

The tropics and the East-Central European gaze

The natural world of Southeast Asia in Polish and Serbian travel writings

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses representations of the natural world in Indonesia and mainland Southeast Asia in a corpus of Polish and Serbian travel writings for the period between the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the outbreak of the First World War (1914). The research is based on travel writings by twenty Polish and Serbian authors, who visited Southeast Asia during the period 1869-1914. Scrutinizing a corpus of such narratives should contribute to the study of perceptions of Southeast Asia, especially among travellers from very diverse backgrounds. The theoretical and conceptual framework of the article draws on works by other scholars who have analysed travel writings, imaginative geography, representations of Southeast Asia, and tropicality. The study focuses on four areas: 1) images of the luxuriant tropics, 2) images of the perilous tropics, 3) exploitation of its natural resources, and 4) nature and identity.

KEYWORDS

Imagology; travel writing; Polish travellers; Serbian travellers; tropics.

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I shall analyse representations of the natural world in Indonesia and mainland Southeast Asia in a corpus of Polish and Serbian travel writings for the period between the opening of the Suez Canal (1869) and the outbreak of the First World War (1914). Such a topical formulation might arouse a few questions. Why 1869-1914? Why Polish and Serbian travellers? And, finally, why the natural world in the first place, was it an important topic then? I shall now address those queries, commencing with the last.

Although it is seldom stated openly, the natural world played a defining role in Polish and Serbian writings about the south-eastern parts of Eurasia. This can be demonstrated by taking a closer look at attempts to characterize that region. Władysław Michał Zaleski, a Polish missionary who was an Apostolic Delegate to the East Indies in the years 1892-1916, summarized his vision of a geo-cultural map of Eurasia in one of his travel accounts:

Lands, which we usually call the East, can be divided into three separate groups. The first stretches from the Adriatic Sea to Bombay.

Bombay still shares the same features as cities of Europe's near East: Carigrad [Istanbul], Cairo, Damascus.

Where the streets of Bombay end, a completely different land begins: It is the Indian East, which stretches all the way through the Strait of Malacca to Singapore.

Beyond Singapore, it is the far East in which the Chinese element prevails. (Zaleski 1898: 60-61).¹

Zaleski's imaginary geography uses the general concept of "the East" as an all-encompassing term, a handy label for a plethora of cultures in various regions of Eurasia. This way of thinking has, of course, been scrutinized and deconstructed by scholars (Edward Said 1977; Erazm Kuźma 1980), but I would like to pay attention to the way Zaleski describes differences within "the East", dividing roughly it into "Islamic" (this name is implied but not used by Zaleski himself), "Indian", and "Chinese". There is no place for the region which nowadays is called "Southeast Asia". Of course, this modern term is similar in nature to Zaleski's "East", and it is also a conventional label which, on historical and cultural assumptions, simplifies its geo-cultural reality in order to make it easier to comprehend (Henk Schulte Nordholt and Remco Raben 2005; A. Farish Noor 2016). However, confronted with Zaleski's "Indian East" and "Chinese East", one might ask whether for him (and other nineteenth-century Poles) a space in the southeast part of Eurasia did not really have any specific features? Reading other travel accounts from this period suggests otherwise. Travellers did describe this region differently to India and China, even if they did not have a particular label to describe it readily to hand. For example, while describing a Roman Catholic priest

¹ All translations into English are my own, unless stated otherwise.

living in Bangkok, Paweł Sapieha, who was a member of a Polish-Lithuanian aristocratic family which belonged to high echelons of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and travelled throughout Asia in 1888-1889,² claimed that the man was worn out by many years of life in “the most extreme East” and “deadly South” (Sapieha 1899: 53). Here, two labels, “East” and “South”, are used simultaneously. Sapieha lacked the modern term “Southeast Asia”, but his formulation delimits a particular region which was “the most extreme East” from a European perspective but was also different to China, Japan, or the eastern fringes of the Russian Empire because it belonged to the “deadly South”. The adjective “deadly” is inextricably associated with the perception of tropical regions. In the context of India, David Arnold captured this image of the tropics in the following:

But the tropics were also the “torrid zone” and came to signify abundance and excess in more troubling ways – diseases of a kind or intensity unknown in Europe, seasons of intolerable heat and enervating humidity (unrelieved by the moderating seasons of more temperate lands), plagues of insect pests, violent storms and crashing surf, and a predation and savagery in nature that ranged from the sharks circling menacingly at sea and tigers prowling in dark jungles to the superstition and savagery of the “tropical races” themselves. (David Arnold 2006: 111).

The “deadly South” so characterized in Sapieha’s description of Bangkok refers to this set of representations. While Zaleski’s imaginary geography was dominated by cultural and ethnic terms and divided into “Islamic”, “Indian”, and “Chinese” zones, Polish and Serbian travellers in the second half of the nineteenth century often described places like Java, the Strait Settlements, and the kingdom of Siam³ in terms different to those used for China, India, and Islamic countries. Images of tropical nature played a key role in the creation of a distinctive image of the region. Of course, travellers also did not fail to mention historical, cultural, political, and demographic issues, but it was the portrayal of the exotic wildlife and climate which was essential to a general image of Southeast Asia in Polish and Serbian travel writings.

The second question posed at the beginning of this article is: “Why Poles and Serbs”? Firstly, for people hailing from a temperate climate zone, the natural world of Southeast Asia was an environment radically different from their own, arousing both fascination and anxiety. However, the most interesting feature is how a certain outlook on the world can be expressed through descriptions of nature, which is why the particularity of Polish and Serbian experience offers a valuable perspective. Here, I would like to return to a quotation from Zaleski, especially to the pronoun “we” and the designation “the East”. From Zaleski’s perspective, “we” could mean Poles or Europeans in general, however this European self-identification can be questioned. Zaleski

² On Sapieha’s travel, see Bogdan Mazan (2010).

³ To preserve the spirit of the epoch I use historical names “Siam”, “Batavia”, “Dutch East Indies” instead of modern Thailand, Jakarta, Indonesia.

wrote about “the East” that began at the Adriatic Sea, while for many Western Europeans Poland and Serbia also belonged to “the East” (Larry Wolff 1994; Maria Todorova 2009). This notion of a peripheral, not fully, European identity was (and still is) also part of the Polish and Serbian auto-image (Maria Janion 2006; Zoran Milutinović 2011; Jan Sowa 2011). In the nineteenth century, Poles lived under foreign rule, as did a large Serbian population resident beyond the borders of the young and weak principality of Serbia (kingdom from 1882). This experience of subjugation and peripherality could indicate that Polish and Serbian points of view might diverge from the perspective of Western European writers. For example, the Serbian traveller Milan Jovanović, describing his travels through Southeast Asia, formulated a sharp critique of colonialism and, while observing the opprobrious behaviour of British sailors in Singapore, he declared himself ashamed of being a European (Jovanović 1895: 137). However, members of both nations often travelled to Southeast Asia as soldiers, researchers, or in other roles on behalf of Western European institutions. For example, two Polish biologists who worked in Java, Marian Raciborski and Michał Siedlecki, advanced their professional careers thanks to opportunities created by Dutch colonial institutions. However, Raciborski did not forfeit Polish patriotism in his professional activity, even though he was a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian empire and published mostly in German. He even named newly discovered fungi after characters in Polish romantic literature (Szary 1901: 451; Piotr Köhler and Alicja Maria Zemanek 2018: 96). Therefore, among tropical Javanese fungi we can find genus *Anhellia*, which refers to a poem about Polish exiles in Siberia or *Ordonia* which alludes to a heroic Polish soldier. As we can see from these few examples, East-Central European images of Southeast Asia are multi-layered and complicated which makes them a worthy topic of study. A comparison of two different “peripheral” peoples, Poles and Serbs, can provide a deeper insight into various factors which influenced the image of Southeast Asia in travel literature.

Finally, it is important to address the timespan of this research: 1869-1914. The first date denotes the opening of the Suez Canal. Various historians have emphasized the vast importance of this artificial waterway to the expansion of colonial empires (Daniel R. Headrick 1981: 150-156; Sarah Searight 1991: 105-140) and to social changes in the Dutch East Indies (M.C. Ricklefs 2007: 57-60; Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben 2008: 131, 215). It was also very significant for Polish and Serbian travellers to Southeast Asia. Before 1869 many Poles and Serbs who had visited the region – for example, the Jesuit Michał Boym (1612-1659) (Edward Kajdański 1988; 1999), a soldier in Dutch service, Anzelm Dzwonkowski (1764-1850) (Teodor Anzelm Dzwonkowski 1985), the Serbian painter Pavel Petrović (1818-1887) (Miodrag Marković 2015). And, although some of them left written testimonies, only after the opening of the Suez Canal can one speak of a sizable number of voyagers. The *terminus ad quem* is the outbreak of the First World War, not only because it disrupted travels, but also that, after the conflict, new political entities, Poland and the kingdom of Serbs,

Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) were formed, changing the way Polish and Serbian travellers perceived themselves as well as the lands they visited.

