” to describe the expanded world brought to the peninsula via the newswires. Yet the image of a solitary man, running with a drawn dagger, is not what one finds in the Malay press. Readers and listeners in these rural settings encountered the term “amok” describing almost anywhere except a Malay village. Rather than a sign of some primitive, anti-modern force in Malaya, amok references in Malay language newspapers described modern things: trains, ethnic identity, police shoot-outs.

The ethnographic vignette of the amok story readily translated into Malay newspapers, traceable back to the early days of Malay journalism. In the 1910s the Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu* in Singapore regularly reported incidents it referred to as instances of “running amok.” These are cosmopolitan descriptions, where the surprise of amok itself is the definition of a newsworthy event. Malays could be anywhere in the world via reference to amok: in 1910, *Utusan* ran the headline “A Malay Runs Amok in Australia” (*Utusan Melayu* 1910). Amok stories in *Utusan* led with information of who was involved: “A Malay Runs Amok in a Theater,” (*Utusan Melayu* 1912b) “An Achehnese Runs Amok” (*Utusan Melayu* 1912c). In the headlines of certain papers the term describes the unusual. *Idaran Zaman*, for instance, headlined in 1926 its column about Penang with “Another Water Buffalo Runs Amok” (*Idaran Zaman* 1926). A Klang newspaper in 1930 led with a story from Scotland “Speeding Train Runs Amok” (*Lidah Benar* 1930). Amok helped to normalize the tremendous change characteristic of modern life and mediated the peninsular experience of modernity. The old term’s appearances in Malay newspapers in its new guise signaled how “amok” could describe unexpected things.

Unlike the European writers, increasingly convinced that a propensity to run amok was an essential part of Malay character, journalists writing in Malay did not organize amok into a racialized or individualized concept. In March 1912 *Utusan* described how “A Sikh Police Runs Amok in Kedah” (*Utusan Melayu* 1912a). Though the story occurred in Kedah and is published in Singapore, the dateline reads Penang. The news followed these kinds of circuits. The story itself marks how people could shift between different possibilities. *Utusan* describes how a policeman took a gun from his room, shot a man five times and then “entered a Chinese shop, changed his clothes and cut off his hair, beard, and mustache” and then “after that he took a Chinese cap from the shop and left resembling a Chinese” (*Utusan Melayu* 1912a). The story leads from one detail to the other like its report that weaves from Alor Setar to Penang to Singapore. Malays anywhere could read about a Sikh policeman running amok via becoming Chinese, as if running amok meant being able to be anyone in colonial Malaya.

In other instances the term describes local, specific struggles. *Majlis* ran a story in 1932 “Chinese Run Amok Because of Hunger” (*Majlis* 1932). Chinese coolies held up a shop in a town near Kuala Lumpur:

Two coolies entered the stores and asked the taukehs [business owners] for four bags of rice with the explanation that they had not worked for six days because of heavy rain. Because of that they had no money and also had no food, wanting to eat (*Majlis* 1932).

Majlis reports that the coolies signaled to their colleagues outside to come into the shops and take the food they wanted. Within 15 minutes, police from nearby Kajang and Kuala Lumpur appear on the scene “to reestablish peace, but the greedy coolies fought the police and it became a situation of shooting back-and-forth” (*Majlis* 1932). In a similar tone Singapore’s *Warta Jenaka* in 1937 reported from the Philippines “Head Hunters: Amok in Manila” (*Warta Jenaka* 1937). In this account, Manila had to send four policemen into the jungle in search of soldiers feared lost to the headhunters. The soldiers were looking into a family quarrel that escalated into clan fighting, “and twenty people died as a result of their action” (*Warta Jenaka* 1937). The story from Manila, *Warta Jenaka* notes, arrives in Singapore via Reuters. Telegraphic news made amok an exotic term for Malay readers in the Peninsula, one that referenced gun fights in the state of Selangor and intrigue in the deep jungles of Luzon. Together they explored the modern possibilities of inhabiting an identity.