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a corpus of travel accounts written by twenty Polish and Serbian authors who visited Southeast Asia in the period 1869-1914: Serbs Vlado Ivelić (1855-1940), Milan Jovanović (1834-1896), Milorad Rajčević (1890-1964); and Poles Henryk Chmielewski (1874-after 1914), Henryk Cywiński (1855-1938), Julian Fałat (1853-1929), Florian Hłasko (1865-1921), Władysław Jagniałkowski (1856-1930), Lucjan Jurkiewicz (1833-after 1898), Karol Lanckoroński (1848-1933), Jadwiga Marcinowska (1872-1943), Bogumił Nowotny (1872-1960), Czesław Petelenz (1879-1949), Paweł Sapięha (1860-1934), Michał Siedlecki (1873-1940), Henryk Sienkiewicz (1852-1936, a relative of a famous writer of the same name), Adam Sierakowski (1846-1912), Marian Raciborski (1863-1917), Władysław Michał Zaleski (1852-1925), and Hugo Zapałowicz (1852-1917). Some texts were written and/or published after 1914, but the travels they describe took place in the given period. My general conclusions are based on a close reading of these accounts, although to illustrate my findings in the article I shall refer only to certain works, therefore not all authors who were the object of my research will be referred to directly. In order to make the voices of these travellers heard, provide a deeper insight into their experience and to enable readers to assess my interpretative conclusions independently, this article includes extensive quotations which I have translated. The larger number of Polish authors in the corpus reflects the fact that in the period in question, Poles were more numerous than Serbs.⁴

On the one hand, the basis of my research is made up of texts published in Polish or Serbian by the afore-mentioned authors and, while relatively speaking they are fairly unknown figures, they still play a role within the framework of Serbian or Polish national culture. On the other hand, it is also easy to make a case that they had a hybrid identity as their writings represent transnational history. They were citizens of different countries (Russia, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian empire, Serbia, France), some of them even changed their citizenship during their lifetime. They served in various institutions (the French Foreign Legion, the French Colonial Army, the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL), the Roman Curia, the Austrian Lloyd Steamship Company). Besides Polish and Serbian, they also published in a few other languages.

This group of travellers is very heterogenic, representing different professions and social backgrounds: the sailor Ivelić, the doctor Jovanović, itinerant-journalist Rajčević, the painter Fałat, the soldiers Jagniałkowski and Sienkiewicz, the university professors Siedlecki and Raciborski, et cetera.

⁴ For general information about Polish travel writings, see Stanisław Burkot (1988); Waclaw Ślabczyński (1988); Antoni Kuczyński (1994, 2000). About Serbian travel writings, see Saša Radonjić (1995); Slobodanka Peković (2001); Vladimir Gvozden (2011). For a short introduction in English, see Alex Drace-Francis (2019).

The purpose and character of their travels to Southeast Asia were also diverse, Lanckoroński just sailed through the region during his round-the-world leisure trip, Jovanović was working as a ship doctor, Sienkiewicz and Jagniałkowski were there for a few years as soldiers. However, having mentioned the heterogeneity of these travellers, it should also be noted that only one author was a woman, which reflects the fact that in the nineteenth century travelling far away from Europe was fairly uncommon for Polish and Serbian female travellers.⁵ There are Polish and Serbian travel narratives concerning Southeast Asia from the 1930s written by female travellers Jelena Dimitrijević (1862-1945) and Halina Bujakowska (1907-1971), but these are outside the timespan of the research presented in this article.

The travel accounts analysed are diverse in character. I understand travel writing broadly as “the written record (usually in prose but sometimes in poetry) of travel that has actually been undertaken by the author-narrator” (Nandini Das and Tim Youngs 2019).⁶ Of course, within such a broad scope, diversity is possible. On the one hand, although Vlado Ivelić composed his account based on fifty years of seamanship, his observations on Southeast Asia are rather brief. On the other hand, Siedlecki is the author of a book and a collection of short stories about Java. It stands to reason that these differences have been taken into account, but I have approached representations of the natural world in all texts as expressions of an East-Central European attitude towards the tropics, regardless of the significance of the individual traveller’s real experience.

Based on a close reading of travel accounts and an analysis of the socio-historical context, I shall try to show how nature in the tropics was imagined and described by travellers of East-Central European origin. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks employed in this research draw extensively on works by other scholars who have analysed travel writings, imaginative geography, representations of Southeast Asia, and tropicality. Although I have already mentioned some of them, here I would like to introduce a few additional important concepts. In her work on Western travel writings on China, Sybille Fritzsche has proposed investigating the image of a foreign land in a travel account as a product of interactions between “observed reality, the persona of the observer, and the trope of representation” (Sybille C. Fritzsche 1995: 3). Similarly, Maria Noelle Ng, in her comparison of three travel accounts on Southeast Asia, claims that travel writing is “both a palimpsestic history of the metropole at a certain period and a literary record of the countries visited” (Ng 2002: 11). By reconstructing the context of a travel account, we can analyse how representations of the lands visited have been influenced by literary conventions as well as the national, social, and professional background of the individual

⁵ For a short introduction to “first Polish female travellers”, see Dorota Wojda (2015: 100-105).

⁶ A quotation taken from an e-book provided by Amazon.com in azw. format, hence page numbers are not given. For various definitions of travel writing, see also Paul Fussell (1980: 203); Jan Borm (2004: 17); Carl Thompson (2011: 26); Charles Forsdick, Zoë Kinsley, and Kathryn Walchester (2019: 17).

traveller. Other works on travel writings about Southeast Asia provide an important set of terms and topics which allow a deeper understanding of travel accounts: the essential “strangeness” of Southeast Asia seen as a region of marvels and mysteries; the tropical climate and tropical fertility; aesthetic and emotional reactions to landscape, fauna and flora; wild nature (“jungle”) and “cultivated nature” (plantations and botanical gardens) as symbolic environments (Victor R. Savage 1984; Steve Clark and Paul Smethurst 2008; Mikko Samuli Toivanen 2019). Paul Smethurst’s presents the argument that, since the second half of the eighteenth century, in travel writings we often encounter not a description of the actual environment but a vision of a detached, abstract space of nature filled with culturally constructed meanings (for example, various taxonomies of organisms). Smethurst analyses different modes of writing about nature: the scientific gaze, the utilitarian perspective, the romantic sublime, the picturesque (Smethurst 2012). The famous *Imperial eyes; Travel writing and transculturation* by Mary Louise Pratt (2008) is an example of a critique of colonial and exploitative representations of the natural world (although this work deals mostly with examples from Africa and South America). Finally, a significant inspiration comes from works on the representations of the tropics by David Arnold (2000, 2006). In many senses the tropics were perceived as “the otherness” of Europe and the embodiment of the exotic. There were two competing visions: the “deadly South” vs. the tropics as the land of abundance. The notion of fecundity is connected with the issue of exploitation of resources. In the nineteenth century, such opinions about the tropics not seldom took the form of blatant imperial statements that tropical peoples were indolent and inferior to Europeans, consequently the latter had a civilizing mission to tutor locals and develop local resources.

The framework described in the previous paragraph provides concepts and terms which will be used in the analysis of Polish and Serbian travel accounts. The following part of the article is divided into five sections: 1) luxuriant tropics, 2) perilous tropics, 3) exploited tropics, 4) nature and identity, 5) conclusions.

LUXURIANT TROPICS

In 1876, when Henryk Sienkiewicz came to Java as a soldier in the ranks of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, he was twenty-four years old but had already had extensive military and travel experience, having served in the French army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 and in the French Foreign Legion in Algeria, where he endured many hardships, for five years. Compared to the French Foreign Legion, the Dutch colonial army was almost like a stroll in the park and the natural world of Java exhilarated Sienkiewicz, especially after years of service in the desert. As noted by Pratt, in travel literature, arrival scenes often set the categories of the representation (1986: 31-32) and, in this context of travel accounts describing the tropical regions of Asia, Mikko Toivanen remarks that nature often provided a vivid first impression (2019: 127). This is certainly reflected in Sienkiewicz’s description of his arrival in Batavia: “The

first impression that Java makes on a European is difficult to describe. Everyone is amazed and enchanted by this natural beauty" (Henryk Sienkiewicz 1914: 120). An encounter with the tropics is characterized by categories of beauty, amazement and inexpressibility. Such first impressions are only reinforced by greater experience of the nature in Java. This is how Sienkiewicz comments on a journey by train from Semarang to his military post in Salatiga:

The whole journey of several hours is beyond description. It seems to be one series of gardens of subtropical plants, then fields covered with tall sugar-cane and coffee plantations. The train goes up and up in circles. Sometimes it passes by a precipice, but even this precipice is an attractive spectacle, because it is full of bushes and greenery. (Sienkiewicz 1914: 125).

Here, the category of beauty is underpinned by pictures of tropical fertility. Coffee and sugar-cane plantations convey the image described by Smethurst as "cultivated nature", which is associated with beauty, though not in the sublime category. However, in Sienkiewicz's travel account, "wild" nature and precipices are also described within the discourse on beauty, thanks to the tropical greenery, a sign of fecundity. Therefore, in the fragments quoted we do not encounter any rhetoric of sublime and spectacular, wild nature, but rather that of beauty. It should also be noted that the dominant aspect is aesthetic and, although Sienkiewicz did write about plantations, his first concern was not about literary or scientific aspirations; his principal focus was on his military service. Consequently, portrayals of places visited are always associated with his personal experience. He was a soldier who had received a rather limited education (he joined the French army when he was only eighteen years old). It is also interesting that categories of amazement and inexpressibility, which are often linked with the rhetoric of sublimity, are employed here to emphasize the impression left on a European traveller by such lush greenery and plantation agriculture.