In another difference from English writing, the Malay newspapers did not describe amok as something fixable in the landscape of the peninsula. The reports of a train in Scotland or a waiter in Australia helped to negotiate an increasingly international landscape. Like everything else in Malaya, the new landscape changed the meanings of words. Za’ba felt the greatest effect of reading the newspapers was in stretching what could be said in Malay:

But no less far-reaching also is the influence of the Malay papers in modernising and revitalising the Malay language. New ideas and new contents are put into it, and with that new spirit and life. There is no fear that the Malay language is getting out of date (Zainal Abidin 1941b: 250).

Za’ba’s defensiveness comes from the fact that the very newspapers breathing life into Malay did so while sometimes predicting its imminent demise. One of the projects to promote Malay language that both pleased and frustrated Za’ba was the development of a Malay-Malay dictionary. In this companion article to his piece on Malay journalism,

Za'ba surveyed the new dictionaries as part of his larger critique of literary production in Malay. He did not like what he found, calling the volumes mere "efforts at Dictionaries and Grammars" (Zainal Abidin 1941a: 15). Some dictionaries of the period included the term *amok* and some did not (Mahmud 1925; Fa-Izie 1928). The one dictionary Za'ba supported was the 1936 *Buku Katan*, which he notes was "published bit by bit" in *Warta Malaya* with "criticisms invited from interested Malay scholars" (Zainal Abidin 1941a: 16). The *Buku Katan* (1936) defines *amok* as synonymous with a Buginese word "*mengaruk*," the definition given "*mengaruk* especially *mengaruk* with the desire to kill repeatedly." *Mengaruk*, like "run amuck," refers to somewhere outside of the peninsula. Perhaps it was *Warta Malaya* readers sending in their suggestions of the term's definition that made it different from the other Malay dictionaries. Their suggestions to Singapore and the Johor Literary Society via *Warta Malaya* and the *Buku Katan* made *amok* a violent, deadly form of something else. *Amok* could be defined by things outside, or as Za'ba put it, out of "the country" (Zainal Abidin 1941b: 246). This peninsular Malay quality represented a difference increasingly sealed off from other places in the Malay Archipelago.

Carefully determining what *amok* might mean led British writers to fixate on the Malay body and Malay writers to look beyond the hardening modern borders of the colony. For the readers of the *Buku Katan* (1936), *amok* as *mengaruk* represented change. People in Malaya who used the term *amok* in English thought it was something particular to the peninsula. Yet in Malay it could also describe things happening farther afield, in other places. *Amok* could even be used to describe the quality of change itself. Almost all the Malay periodicals of the late colonial period included short poetry. Sometimes called *syair*, these verse-forms were sent by contributors to express concern over large political issues (Abdul Latiff 1987). In 1940, Ahmady Asmara, a 19-year-old former student of the Sultan Idris Training College, sent a *syair* to the *Warta Kinta*. His *syair*, "The Modern Amoks in the East" uses the term *mengaruk* and *mengamok* as synonymous. Its opening lines read:

The modern amoks [*mengaruk*] in the East
From the West it comes strewn
Then amoks [*mengamuk*] to every corner (*Warta Kinta* 1940: 12–13).

For the newspaper poet, *amok* could appear in Malay verse as a sign that the times were out of place.

Powerful as the colonial authorities might be, British definitions of *amok* were not the last word. These vernacular usages of the term

“amok” in Malay newspapers show that the term could communicate beyond the limits of colonial control. Riches argues that:

The expressive function of acts or images of violence capitalizes, firstly, on the visibility of violence, and secondly on the probability that all involved—however different their backgrounds—are likely to draw, at the very least, some basic common understanding from the acts and images concerned. These two properties of violence make it an excellent communicative vehicle (1986: 12).

Newspapers provided the crucial visibility of amok violence, for British and Malay readers alike. The intertextuality between English and Malay newspapers helped develop a shared sense of what was newsworthy. But the semantic differences in English and Malay of this “untranslatable term” showed a slippage of understanding in the Peninsula. Even in the disenchanted world delivered by the newspapers, references to amok could still haunt Europeans. A 1930s newspaper report suggested that certain Malay villagers were setting out food for an amok on the run, “happy in the belief that after an amok the rice and fruitcrop in the area is always a bumper one” (*Malayan Police Magazine* 1935: 373). Daniel argues that such slippages “appear as such only for those who are at home in little else besides in the unfolding of coherent master narratives” (2000: 362). As the Malay papers suggest, in the last gasps of colonial rule there were still many possibilities for running amok.