Sienkiewicz's vision of the luxuriant tropics can be compared with the writings of Milorad Rajčević, a Serbian globetrotter who visited all continents except Antarctica in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ Like the Polish soldier, this traveller had not enjoyed any university training but had had a "journeyman's education", so his travel account is fast-paced and mostly concerned with his own adventures. Although he tries to provide his readers with factual information, this tends to be rather chaotic, simplistic and lacks depth (Gvozden 2011: 83, 89).⁸ At the end of 1910, Rajčević arrived in Singapore which he described as paradise:

⁷ On Rajčević's biography, see Nada Savković (2018).

⁸ Rajčević travelled in Asia in 1910-1911, when he was 20 years old. His travel account about his trip to Africa in the 1920s presents a more inquisitive and astute approach than do his writings about Asia, even though it was still written within the confines of colonial stereotypes (Rajčević 1924, 1927).

I have been here for five days now and I can't tear myself away from these natural beauties and lovely surroundings. A real earthly paradise. One does not know what to admire and enjoy first. I can sense how it all affects me and I feel much better. If I could, I would never tear myself away from these beauties. (Milorad Rajčević 1930: 147-148).

Rajčević's writings are dominated by the concept of natural beauty which is so enchanting that it transcends merely being an object of observation, but has to power to change the traveller's condition. Since this Serbian traveller was based in the city, again we can talk about cultivated nature as the embodiment of tropical beauty – Rajčević's account of a journey on the back of an elephant through the rainforests of Siam has already adopted a different tone (see next section). The language used also suggests a kind of addiction, he does not want to tear himself away from beauty of nature; as well as a feeling of being overwhelmed: "One does not know what to admire and enjoy first". This can be linked to the rhetoric of wonder and amazement, as noted by Carl Thompson (2011: 66-67):

[...] wonder may be defined as the emotional and intellectual response that occurs when a traveller is confronted with something that temporarily defies understanding, and cannot easily be assimilated into the conceptual grid by which the traveller usually organises his or her experience.

Rajčević's and Sienkiewicz's "conceptual grid", formed in the temperate climate zone, makes it almost impossible for them to assimilate the enchanting greenery of the tropics, so travellers feel overwhelmed and astonished: "One does not know what to admire and enjoy first"; "Everyone is amazed". This style of writing also strengthens the image of the tropics as that of otherness. Although the reactions of travellers – feelings of amazement, captivation, left speechless – are positive, still they emphasize that the lands visited were radically different from their homelands. Viewed from this perspective, their writings can be seen as examples of exoticism, understood as creating a reality within a literary work which is perceived as foreign, distant, yet attractive (Andrzej Stoff 1990: 13).

Both travellers express their impressions using fairly simple language and both employ the rhetoric of the luxuriant tropics, although Rajčević does try to be more analytical. For example, while describing the curiosities among the maritime fauna of the tropical seas, he refers to the scientific knowledge of oceanography, although he also hastens to say that his own point of view is that of a simple traveller (Rajčević 1930: 143-144). This differentiation between the perspective of the expert and the layman is not insignificant. Rajčević more often than Sienkiewicz employs analogies and comparisons, familiarizing himself with the observed tropical reality. He also pays more attention to the economic exploitation of the natural world, which will be analysed later.

Another traveller who expressed enchantment with nature in the tropics was the Serb Milan Jovanović, who served as a ship's doctor on Austrian Lloyd steamers sailing to East Asia in the years 1878-1882. In comparison to Rajčević

and Sienkiewicz, Jovanović was much more a literary figure and an intellectual and, besides travel accounts, he also published numerous literary works and became a member of the Serbian Academy of Science.⁹ This background is also visible in his descriptions of the tropical verdure. He uses tropes similar to those used by Sienkiewicz and Rajčević, but does so more artistically. For example, he described sailing through the Malay Archipelago using complex sentences with parallel structures and many modifiers:

In the two days and two nights of a voyage through the Malay Archipelago, I just enjoyed the beauty around me and did not think about what had happened and what will happen. We are now on a silent river which is second to none in the world and which arouses so much curiosity in us that we do not have time to think about anything else. (Jovanović 1895: 110-111).

In a manner fairly analogical to the examples previously analysed, the natural world is described as so beautiful that it totally captivates the traveller and surpasses his conceptual grid, so much so that Jovanović claims he did not think about anything else. We might even talk about a quasi-mystical feeling, the traveller feels as if he is in the “eternal now”, in which he does not need to be concerned with either the past or the future.

While describing a walk around Penang, Jovanović creates one more literary apotheosis of the cultivated tropical landscape using superlatives and comparisons:

Perhaps there is no more beautiful corner of the world than this field around Penang; but nowhere on Earth have I seen traces of a more diligent human hand! The eye does not know where to linger first and our journey from the town to the forest, even though it was no more than a few kilometres long, passed like a summer dream. We did not have time to talk because of strong impressions the landscape was making on us. In its landscapes, Penang is like the Bosphorus among seas or Venice among cities. (Jovanović 1895: 96).

In this quotation we already encounter familiar tropes: being mentally overpowering among so many visual delights; a topos of inexpressibility, although this time in the form of an inability to keep up a conversation because of the overwhelming impression (in the next paragraph there is also a conventional cliché of “indescribable beauty”). This rhetoric is reinforced by a comparison of reality with a “summer dream”; such a simile being a staple in the language of exoticism. Here it should be noted that, in the passage quoted, cultivated nature is again showered with praise. Travellers enjoyed the sights provided by plantations, orchards as well as botanical gardens; representatives of tamed and Europeanized tropical fauna and flora (Toivanen 2019: 136).

We have already seen three visions of the luxuriant tropics which were all written in different styles but with similar tropes. This rhetoric was typical

⁹ On Jovanović, see Ivo Tartalja (1984), Goran Maksimović (2008), and an extensive biography by Snežana Veljković (2016).

but, to make this section more comprehensive, I would like to discuss one more example: the description written by Michał Siedlecki, a biologist himself who did research in Java for almost a year.¹⁰ Like Jovanović, in addition to his main profession this Polish traveller also tried his hand at writing and was an accomplished stylist. His book on Java contains very detailed descriptions of the natural environment and it was the earliest Polish popular scientific book about this area, so actually a whole article could be devoted just to Siedlecki's writings. Here, however, I would rather focus on the general image of a tropical island in the introduction to his book:

[...] this picture of the unbridled power of life, which one sees there, surpasses all notions based on [received] descriptions, surpasses all expectations. It is a simple fact that the essential symptoms of the life of subtropical creatures are similar to ours – after all, life, wherever found on our globe, always proceeds in an essentially similar way; but under the Equator, in a hothouse atmosphere, the flower of life sways so powerfully that its details are far more visible and more readily perceived. The growth of living beings occurs more rapidly; plants and animals achieve larger dimensions than ours; the colours are more vivid and have more depth and, in the rapid course of life, its successive phases move immeasurably in full sight of the eye of the beholder. Nature and its manifestations seem less shrouded in mystery and are more easily perceived [...] Life in hot and humid countries is not restricted by climatic conditions and therefore it seems to exist in a purer form. (Siedlecki 1913: v-vi).



Figure 1. “[...] under the Equator, in a hothouse atmosphere, the flower of life sways so powerfully that its details are far more visible and more readily perceived”. Young rice fields at the foot of the Papandayan volcano. (Source: Siedlecki 1913).

¹⁰ On M. Siedlecki, see Joanna Waclawek (2014); Przemysław Wiatrowski (2014).

This paragraph about the proliferation of life in the tropics uses various stylistic means to convey the image of fecundity: cumulative sentences, comparisons, poetic adjectives. The remark about nature surpassing received notions can be linked to the feeling of wonder aroused in a response to a phenomenon which defies understanding, as analysed above. But, even if the sight of tropical wildlife surpassed Siedlecki's expectations, can we say that it really defied his understanding (see Figure 1)?

Siedlecki looks at nature from the point of view of a biologist and, although he does not use scientific terminology in this paragraph, his impressions of tropical abundance are still slotted into the framework of a system of knowledge. We can risk a conjecture that the lush greenery and hothouse atmosphere led to similar initial emotions in all the writers analysed, but Siedlecki's scientific outlook puts his impressions in a different context. Although he might have initially felt just as dazed as Sienkiewicz or Jovanović, his "conceptual grid" still firmly encompasses the tropical world. It is also interesting how Siedlecki's biological point of view is applied even to ruins of Borobudur and Prambanan. Victor R. Savage argues that "the relic landscapes of Southeast Asia offered a symbol of the poetry and power of past civilizations" (1984: 295) and "the lavish portrayals of animals in paintings and sculptured walls seemed to some Western eyes to simulate the very plenitude of tropical Nature" (p. 301). Besides passing comments on their artistic value, religious meaning and history, the Polish traveller also identified the animals represented in reliefs, linking a lack of portrayals of local species to Indian influence in religion and art (Siedlecki 1913: 292-293).