Post-colonial mass amok

Knowing the complexities of this colonial history is helpful for understanding the organization of violence in the peninsula’s post-colonial period. Through the long years of colonial rule, the concept amok grew in two related, but substantially different vectors of meaning. One was a British-colonial description of primordial violence; the second was a Malay-colonial description of cosmopolitanism and the presence of the modern. Ian Hacking suggests that labels have powerful effects for making up kinds of people (Hacking 1986). As he describes it, they work in two ways under modern conditions of power. One, experts define a particular kind of behavior (usually something deviant) and then create a description of it. The medical and legal definitions of amok violence are two powerful ingredients of this expert definition. Colonial authorities, along with amok’s publicists, helped create an identifiable kind of behavior and type of person in the Malay Peninsula, made real through the police departments, courts, and

asylums that dealt with what were established to be amok cases. But Hacking also describes how people can stretch the limits of these modern administrative categories. The terms for colonial violence in Malaya might have been organized by the British, but Malays lived in ways that subtly altered the British definition of amok. Malay newspapers described certain kinds of violence as amok, but that did not necessarily imply the racial essentialism or psychopathology of European descriptions. The term could also communicate ideas about the pace and quality of change in the peninsula.

The biggest difference between the two vectors was the British insistence on amok as something individual and the Malay use of the term to describe collective social experiences. Though there was semantic overlap, the differences produced an important political effect. The modern colonial project hinged on the ability of European rule to defer the creation of a collective politics among the colonized. The British in Malaya, for most of their rule, successfully achieved this. Yet in the second half of the twentieth century, the medico-legal, culturalized description of Malay violence as individual pathology became increasingly used as a warning about the dangers of politics. This is where individualized amok met amok as a mediator of modernity. Challenges to both the late-colonial and post-colonial state were represented as collective amok, and thereby communicated the risk of apocalyptic violence.

The postwar colonial state faced this more menacing possibility of amok first. Malayan colonial politics transformed when the Japanese occupation of 1942–1945 mobilized Peninsular society and effectively ruined the British fantasy of complete control over their wealthy, divided, and placid colony. Entirely new possibilities for political communication opened up in turn. In 1946, the returning colonial forces were eager to rebuild Britain through the dollars earned by Malayan tin and rubber exports. When Malays appeared in unprecedented public protests against British schemes to rationalize the colony's political structure, the British panicked. The reimposition of colonial rule, in the face of an active Chinese rural insurgency, would not be possible with the addition of organized Malay opposition. Mohamed Noordin Sopiee's history of this postwar period notes that "knowledge of the amok was part of the intellectual capital of every Britisher having the slightest claim to knowing the Malays" (1974: 35). British military intelligence, nervously eyeing both these protests and the Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army, learned of a group in the state of Perak (the site of the 1875 rebellion) that called itself the Angkatan Muda Kalimantan. The *Malayan Security Service Political Intelligence Journal* pointed out that "the adoption of the abbreviated title 'A.M.U.K.' is significant" (1947: np).

Britain shelved its scheme for a Malayan Union and made significant changes in its decolonization plan as a result of the protests. Against London's wishes, independence was brokered by politicians organized by ethnicity, and political power was premised on an ethnic division of spoils. The dominance of ethnic Malays in the military and police countered the control of ethnic Chinese over the economy. The post-colonial Malaysian state was highly militarized, a colonial inheritance left by Commonwealth forces fighting against communist rebels in what was called "the Emergency." The specter of ethnic conflict, therefore, became an effective means to increase the state's power. In this milieu, highlighting the public's propensity for violence became increasingly critical. A racialized proclivity, like that of amok violence, took on a strategic role in the struggle between the post-colonial state and the sectors of the population that challenged its claim of a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Communication and censorship became crucial ingredients in this struggle to define what types of collective action were possible in post-colonial Malaysia and to emphasize that challenging government authority risked chaos. The capacity for mass amok by the newly politicized Malay population justified the further expansion of the state.

The Malaysian state emphasized the anti-modern potential of amok to consolidate its form of rule. Following independence in 1957, the prospect of ethnic conflict between Malays and Chinese haunted the post-colonial state. These fears crystallized in the great threat to the Malaysian state's hegemony: the May 1969 riots in Kuala Lumpur. The electoral gains of opposition parties threatened the ruling coalition, dominated by the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). UMNO claimed that the largely non-Malay opposition contested Malay dominance in Malaysian politics. After the opposition parties held a public parade in Kuala Lumpur, pitched street fighting in the city left hundreds dead, and martial law was declared. Parliament was suspended and the country run by a National Operations Council (NOC) for two years. The NOC argued in their White Paper that the events of May were apocalyptic:

May 13, 1969 will go down in our history as a day of national tragedy. On that day the very foundation of this Nation was shaken by racial disturbances whose violence surpassed any we had known . . . Had it not been for the immediate preventive measures, there is no doubt that the whole country would have been plunged into a holocaust (NOC 1969: iii).

Such accounts of May 13 argued that Malaysia contained the potential for limitless violence. The elements within the Malaysian state that

formed the NOC used the alleged vulnerability at the heart of Malaysian society as a means to strengthen their coercive power. The NOC interpretation of 1969's violence has shaped Malaysia's social field for the past thirty plus years.

The concept "amok" was important in understanding what the events of May 1969 meant. Goh Cheng Teik's book, for example, argues "The mass *amok* which took place in Kuala Lumpur on 13 May has its origins in the perceived change in the ethnic configuration of power and the resultant sense of anxiety and alarm . . . led to an overflow of racial emotion" (Goh 1971: 18). Also analyzing May 1969 as an amok incident was parliamentarian Mahathir Mohamed, who in a notorious letter to then Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman wrote that "The Malays, whom you thought will not revolt, had lost their minds and ran [sic] amok, sacrificing their lives and killing those whom they hate" (Means 1991: 9). In Mahathir's terms "amok" appeared as an index of communication problems in the peninsula, especially between the post-colonial state and the Malay population. Political scientist Gordon Means insertion of "sic" suggests that he disputes Mahathir's use of the term "amok." In his words, the events of May 13 were

not the expression of overt economic grievances or of class animosities. Rather, in the atmosphere of crisis and with the irrational mechanisms of crowd psychology, primal emotions surged in uncontrollable waves combining racial antipathies, anger, fear, hatred, and self-justifying rationalizations for barbarous behavior (Means 1991: 7).

Whatever the grievances of the urban population in Kuala Lumpur in the late 1960s, their actions in those May days were reducible to furious anger rising from the realm of unreason. The term "amok" overshadowed other kinds of analysis, whether disaffection with the state, local struggles between segments of the urban population, or the state's chosen path for national politics, international affiliations, and economic development. The phenomena of amok organized and explained the trauma of May 13 and left the ruling coalition with a powerful warning to the opposition—challenge us, and amok will be the result.

The state, through the NOC, aimed to stop political communication. By labeling the urban rebellion as insane violence, the state was able to limit discussion to its own diagnosis and remedy for the problem. One of the myriad effects of 1969 was an increase in the Malaysian state's already considerable power, including a vast affirmative action program called the New Economic Policy and tight reins on the practice of politics. A whole list of issues, including the NEP, the position

of the Sultans, language, and education policy were deemed “sensitive” and outside the scope of public debate. Public rallies and meetings were also tightly circumscribed, and the censorship extends such that film and theatre scripts must be vetted by the authorities. A related legacy of May 13 is a lack of commemoration of the events that took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1969. After the few commentaries written at the time, there has been little academic scholarship on the events; even considering how to do such a project is a complicated task. Public representations are thus quite shocking. For example, in the 1995 elections, photos of 1969 were published; *Utusan Malaysia* referred to the period as “the black history” (*Utusan Malaysia* 1995). It is as if the newspapers say, we have the capacity to represent those events but choose not to. If May 13 was analyzed as amok, amok could thus appear as a sign of people communicating but without anyone talking about what might have been said.