This mechanism is even more visible in writings by another Polish biologist who worked in Java, Marian Raciborski.¹¹ In one of his popular scientific articles there is an arrival scene, constructed with familiar tropes:

The expected sight of the equatorial land, covered from the sea shores to the mountain tops with a dense, green layer of vegetation, so lush that it does not leave any free space, but covers even vertical rocks, walls and tree trunks, evokes an indescribable feeling.

Everything is alien to us: plants, animals and people; the enormous variety of forms depresses us and the first question we should ask ourselves is what factors and causes led to this world, so alien to our European one, taking shape. (Raciborski 1924: 4).

Overwhelming greenery is characterized by the usage of tropes of inexpressibility and otherness. The general emotional feeling is not as positive as in the examples analysed above, but the most important point is that Raciborski does not stop with depictions of nature, for he immediately proceeds to look for "factors and causes" behind the observed reality. So, the first two paragraphs are followed by an account of the first day spent "under the Equator" with a detailed description of a sunrise, rising temperature,

¹¹ On Raciborski's life and scientific activity, see Jan Kornaś (1987).

mounting humidity and torrential rain, presented as factors which determine the lush vegetation. While Rajčević writes about paradise and Jovanović did not know what to look at, Raciborski is perfectly well aware of how to scrutinize the surrounding environment in order to explain its causes (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. “[...] the first question we should ask ourselves is what factors and causes led to this world, so alien to our European one, taking shape”. Marian Raciborski in the Botanical Garden in Buitenzorg. (Source: W. Szafer 1964).

In this section, various images of tropical abundance and fertility are analysed. Lushness and verdure are described using the rhetoric of beauty enhanced by frequent use of tropes of inexpressibility, wonder and exotics to emphasize strong impressions made by the natural world. Similar conventions notwithstanding, the persona of the traveller also strongly influenced the textual image of the region; illustrated by differences between down-to-earth Sienkiewicz, literary Jovanović and scientific Siedlecki and Raciborski.

The image of luxuriant tropics also has its dark side. In his description of the walk around Penang, Jovanović makes the remark that, although he enjoyed the scenery so much, he still felt a little bit uneasy. What disturbed him? He writes that in Penang tigers still roam at their leisure. This predator embodies the concept of a perilous tropics, to be analysed in the next section.

PERILOUS TROPICS

Whereas images of a luxuriant tropics in essence contain abundance and fertility embodied by lush vegetation, images of a perilous tropics are more diverse. One of the menaces is dangerous animals. In the case of Jovanović, anxiety did not spoil his delight, but Milorad Rajčević, who travelled from

Singapore to Bangkok and then to Penang by a land route, describes how he was tormented by the roars of beasts:

At night, the heat subsides but another evil takes its place: the beasts shriek like crazy on all sides. This music is not pleasant, even when it is of tamed animals in cages, [hence it is much worse] in the silence of the night, when they might attack at any moment. Roars are varied, allowing each beast can be distinguished by its voice. On this journey, I have already learned to distinguish the roar of a tiger [or] a leopard, the trumpeting of an elephant, etcetera. I have just not been able to become accustomed to their roars and their proximity. This shatters the nerves so much that they cannot relax for a very long time, even after one has left such an environment behind, especially in sleep. (Rajčević 1930: 162).

The Serbian traveller only heard the “tropical beasts”, he did not actually see them and yet this was enough to infect him with a lasting feeling of distress. The traveller claims to have become so familiar with roars that he can distinguish different species simply by their sound, but this familiarity did not rid him of his anxiety. If we note that, during the trip, Rajčević also felt disturbed by the smell of an elephant he was riding besides suffering from the tropical heat, the conclusion has to be that little remained of the image of a tropical paradise. Here it is important to pay attention to the sensual dimension of experiencing the tropics. John Urry and Jonas Larsen have found a link between modern tourist practices and visual consumption, dating the birth of the tourist gaze to the 1840s (Urry and Larsen 2011: 29) and showing how nature was visually consumed as a leisure activity (pp. 156-164). However, they also examine how this gaze is embodied (pp. 195-199) and, from the anthropological perspective, a traveller uses all his or her senses to explore the world (Anna Wiczorkiewicz 2012). Rajčević’s account teems with physical sensations: he refers to the smell of elephants, roars of wild beasts, heat and sultry weather. The luxuriant tropics analysed in the previous section are dominated by the sense of sight, whereas in Rajčević’s account other sensual sensations are unpleasant and even threatening.

Even though travellers might feel anxious in the vicinity of large predators, actually even Sienkiewicz, who remained in Dutch East Indies for six years, saw a tiger in the wild only once and this encounter was rather anticlimactic: the animal just ran across a road and, as the Polish traveller wrote, neither he and his party nor the tiger was interested in any closer interaction (Sienkiewicz 1914: 200-201). Siedlecki writes that, before his departure for Java, he was often asked about dangerous predators but, in the time he spent in the island, he never came across any (Siedlecki 1913: 137). Therefore, large beasts tend to contribute to the image of tropical nightmares more as an idea rather than as a reality. Actually, it was smaller animals that became a real nuisance. A famous Polish painter Julian Fałat, who visited Southeast Asia during his journey around the world in 1885 and stayed in Singapore for a few months,¹² complains about snakes in his memoirs:

¹² On Fałat’s trip around the world, see Jerzy Malinowski (2000).

Before the first bath, I was horrified by the huddle of multi-coloured snakes on the floor of the cabin. They had to be chased away with a stick, so that they hid in the corners and crevices – but even this did not help much because, before I finished bathing, they were on the brick floor again. They are not venomous snakes, but they are nevertheless a repulsive sight for a European. (Julian Fałat 1987: 118).

Even simple aspects of everyday life like bathing become unpleasant activities because of the tropical wildlife. Although we can hardly speak of life's perils here, we are nonetheless far removed from the image of paradise. There is also an interesting notion of relativity, in that Fałat considers snakes repulsive "to a European", which naturally raises this question: who chased those snakes away, was it Fałat himself or a servant?

A universal tropical plague concerned an even smaller organism than a snake: the mosquito. These were a real torment and a description given by Fałat draws a connection between insects and another tropical scourge, heat:

Dealing with the heat sapped one's energy and strength; during the day, even the hottest day, one could save oneself by frequent taking of a bath and a few changes of clothes, but the nights were desperately tiring, all the more so because it would be necessary to have several beds prepared in order to dry the sweat and refresh the bedding. A plague of a different kind were the bloodthirsty mosquitoes: despite having cleaned the room in the evening and having swept the curtain next to the bed, it was enough if a single mosquito remained inside and one would get up after a sleepless night with burning and scabby blisters on the body. (Fałat 1987: 118).

Snakes made bathing unpleasant, but the natural world of Southeast Asia deprived anyone of one activity essential to one's well-being: sleep. An even more striking depiction of a similar feeling can be found in Paweł Sapięha's travel account:

Any bigger movement before falling asleep is disastrous, because it increases transpiration, which makes it difficult to fall asleep. But how can you avoid sudden movements when, despite all precautions, sometimes even more than one mosquito is inside the net? You've grown tired, sleepy and, trusting to your servant's care in rolling and unrolling the mosquito net, you lie down with real pleasure, the Chinaman puts out the candle, you are on the verge of slumber – when suddenly, in the stillness of the night, near your ear you hear the singing of the mosquito, a seemingly gentle, sonorous, but accursed singing; you have to get up, light the candle and catch it; this sometimes takes half an hour; you begin to sweat, and the [chance of] peaceful, refreshing sleep has already disappeared. (Sapięha 1899: 105).

The aristocratic Sapięha frames this unpleasant situation in a discourse on class relations because, besides complaints about the heat and mosquitos, there is also an oblique criticism of the untrustworthiness of servants whose lack of care let insects inside the mosquito net. Sapięha also adds one important dimension to this description of "tropical plagues". It is not just an

inconvenience, it also has huge consequences for the well-being of Europeans in the tropics:

And those poor people who spend years here, they've lost weight, their nerves are debilitated, any trivial issue and there is illness from these battles with mosquitoes, from this lack of sleep. The white people here look awful. They are all anaemic; the children of the whites are all pale, bloated, unhealthy, not happy as children. (Sapieha 1899: 105).

Sapieha even claims to have heard that the second generation of "white people" in "the South" is childless (although he admits to being not sure about the veracity of this statement). Therefore, while most of descriptions Fałat have to do with his personal experiences, Sapieha uses the scene of a sweated-filled tropical night and vexatious mosquitos to make his point in a discussion about the possibility of European settlements in the tropics, limits to expansion and the degeneration of humanity in tropical regions. Sapieha's conclusion is categorical: "Tropics are the boundary beyond which whites cannot exist and breed" (p. 105). Savage (1984: 25) claims that many Western travellers considered "the enervating and debilitating climate" a factor which contributed to the degeneration of local peoples. There was also an ongoing discussion about whether the tropical climate could affect Western travellers (pp. 175-179). Sapieha is convinced that a long stay in the tropics "produces negative results". Here we also encounter an example of the environmental determinism which was crucial to Western perceptions of Southeast Asia (Savage 1984: 68).

A similar observation on the tropical climate as being harmful to Europeans was made by Henryk Cywiński, a Polish officer in the Russian Navy in which he eventually reached the rank of vice-admiral. During one of his voyages, he visited Batavia in 1880 and in his memoirs left the following impression about the life of Europeans under the Equator:

The climate here is harmful to a European; the Dutch colonists living here, especially the women and children, are sluggish and have pale, sickly complexions. [...] as soon as he gains wealth, every European immediately returns to his homeland. (Cywiński 1934: 28).

It is important to notice a contrast between vibrant descriptions of tropical nature, analysed previously, and the portrayals of sickly, pale Europeans suffering in the rigours of the tropical climate.

Sapieha and Cywiński wrote about Europeans looking unhealthy and some travellers personally experienced tropical malaises. The painter Fałat contracted malaria while staying in Singapore. He writes that working with "European intensity" in such a climate was not only tiring, but also dangerous, especially as he was spending a long time in the Chinese quarters, picturesque but dirty and unhealthy in his opinion. Eventually, he was diagnosed with malaria and it took him a few weeks to recuperate. His testimony about his own sickness finds support in a story about a Frenchman who was returning

home after twelve years in Saigon. While waiting for a ship in Singapore, the man stayed in the same hotel as Fałat. One day in the morning the Polish traveller was informed that the Frenchman had died during the night (Fałat 1987: 118-122). The image of the tropics which emerges from such stories is that of a hidden menace, the danger is invisible and can strike suddenly. It is also attention-grabbing that Fałat thought working with "European intensity" in a hot climate was dangerous. This sort of view can be treated as a reflection of the environmental determinism and the theory that climate determines human activity (it would be interesting to ask what did Fałat think of intensity of work of local servants and rickshaw men who made life for Europeans possible in Singapore).

An even more striking testimony about the tropics as a disease-ridden clime is given by Sienkiewicz, especially when we take account of his enthusiastic descriptions of natural beauty, analysed in the previous section. The soldier had suffered from malaria while serving in Algeria but he was spared this malady in the East Indies, however he did have the opportunity to observe the cholera epidemic in Semarang and, as he wrote, "No war, no danger could crush me like this terrible disease" (Sienkiewicz 1914: 202). Of course, in the nineteenth century there were also cholera epidemics in Europe; however, the Polish traveller emphasizes that it was not a European cholera, from which many recovered, but a disease which was killing all people struck by the contagion in a few hours. In what he writes, Sienkiewicz creates the image of a malignant tropical epidemic. His account contains dramatic scenes of witnessing friends passing away; his battalion lost one-third of its soldiers and nine officers (p. 204). The Polish traveller also introduces the topic of colonial segregation, as he does not give the number of the local and Chinese victims of the epidemic because they were so numerous that the bodies were taken away in carts (p. 204). Divisions in colonial society were visible even in the attitude towards the dead.

Before the epidemic Sienkiewicz took part in the Aceh War and he posited the cholera outbreak in this context: "It's terrible! [...] and now, after having been subjected to an arduous expedition and coming out of it unscathed, I am counting every day before I can return to my country as soon as possible, whereas here is an enemy more dangerous than all the Acehnese. And there is no form of defence" (p. 204). The Acehnese, who were considered a cruel and violent people by Sienkiewicz, were still not as threatening as the epidemic. Here are two negative stereotypes about the tropics: "malevolent natives" and "infectious diseases", the one reinforcing the other. Furthermore, Sienkiewicz, in a method similar to Fałat, highlights that the epidemic was like a hidden, insidious enemy, against which there was no form of defence. In the context of India, Arnold wrote about "the land of death" (Arnold 2006: 42-73), a formulation which can be applied to the descriptions of Southeast Asia in Fałat's and Sienkiewicz's travel accounts. In the context of Sienkiewicz's participation in Aceh war it is worth noting that he thought that the Dutch had not only to fight against the fanatical Acehnese but also against the unhealthy

climate and the rugged country covered with primordial forests (Sienkiewicz 1914: 141). Again, stereotypes about “malevolent natives” were linked with the image of perilous nature.

The natural world of Southeast Asia was also plagued by disasters like cyclones and volcanic eruptions. The Serbian sailor Vlado Ivelić spent fifty years voyaging all around the world on various ships, including the seas of Southeast Asia. His memoirs are mostly concerned with his sailing career and contain few details about the lands he visited. It is an example of a narrative which in 200 pages covers fifty years and hundreds of thousands of miles of sea voyages (although he was also writing poetry) in simple sentences.¹³ In such a succinct account, it is significant that Southeast Asia is presented mostly in terms of its weather. As a seaman, Ivelić of course describes the pattern of the monsoons and mentions that the change of the monsoons is accompanied by “the worst storms, and often by hurricanes” and, in the period from April to October, there is the danger of cyclones (Ivelić 1933: 94). In Ivelić’s account, the threat of disaster, even though presented as something typical of the region, is perceived from the distant vantage of a memoirist, while in Henryk Chmielewski’s diary the feeling of danger is recorded with directness and immediacy:

On June 2 we were in a great danger, at lunch time at noon it grew dark and a gale began to blow up, so terrifyingly that the ship’s mast was creaking. At two *verst* from the ship, a water-spout, a “deathly vortex”, formed, it was something horrible, sea mingled with sky and clouds churned together by a large water-spout, if this “deathly vortex” had approached us, it would have signalled the end of our lives. (Chmielewski: 60).

Chmielewski was a Polish non-commissioned officer in the Russian army, a manuscript containing his memoirs notes, poems and drawings is kept at the National Library in Warsaw, and gives an unfiltered insight into the views of a common soldier. In 1898, Chmielewski was transported from Europe to the Russian territories in East Asia and the ship he boarded sailed through Southeast Asia. Even though he considered the tropical vegetation in Singapore “an entrance to paradise” (p. 61), the description of the water-spout introduces the image of a perilous tropics into his account. He complained about the tropical heat as well, calling it “a torture” (p. 62).

Natural disasters in Southeast Asia also include volcanic eruptions. Although “fire mountains”, like iconic Vesuvius, can be visited in Europe, East-Central Europe is a zone free of volcanic activity, so observing it in Southeast Asia filled authors in our corpus with a strange foreboding, “terrifying and yet strangely enrapturing” (Savage 1984: 50), especially that within the timespan of this research, the eruption of Krakatau in 1883. Both Siedlecki and Rajčević wrote about the event. The latter gives a lot of figures – how far away was the explosion heard, how big was the tsunami, how thick was the ash layer, and

¹³ On Ivelić’s biography and writings, see Olivera Doklešćić (2004).

how many people died (Rajčević 1930: 158). His account can be seen as one variation of an attitude called in another context “an arithmetic splendour” (Forsdick, Kinsley, and Walchester 2019: 38), using big numbers to create an overwhelming impression. Siedlecki gives just one number, 18 km³ of ash (1913: 66), but the enormity of the disaster is suggestively conveyed by a remark that, after the eruption, even in Europe the sky was red for a long time (p. 54). Both authors described Krakatau in the context of other volcanos in Southeast Asia. In both travel accounts, the remarks analysed represent an impersonal, scientific mode of writing, in which the natural world is treated as an object of study. Therefore, the image of dangerous natural phenomena lacks directness, as do Ivelić’s remarks about monsoons, but convey the aura of precise, systematic information. There are also personal descriptions of volcanic activity. Siedlecki devotes a whole section of his book to volcanoes and his accounts contain not only research findings, but also describe his own visits to sites of volcanic activity. In these fragments, he demonstrates his mastery of writing by linking a personal story and literary style with factual information and a scientific approach focused on finding causal explanations. This is how he describes the “death valleys” on the Dieng Plateau in Central Java:

The very bottom of the valley is barren and completely devoid of vegetation; only from the sides do the roots and branches of the plants growing above reach it, but even these are withered or leafless; apparently, they grew during the period of weak gas production, and died when the amount of gas increased. At the very bottom, there are many dead insects and, between the withered roots, I saw the skeletons of two rather large birds; in the course of their flight all these creatures had carelessly flown too close to the bottom and had fallen, suffocated by the gas.

The incredibly lush vegetation begins just a few metres above the empty bottom. Magnificent, richly blooming fuchsias and other large-leafed shrubs intertwine with larger trees in a tangle of plants so dense that it is impossible to cross it; treeless places are overgrown with a thicket of ferns, matted into a dense carpet. It seems that an excess of carbonic anhydride in a depression at the bottom kills all life, whereas on the slopes the same gas, which is a source of principal nourishment of plants, stimulates them into extremely luxuriant growth. (Siedlecki 1913: 61-62).

For Siedlecki, the volcanic zone is a space in which death and life are intertwined; the image of lush tropical vegetation forms a stark contrast to the deadly valley, thereby transmitting not only the image of the perilous tropics, but also of the tropics as lands of extremities. A similar trope – contrast between life and death – is also used by Jadwiga Marcinowska in her account of a trip to the famous volcano Mount Bromo; however, her account is very different in terms of style, even though both she and Siedlecki belonged to the same generation (both were born in the early 1870s) and visited Java just a few years apart (Siedlecki in 1908, Jadwiga Marcinowska between 1911 and 1913).¹⁴ Marcinowska was a teacher and social activist but above all else

¹⁴ On Marcinowska’s biography, see Celina Gajkowska (1974).

a modernist poet and novelist and her literary position influenced the way she wrote about volcanoes:

A gigantic funnel has formed in the eroded rocky embankment; the walls, narrowing abruptly, plunge into the depths, full of smoke, incessant bubbling and whirlwinds. At some moments an erupting cloud engulfs everything in a grey, choking blanket. Then the walls of the funnel, cracked into multiple fissures, re-emerge from the yellowish-green sulphur fumes; an unexplored, churning depth appears, eternally toiling in a deadly, but nevertheless vigorous endeavour.