Aside from the dramatic events of 1969, amok describes other violent incidents in Malaysia, which reaffirms the society’s potential for another May 13. Malaysia’s newspapers have recorded a series of violent incidents as amok and organize these stories as a specific category in their files. The clippings library at the *Star* newspaper, for example, has a fat amok file that grows by about two stories from the various newspapers per month. In the *Star*’s library, a story qualifies for the “amok” file if it has the word in its headline. The usage of the term in the headlines shifts between amok as a verb and as a noun, seemingly interchangeable in both Malaysia’s English and Malay dailies. Labeling violence as “amok” serves to explain for readers the cause of that violence, and limits the meaning, motive, and response to the particular kinds of non-state violence that occur in Malaysia. The violence could not be construed as a rational means to an end. This series of incidents (and the reports about them) emphasizes the necessity of the state’s vast security apparatus.

Violence by members of that security apparatus carries a special place in amok journalism. A closer look at two such instances, in 1987 and 1995, shows ways in which these representations of amok become objectified into the lives of particular Malaysians. In 1987, in the midst of a deep recession and a political crisis, Mahathir Mohamed’s 1970 letter to Tunku Abdul Rahman about May 13 began to recirculate throughout political circles in Malaysia. His old letter had warned that the Tunku had ceded too much to Chinese-Malaysians and that the violence of May 13 was the result. At a September rally in Kuala Lumpur, one of the signs warned “May 13 has begun.” Malaysia risked another episode of violent public politics. One month later the violence promised by the banner appeared to come to fruition when a soldier, Private Adam, opened

fire on a crowd of shoppers near the Kuala Lumpur epicenter of the 1969 riots. The Home Minister, through the newspapers, rushed to say that this incident was in no way political, that it was the result of the soldier's insanity (*New Straits Times* 1994). The newspapers did not describe the action as "amok," lest Private Adam's message communicate too much. The government White Paper about the ensuing crisis argued that "it was an isolated incident that had no racial bearing whatsoever" (SUARAM and Das 1989: 127). Terming the incident as "isolated" limited the potential meaning of his act: the state, in the guise of the soldier, could not be seen as prone to amok. Yet the case of Private Adam could also refer to the problems of communication. In 1993, in the midst of another political fight, the image of the soldier in Chow Kit market could be said to have a message that politicians did not listen to. A photo of the Private Adam incident appeared in a book critical of the Mahathir regime. The caption underneath reads "the threatening milieu preceding Operation Lallang, 1987. Did the nation's political leaders understand what Private Adam Jaafar tried to say?" (Ahmad Lutfi 1993: 413). Unsanctioned violence by the security forces raised questions of communication, ones that the state attempted to limit.

In 1995, when a member of the military police, Raja Kazim, shot up his compound, the events of 1987 came up again. A tabloid argued "The stressful and sometimes harsh conditions of army life can trigger the phenomenon of armed soldiers running amok. The dangers are not only to themselves and their comrades, but also to society at large" (*Sun* 1994). Another tabloid reminded its readers about the psychological problems faced by the security forces (*Watan* 1994). "The process of maintaining discipline among each member of society" is especially dangerous, the story claimed, for "members of the military or police who we know carry great responsibility, not only to their household, wife, and children, but also for national security" (*Watan* 1994). Journalists speculated on the nature of amok and asked whether it was a specifically Malay sickness. The 1995 incident brought up memories of 1987. The two cases were used as proof of communication problems within the hierarchy of Malay society. An editorial the day following the 1995 incident addressed the "communication gap and psychological problems" and claimed that the two soldiers "might not have done anything outside the law if their difficulties had been heard and action taken to overcome their problems" (*Utusan Malaysia* 1994a).

In these two instances the domestic problems of the security forces become national issues, but only when they are not communicated. Amok thus functions as a speech act where communication is difficult: the two soldiers are men who publicly say they are speechless to the Malaysian public. Their violent outbursts take the place of the

communication that has not happened (between themselves and their superiors) and refer to the existence of a message that is not publicly available (their grievances). Something was not being heard that should have been and cases of amok were the consequence. The individual acts of the soldiers become public events that refer to amok's long history, questioning whether the violence might spread. The post-colonial state's power comes, in part, from its ability to control such representations of violence through limiting the possibilities of communication. The Malaysian state argues that only it can protect the society from Malaysia's (seemingly) limitless capacity for violence, in the form of individuals and groups running amok.