Via a small path one can climb a little to glimpse the whole stony panorama; eyes are drawn along the rocky walls, piled up, swept day after day with the fervent breath of doom. The high, bright sky arches above the rumble and horror.

Nowhere do life and death seem as ruthlessly merged with each other as here. The unquenchable, ever-moving bowels of the earth are at work under the swathes of unparalleled necrosis [...]. (Marcinowska 1925: 164-165).

While Siedlecki contrasted a deadly volcanic valley with the vibrant vegetation, Marcinowska builds a different contrast between life and death. The barren, fractured land epitomizes death, while life is represented by geothermal energy which can be felt so directly from the volcano. From this perspective, even the force of life is itself deadly. Marcinowska's poetic description and cumulative sentences are employed in the service of a romantic vision of nature, in which the landscape is dominated by "infinitudes, fluidity and sudden immensity" (Smethurst 2012: 153). The observing eye seems to be located somewhat above and at a distance, and Marcinowska's account lacks the feeling of personal danger present in the remarks made by Chmielewski about the water-spout or by Sienkiewicz about cholera, because the romantic subject predominates over nature through the use of literary and intellectual conventions. Dynamic verbs and descriptions of fumes enveloping rocks create the image of a fluid landscape, one can even imagine a picture drawn on the basis of this description which would look like a more violent version of Caspar David Friedrich's (1774-1840) *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*. There is also an evocative image of mysterious movements in "bowels of the earth". As Maria Janion shows, romantics believed that the focus of creative power, the forge of life, is hidden in the centre of the Earth (Janion 2000). Nevertheless, underground creative power could manifest itself on the surface through the deadly phenomenon of a volcano, whose morbid influence is vividly expressed by Marcinowska through the image of "necrosis".

As we have seen in this section, images of the tropics as a paradise coexisted with visions of a perilous tropics. While the lush nature was described by travellers with the rhetoric of beauty, there were numerous phenomena which arouse discomfort, anxiety and even fear: tropical beasts and no less dangerous mosquitos, the hot and humid climate making it impossible to function normally, deadly diseases, unbridled powers of nature exemplified by cyclones and volcanoes. Sapieha claimed that Europeans could not live below the Tropics. Such a situation begs the question of why people would bother to travel to locations like Java, Singapore, and Penang. This query is partially

answered by Cywiński, who emphasizes that the only reason for Europeans to settle in the perilous tropics was the hope of material gain: “as soon as he gains wealth, every European immediately returns to his homeland”. It is also very telling that travellers tend to enjoy the view of plantations and cultivated nature in general, both important from the economic point of view. In the tropics, Europeans could get rich, so one of the most important features of the images of Southeast Asia’s natural world was the exploitation of resources which will be analysed in the next section.

EXPLOITED TROPICS

Smethurst, analysing changes in approach to nature in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, claims that the human attitude towards the natural world was increasingly dominated by economic, scientific, and aesthetic motives, in which nature was seen as “a thing of beauty and economic value” (Smethurst 2012: 3). This tendency was intensified in the case of the tropics. The development of the plantation economy and the export of tropical plants from one region to another (coffee, tea, cacao went global only in the early modern period, see Ross W. Jamieson 2001) formed “the visual impression as well as the economic utility of a single ‘tropical world’” (Arnold 2000: 9). Critics who have written about travel writing from a post-colonial perspective have commented on travellers looking for opportunities to exploit the natural resources. Pratt has called such minded voyagers “the capitalist vanguard” (Pratt 2008: 143-152), while David Spurr has written about the “rhetoric of appropriation” (David Spurr 1993: 28-42). What seems interesting is that many Polish and Serbian travellers, although not involved in any colonial activity, also wrote from such a perspective.

Hugo Zapałowicz, a military lawyer in the Austro-Hungarian army and a natural scientist, visited Southeast Asia briefly in 1889 while on a trip around the world. When describing his stay in Saigon, his first stop in Southeast Asia, he gave the following introduction to the region he visited:

India [Zapałowicz refers generally to the southeastern regions of Eurasia] is a land of figs, sago, sugar-cane, rice; a land of pepper, cinnamon, gutta-percha, muscatel, cloves – in a word, a land of roots and aromas. It is a land of precious stones, marvellous flora and butterfly fauna; a land of products made of fragrant wood, inlaid with mother-of-pearl – but also a land of the most venomous snakes and the most predatory animals. (Zapałowicz 1899: 358).

From this perspective, Southeast Asia is defined by the commodities which can be obtained there. The enumeration of goods creates the image of a rich land brimming with exotic items which are impossible to find in Europe. It can also be said that Zapałowicz bows to the medieval and early-modern images of the Indies as a land of marvellous riches, exotic spices, precious gems, aromatic woods (see Savage 1984: 28); the nineteenth-century plantation economy is rather absent from this vision, for example, coffee is not mentioned. Such a positive image is contrasted with snakes and predators so, in the binary

opposition, luxuriant tropics versus perilous tropics, the former is replaced by the image of the tropics as an area of potential economic exploitation.

The image of the exploited tropics was also conveyed in accounts which emphasize the practical use of natural resources. An example of this style of writing is found in Lucjan Jurkiewicz's travel account. Jurkiewicz was a Pole from a German-ruled part of the country, but worked in the Russian empire and was appointed an agronomist on the Island of Sakhalin in 1886. During a voyage there, Jurkiewicz stopped in Singapore which he wrote about in his diary. His background as a specialist in agronomy is detectable in remarks about one iconic tropical plant, bamboo:

In the handicraft industry here, the manufacture of furniture woven from bamboo, which is quite affordable and durable, stands out. Bamboo possesses incalculable benefits: at school they beat dunces [with bamboo], [they] use it for all sorts of building supplies in ordinary huts and for scaffolding and rafters in the construction of larger houses, [they] make furniture and all sorts of household utensils, stripping the phloem from young bamboo to weave various objects, use young bamboo stalks to thatch roofs and finally they make yarn from the leaves and use it to weave quite pretty fabrics. (Jurkiewicz 2014: 70).

Jurkiewicz also made some comments about fruits, cows, and pigs. It is interesting how his writing convention, dominated by a utilitarian approach to nature, diverges from both a lyrical apotheosis of nature and scientific descriptions which looked for causal explanations.

Rajčević also wrote from a utilitarian perspective and, although describing fauna and flora, he also often mentions their practical utility and market value. Corals can be used to make jewellery (Rajčević 1930: 160). Rattan is characterized as a plant very useful in the manufacture of furniture and as an object of intensive trade (p. 152). Depictions of animals sold on the streets of Singapore often end with the conclusion that creatures bought "here" for trifles can later be sold in Europe for astronomical sums (p. 153). A similar remark was also made by Jovanović, although in his case it was even more interesting, because he was writing about the trade in tigers. One of Jovanović's acquaintances in Singapore was a German trader who was selling tropical animals to Europe and importing horses to Singapore. In his residence, tiger cubs were kept as pet animals and at night thieves were scared off not by a watchdog but by a "watch tiger". The personal wealth of this trader was very impressive, as Jovanović concludes: "Everyone knows what a Bengal tiger costs in Europe, and in Singapore, where everyone lives outside the city, good European horses are highly sought after and cost a goodly sum" (Jovanović 1895: 124). In the previous section, tigers were considered one of the symbols of the perilous tropics, Jovanović himself wrote that he was afraid of them. However, in the fragment quoted in this paragraph, the exploitation of the natural resources, fuelled by colonial capitalism, led to a degradation of tigers into useful pets and finally commodities. Here, it should also be noted that, although Jovanović's and Rajčević's later travel accounts are very different in

style, they share a surprising number of themes: a method of catching monkeys by leaving a piece of fruit in a bottle; rattan as a material sold to China and used to make furniture; shells so big that a child can be washed in them (Jovanović 1895: 115, 118-120; Rajčević 1930: 152-155). This can, of course, be explained by the fact that Rajčević observed the same objects in Singapore and listened to the same stories as Jovanović had done thirty years earlier but using the same metaphors and comparisons suggests some textual connections. It is difficult to say if Rajčević copied anything from Jovanović, but the similarities are striking, especially when we take into account how different both texts are. In the introduction, I have quoted Maria Noelle Ng who claims that travel writing can be read as “a palimpsestic history of the metropole”. The afore-mentioned links between Jovanović and Rajčević suggests that a travel account is a palimpsest of various well-established representations.