The fact that these two men, Private Adam and Raja Kazim, were Malays who were not from Kuala Lumpur but were acting in the capital city reveals the class and ethnic politics involved in the incidents (to Malaysians, Kuala Lumpur is the domain of money and immigrants). Jim Siegel argues that in Indonesia "criminality is a source of power that is contended for . . . there is the possibility of strong communication between criminals and others" (1998: 119). Private Adam and Raja Kazim did communicate to people outside the capital: I heard stories about their tools, intentions, and family problems years after their acts. Such dialogic possibilities were exactly what the state, through the newspapers, attempted to contain. Yet the spectacular attention that the newspapers, in particular, give to amok stories helps the communicative potential of violence exceed the state's grasp.

Indeed the communicative complexities of amok do extend beyond Malaysia's mass media and national politics. When people use the word amok in daily life, they often do not reference stories of dramatic violence. In conversation, many Malays use the term amok to describe the outbursts of infants, young children, and domesticated animals like water buffalo. Amok in these terms describes a feeling of anger that is difficult to express to others. Babies frequently are described as amok, their angry outbursts noted but not always understood. Yet these conversational uses are also intertwined with the newspapers. A 1996 cartoon in *Utusan Malaysia* shows an angry woman in her kitchen. A housewife throws a pot against the floor in her kitchen while her friend says "hey . . . why are you amok like this?" The angry woman replies "to release my frustration and anger, because there are still fathers who abuse their children . . . don't they know, children are trusts from God?" (*Utusan Malaysia* 1996). The cartoon suggests a domestic way in which amok communicates when language is elusive.

How effective is this communication? *Utusan's* cartoonist does contain a political point. The ruling coalition, never defeated in Malaysia's post-colonial history of elections, premises its strategy for

power on dividing the Malaysian public. Since 1969 the state has attempted to keep the public from appearing as a consciously political entity, and one could say that it strives to keep amok in the kitchen. Part of how the state does so is through the potential of its own violence and containing the violence of its security forces. When crowds do appear, as they did as part of Anwar Ibrahim's 1998 Reformasi movement, they are said to be amok, outside of both the law and the domain of sanity. The *New Straits Times* editorialized in 2001 that "No Government which has self-esteem will allow the demo diehards to run amok" (*New Straits Times* 2001). What the crowds might say is therefore mysterious and uncommunicatable except as "amok."

In the triangle of perpetrators, victims, and witnesses of violence, the witnesses speculate on the intention and message of the perpetrators. Such speculation is not easy to contain, and it is politically powerful. In 2000, a reporter argued that though most amok cases "had always been very personal in nature, meaning involving an individual" there were cases "where a number of Malays were collectively engaged." The article concluded: "if the 1969 amok saw the birth of the New Economic Policy, the 1999 political amok is still being assessed and political solutions are yet forthcoming" (*New Straits Times* 2000). Such references to a politics of amok often come up in stories about Malay unity (a unity deemed necessary against the British then and against the immigrant groups now). Many Malays told me, as a means of introduction to life in Malaysia, that if Malays appear to be genial, when pressed they have the capacity to run amok (Williamson 1998). Cabinet Minister Nazri Aziz recently warned the public that though Muslims in Malaysia are tolerant people, "you must remember that the word amok comes from this country and there is a limit to everything" (*Star* 2006). Representatives of the state warn the population of its potential violence and thereby remind Malaysians of the state's rationality in containing it. Political possibilities in Malaysia continue to hinge on the productive capacities of amok violence.

Implications for practice

Christian Krohn-Hansen argues that the "future of anthropology depends in part on sustained reflection on and extended empirical inquiries into violent processes" (1994: 367). This essay is one such attempt to do so. Years of analysis have built powerful habits for thinking about violence in the Malay peninsula. Historians, like anthropologists, are trapped within their categories of description and analysis. Therefore, analyzing amok violence as a social process rather than as a fixed thing helps us to see the political power of the concept

in Malaysia. Pradeep Jeganathan points out that “what is violence and what is not, is always constituted by a politics” (2000a: 64). How we categorize violence is also constituted by a politics, and our habits of thinking about such things as “running amok” can productively be rethought. Interrogating our categories is a first step to exploring, through ethnography, the social place of violence.

Hardening the boundaries of a scientific category can have social effects beyond the academy. It is common in Malaysia to think of amok as a thing specific to the Malay population. Malaysian newspapers echo other experts by referring to amok as a “culture bound syndrome” (*Utusan Malaysia* 1994b). A good friend of mine in Perak told me that Malaysian hospitals have a machine to measure the genuineness of an amok’s illness. Indeed the seductiveness of culturalized notions of violence is increased by the ways that they have been embedded in the social fabric. But it is important to analyze with and beyond such essentialism, because it cuts off other possibilities for analysis. Anthropologists argue that human beings are meaning-making creatures, and a communicative approach to violent processes helps us to see the range of meaning embedded within violent acts. As I have shown, violence labeled amok is a linguistic artifact as well as a psychiatric one, has a history as well as a culture, and is political as well as criminal. Most importantly, the particular categorization of amok has been crucial to building the coercive apparatus of the Malaysian state. The multiplicity of other “culture bound syndromes” also have histories and politics that we can reexamine.

Therefore, it is vital to show how violent processes are embedded in political communication. Through highlighting the communicative potential of amok, its semantics, we see the ways that threats of violence are tightly woven into the poetics and practices of the Malaysian state. I have emphasized how Malay-language and English-language histories of amok have created a term that signifies problems of communication. In 1995, after viewing the controversial film *Amuk*, one of my friends told me that she had learned in school what caused amok incidents but had forgotten what it was. Amok violence, omnipresent in the newspapers, often emerges as a conversational topic about things not said and phenomena not remembered. Though the events of May 13, 1969, remain the watershed moment of modern Malaysian history (and are often explained as a mass amok), they still elude deeper historical narration and public commemoration. Thongchai Winichakul eloquently writes of the difficulty of “remembering the silent past” of a similarly pivotal violent series of events in Thailand (2002). The audibility of such silence is therefore a challenge for social scientists who too often assume the ready ethnographic accessibility of all social phenomena.

Thus, a close examination of amok violence raises questions about the ethnographic possibility (and propriety) of investigating violent processes. Valentine Daniel and Pradeep Jeganathan both caution against the too-easy formation of an “anthropology of violence.” Daniel (1996) sees in certain acts of violence a “counterpoint to culture,” something that exceeds the ethnographic capacity for conversation. After a discussion of bloodshed in Sri Lanka, he concludes: “I have struggled to understand this event in which reality overtakes the surreal, to speak about it, and thereby to master it. But I have literally been struck ‘speechless’” (1996: 209). Jeganathan explores the terms under which anthropology creates a “space for violence” as an object of analysis (2000b). He points out that, unlike, say, ritual, “violence is not a well-worn, firmly canonized category in anthropology” (2000b: 40). Given the pain and suffering experienced by victims, witnesses, and perpetrators of violence, it is unseemly to too quickly assume we know how to study violent processes through the intimacy of ethnography. All of our other tools of analytic inquiry (archival research, statistics, theories) deserve similar close scrutiny when critically investigating questions of violence. Our twentieth-century habituation to violence makes it vital that we constantly denaturalize the experience and understanding of it.

Amok has been a durable category over the course of the past century. As we continue into the next, it is all too obvious that we live in the awesome shadow of violence. Understanding what this shadow means for us is a key question for the social sciences. In Malaysia, references to amok provide an index of social pain that people feel but have difficulty communicating to others. The pain of economic transformation, family dislocation, ethnic competition, and the anomie characteristic of modern life all produce violence, there and elsewhere. Making our familiar understandings of violence appear awkward is a means to challenge our habit of domesticating violent acts. Our common humanity—our capacity to feel pain and to suffer—compels us not only to understand violence but also to seek ways to ameliorate it and the conditions that create it. A tall agenda, of course, but there is no other human choice.

Notes

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