To some extent the examples analysed above have an incidental character because, although they show the perceptive framework used by travellers to describe Southeast Asian reality, they are not systematic. In the corpus analysed, we also encounter images of exploitation of the natural world as part of a discourse on political economy and colonialism. In a short travel account written by Adam Sierakowski, we find a comprehensive chain of ideas linking together racialized colonial capitalism, tropicality, and the exploitation of natural resources. Sierakowski was from a Polish land-owning family, had a doctorate in law, served as a member of the German parliament and was also an avid traveller as well as being an amateur historian and archaeologist.¹⁵ In 1872-1873, he travelled to India and Java. His account of the island uses the image of fertility: “Nature is delightfully luxuriant; the cone-shaped mountains look amazing. The soil everywhere is unbelievably fertile, producing an inexhaustible supply of sugar, coffee, tobacco, indigo and rice” (Sierakowski 1873: 570). This sort of image can be associated with the exploitation of nature and praise of colonialism. To render this way of thinking logical, Sierakowski paints a critical portrayal of the inhabitants of this fertile land:

The Javanese are calm, phlegmatic, docile, humble, shrewd and usually a little dishonest [...]. They are, for the East, very clean, working slowly but with a degree of regularity and deftness. They are incomparable blacksmiths, hence in Javanese ‘pandéh’ means ‘blacksmith’ and also ‘graceful.’ Reprimanded, they fall silent immediately: they must be guided with gentleness and patience. (Sierakowski 1873: 566).

In this fragment, despite its derogatory tone, Sierakowski at least admits the Javanese some virtues, even if only relatively speaking. However, his account of the Diponegoro War (Java War) of 1825-1830 teems with the worst orientalist clichés:

¹⁵ On Sierakowski’s travel writings, see Elżbieta Malinowska (2014).

The Javanese are not Arabs; only once did they rebel, under Diponegoro, and then a few hundred Dutchmen quickly averted the storm. During that uprising, when the Javanese were threatening the town of Semarang and the hastily formed town militia, which was sent against them, ran away, only one former Dutch officer, whose horse had bolted, finding himself in the midst of the enemy, instinctively, habituated as he was to giving orders, shouted: "Move aside". Accustomed by their old habit of listening, the stupid Javanese parted and let him pass! (Sierakowski 1873: 569).

In this fragment, we encounter a flagrant distortion of historical facts, which might have been unintentional because Sierakowski, who mentions interactions with Dutch colonial officials and planters, probably relied solely on Dutch informers. This image of the Javanese as stupid and submissive also has an important function in the discourse on the exploitation of natural resources. Syed Hussein Alatas claims that the stereotype of the lazy native was used in European writings about Southeast Asia to justify colonialism (1977). As shown above, Sierakowski does not describe the Javanese as lazy, but he does assign a few other negative qualities to them. Such people are unable to make proper use of the fertile lands, therefore, and unsurprisingly, the Dutch exploitation of Java is seen by the Polish aristocrat as justified:

The government, having taken over the country from the Muslim sultans, also expropriated the ownership of all the land from them [...]. Taking advantage of this state of affairs, Bosch [Johannes van den Bosch, 1770-1844, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies], ordered the inhabitants of Java to plant coffee on some pieces of land and sugar or indigo on others and to do so without remuneration, with the obligation to sell the yield from these crops to the government for a predetermined very low price. The government proceeded to sell this produce for triple and quadruple the price in Europe. Millions immediately began to pour in but, as serf labour will never be free labour, the government has slowly abandoned many of these crops; this year it stopped growing sugar-cane and now only one [compulsory crop] remains, that is the cultivation of coffee. On its success or failure depends the state of the colony's finances. [...] In Europe this system is called barbaric, but one has to take the local conditions into account – the population of Java is enormous and the work is not arduous because only one day out of five in a week do they work as serfs. Moreover, the Javanese farmer is not tied to the soil as the peasant used to be in our country. If the work is too arduous for him, he can leave his village and move to some other places or hire himself as a free labourer; no one has the right to prevent him from doing so. (Sierakowski 1873: 567).

The image of the fertile tropics combined with negative stereotypes of local peoples concocted a perfect justification for the system of exploitation of natural resources by colonizers. Władysław Michał Zaleski, whom I quoted at the beginning of this article, presents a similar apology for the exploitation of the fertile soils of Java by the Dutch. During his many years of residence in Ceylon as an Apostolic Delegate for the East Indies, he did most of his

travelling around British India, but he also made trips to Southeast Asia.¹⁶ And, although he was a Roman Catholic who was critical of some British policies in India and of Protestantism, he nevertheless described the Dutch colonial system in a positive light. The categories used by Zaleski are similar to those used by Sierakowski: tropical fecundity untapped by indolent natives justifies exploitation by the colonial power.

When the Dutch conquered the island of Java, the whole country lay fallow, the natives did not know how to cultivate it and were only able to get the produce needed from the land so that they would not starve.

The government then became a farmer: it cut down the virgin forests, taught the natives how to cultivate these strangely fertile fields, poured enormous sums of money into plantations; in a word, created a source of immeasurable wealth. Can we then deny the government the right to a certain part of the profit as the fruits of its entrepreneurship and a percentage of the capital it has invested in this land? Besides, these monopolies are only a question of form, for whether one takes a part of the produce in kind and orders it to be sold at a certain price or whether one imposes taxes on the land, the effect is the same for both sides.

The question of forced labour is closely linked to the question of monopolies for, if this half-wild, lazy and inefficient people had not been forced to do a certain amount of work, which is not at all onerous, large plantations, which bestow wealth and prosperity on the country, would not have been created [...]

So much is being censured today as forced labour, but I ask, what would happen to a child if he were freed from forced labour, either at school or on his father's land?

Nations also have their ages of minority: work and the fruits of work civilize barbarian peoples. (Zaleski 1898: 86-87).

The fragment quoted is a model example of colonial rhetoric because in it we find the lazy native, the discourse of historicism putting non-Europeans into the "waiting-room of history" (Dipesh Chakrabarty 2008: 8), erasure of the achievements of a colonized people and of the cruel deeds of colonizers, appropriation of natural resources and affirmation of Dutch colonialism as their effort to bring prosperity to a colonized land, as they pursue a civilizing mission. The natural world of Java plays an important role in this construction and the exploitation of natural resources is presented as something commendable, a success achieved by the Dutch in that field, making them worthy of the prize of Java.

At this point we might ask the following question: Why were two Polish travellers, who did not have plantations and whose nation was under foreign rule, so enthusiastic about the Dutch colonial system? It is possible that they had limited sources of information and this was coupled with the fact that their informants were the Dutch they met on Java. However, both travellers also had access to opinions critical of the exploitation of the Indies by the Netherlands,

¹⁶ On Zaleski's biography, see Witold Malej (1964) and George J. Lerski (1984). The first contains many facts, but is written as a biographical apology of the bishop from a Roman Catholic perspective, while Lerski's article is more critical.

because they wrote their positive assessments of the colonial system as a refutation, claiming that some people in Europe did not understand what the real situation was. After a few weeks, Zaleski and Sierakowski decided that they had enough knowledge of the real situation, which was of course based not on conversations with the Javanese but with the Dutch and other Europeans living in Java (Zaleski talked mostly with Roman Catholic officials). Sierakowski, in particular wrote positively about the planters. Another reason might have been a certain sense of racial and European solidarity. Tadeusz Budrewicz claims that Poles travelling outside Europe were adopting the perspective of “a white man”, a European, a Christian, a colonizer (Tadeusz Budrewicz 2018: 112). However, travellers like Jovanović, Siedlecki, or Marcinowska did make critical observations about the colonial system (comments by Jovanović are mentioned in the introduction, remarks by Siedlecki and Marcinowska will be a focus of attention in the next section). We can also think of their writings in terms of social class and economic solidarity. Sierakowski, a landowner himself, draws an analogy between Javanese peasants and Polish peasants (“Moreover, the Javanese farmer is not tied to the soil as the peasant used to be in our country”). It has been noted that Polish landowners did use to describe peasants in an orientalist mindset, although this observation was made for Austrian Galicia, not for Sierakowski’s region (Klemens Kaps 2012: 110-111). Zaleski, another descendant of landowners, was an important figure in the Roman Catholic Church in Asia. The majority of Dutch in the Indies were Protestants, but Roman Catholic missionaries were allowed to work in Dutch East Indies. Since 1847 the colonial state had recognized the independence of the Roman Catholic Church and parishes were financed by the government (Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel Steenbrink 2008: 139). Generally, the progress of European colonialism was linked to the progress of Christianity, which is admitted by contemporary Indonesian Catholics (Alfons N. Embu 2014). Zaleski would have preferred to identify with colonial landowners than with Muslim Javanese peasants.¹⁷ Finally, we can speculate about the impact of the natural world itself. On the one hand, as shown in the first section, when writing about the beauty of the tropical vegetation, travellers also often praised cultivated nature. On the other hand, tropical nature was also perceived as otherness, often dangerous. This system of cultivation which had brought wildlife under human control was appreciated by two Polish travellers.¹⁸

Farish A. Noor argues that data-gathering in colonial Southeast Asia – collecting information about local polities and their inhabitants, mapping out territories – was not only a method of expanding knowledge but also a way of framing Southeast Asians as the others. This process was based on a

¹⁷ I have analysed Zaleski’s position in Ewertowski (2016).

¹⁸ For a very critical assessment of the impact of the VOC and “modern Europe” on Java at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, see Ann Kumar (2013). For an analysis of the Dutch colonial policy and Cultivation System, see Robert van Niel (1992), Cornelis Fasseur (1992). As is to be expected, contemporary researchers do not share such the rosy assessment of Dutch colonial policies expressed by Zaleski and Sierakowski, even if they do recognize certain positive aspects.

racialized colonial capitalism and, ultimately, on the values of the Western Enlightenment. Western officials and scholars “felt that through the study of the non-Western world, that world could be denuded, comprehended and ultimately better governed, like Nature itself” (Noor 2019: 199). Zaleski and Sierakowski also gathered information about distant lands and passed it on to their Polish readers, describing nature along the Enlightenment lines, whose tone was that the exploitation of resources was a way to introduce order into nature. By adopting this attitude, they cast the Javanese in the role of lazy natives, unable to cultivate their fertile tropical world properly. The travellers also simultaneously demonstrated their own sets of values and beliefs. Here we can see how images of nature are associated with the question of identity, the path we shall follow in the next section.

NATURE AND IDENTITY

In the introduction to this article, I mentioned that Marcin Raciborski classified newly discovered fungi using the names of characters in Polish romantic literature. It should be noted, however, that Raciborski not only brought his Polishness to Java, he also later popularized Javanese culture among Poles, organizing performances of *wayang* (Zbigniew Osiński 2008: Section “1901”).¹⁹ What is most important in the context of this section is how the Javanese wildlife became linked to the identity of the traveller, the act of naming tropical organisms as an expression of Polish patriotism.

This naming activity is an interesting example of a traveller’s identity directly expressed through descriptions of nature, in which the biologist turned wildlife into a signification of his own values. Much more often, identity can only be reconstructed via analysis of the text, because the views of Dutch colonialism expressed by Zaleski and Sierakowski provide plenty of information about their background. However, connections between writing about nature and discourse on identity are most clearly traceable when we examine how travellers used descriptions of the environment to characterize others. An example of such a discourse can be found in Siedlecki’s writings. His depiction of tropical nature as luxuriant but also spectacularly unlike anything European is accompanied by a portrayal of peoples of Java, which exaggerates the differences between them and Europeans:

A man also belongs to nature; he who is in the Far East is no less different from us, the people of the North, just as the nature of these sunny lands is different from ours. It is not easy to get to know him, to understand his soul; however, an opportunity to take a closer look at him, observe his colourful life – is incredibly tempting. Calm, shielded by an undisturbed solemnity, or concealed behind the eternal smile of the Sphinx, the man of the East seems to contain within himself all the secrets of the lush and flowery nature which gave him birth; together with the surrounding nature he confronts us as a seemingly very different being, with notions unknown to us [...]. (Siedlecki 1913: vi).

¹⁹ A quotation taken from an e-book provided by virtualo.pl in mobi. format, hence page numbers are not given.

Siedlecki's premise is simple: man is a product of his environment; therefore, Southeast Asians are as different from Europeans as tropical plants and animals are from those in Europe. These remarks by Siedlecki tend to emphasize the closeness of local people to nature, for example, he praises Malay gardeners for their innate sense of the wildlife (p. 91); the "thousand islands" north of Batavia were described as "the world in which nature is beautiful and interesting, and people are good, primeval and not spoiled" (p. 282); a chapter on Javanese music, in which Siedlecki praises *gamelan*, is preceded by a chapter about the natural sounds of Java, containing detailed biological information, and his conclusion is that Javanese music emerged from such a natural background (pp. 221-245). Here we can see the second aspect of Siedlecki's outlook. In addition to the othering discourse, which presents Southeast Asian peoples as radically different from Europeans, the Polish botanist perceives locals within the framework of a stereotype of non-European peoples as living a life tightly bound up with nature, so much so that even the sophisticated products of their culture did not lose this connection (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. "[...] the man of the East seems to contain within himself all the secrets of the lush and flowery nature which gave him birth". Two locals in the forest on the slopes of the Pangrango vulcano. (Source: Siedlecki 1913).

I would suggest that Siedlecki's imagination is founded on an antithesis: the tropical nature and traditional culture of Southeast Asia is contrasted with the temperate climate and modern culture of Europe. Such an opposition can also be found in colonial rhetoric used by Zaleski or Sierakowski, although Siedlecki builds a very different edifice on this foundation. Firstly, Siedlecki was very well acquainted with the cultural achievements of the Javanese people, so he wrote about theatre, music and ancient architecture with a

friendly curiosity and understanding and he even promoted Javanese culture in Poland (Wacławek 2014: 25-27). Secondly, he was critical of some Dutch colonial policies, especially during the period of the Cultivation System:

The attitude of whites towards the indigenous peoples used to be downright appalling, especially when the whole island laboured under forced serfdom, sometimes for two to three days a week. Then the entire population was simply treated as slaves. (Siedlecki 1913: 215).

After analysing Siedlecki's writings as an example of othering, it is time to take a look at an example of familiarization through analogies. A remarkable case of framing the local population (as well as colonial rulers) by way of a sketch of nature was created by Marcinowska in a chapter in her travel account entitled "Melancholy in Sunny Java". This antithetical formulation is already attention-grabbing because of the juxtaposition of melancholy (etymologically "black bile" in Greek) with sunny weather (suggesting the image of tropical paradise). As we have seen, Marcinowska was writing as a professional author who used various stylistic means to organize her message. This feature is also detectable in the chapter analysed; for example, the bright tropical sun reappears a few times as a contrast to earthly reality.

Jadwiga Marcinowska (1925) describes her visit to Yogyakarta which she commences with a depiction of the natural setting.

There is a wide, very long and straight sandy street. The air is slightly hazy because of white dust. Apparently, it has not rained here for several months, so the rich vegetation has withered under the whitish-grey coating. (Marcinowska 1925: 153).

A trope of lush tropical vegetation is employed, but only to be cancelled out by a description of the aridity of the dry season and the omnipresent dust. This dust also has a symbolic meaning, which will be interpreted later. After a short paragraph about the setting, a description of the city and its people follow. This is imbued with a melancholic atmosphere, hence Marcinowska's comment that the town is populous but not lively. Then, as in a conventional "ethnographic" travel account, portrayals of the locals are presented. The writer gives a lot of information but most of it restricted to typical descriptions of clothes and appearance, although some additional meanings are "smuggled in". Suffering is etched on their faces and their lips reveal bitterness, simultaneously both proud and helpless. "One cannot imagine a more melancholic and mournful face" (p. 155). We can observe a parallel. Just as the lush vegetation in the first paragraph is covered by dust, the proud people of Yogyakarta are suffering under a burden of sadness. But why is it so?

At this point the dynamic part of the chapter begins, a description of a visit to the *Kraton*. A few days earlier Ramadan had ended and now it was the occasion for official visits. Marcinowska states clearly that rulers of Surakarta and Yogyakarta are just figureheads. "Although bathed in bright sunlight, surrounded by high walls the kraton is now a very spacious and extremely gloomy prison" (p. 157). Again, the brightness of the sun is used as a contrast

to the depressing reality. The political manipulations of the Dutch of the rulers of Yogyakarta are then described as very cunning:

In general, Dutch policy towards these last rulers does not follow the line of oppression which might provoke a reaction, a reflex of vigour. On the contrary, it tries to provide them with everything except the slightest opportunity to have contact with real life. Cunning! But this duplicity is indeed of a devilish kind, counting on moral decay, the nurturing of this decay (p. 158).

Marcinowska goes on to describe the ceremonies in detail, but the most important part is the ending of the chapter, and here again references to nature play an important role:

Ceremonial shots sounded, smoke billowed in the air, the ceremony was over. The crowd began to disperse in streams, seeping into the sandy streets. There was no loud hubbub. The huge, bright sun looked down on the sluggish movement, on the picturesqueness stripped of its spontaneity, on the spreading stigmata of lifelessness. Melancholy lay over life overwhelmed by depths [of despair] (p. 169).

This whole chapter analysed is based on a curious game of parallels and contrasts. As tropical nature is covered by dust, Javanese society is subjugated to foreign rule. The bright tropical sun is contrasted to a life of melancholy. Marcinowska could write simple travel-ethnographic observations and spice them up with a few anti-colonial statements, and yet her writing style, employing symbols borrowed from the natural world, is much more suggestive and memorable.

There is yet another parallel in Marcinowska's portrayal of melancholic Java, one which emerges when we read the fragment analysed in the context of the writer's foreword to her travel account. The book was published in 1925 and the foreword refers to the shock of the First World War, making the claim that supremacy of "the white man" has been irretrievably weakened. Marcinowska travelled in India and Southeast Asia in 1911-1913, so she claims that the book shows the world as it was in yesteryear (p. 2). Therefore, her compassionate portrayal of the Javanese is an episode from the history of the colonial system, which is, she claims, now crumbling. Furthermore, a patriotic dimension of her travel account has to be taken into account. Marcinowska was a Polish patriot, she was even put into prison for three months in 1902 for her political activities. In her foreword, she states that, at the time she was travelling, there was still no independent Poland and she was thinking about the suffering of her own people as she journeyed through these tropical lands:

Then [my] ear, in the mingled murmur of the most varied voices, discerned the slowly rising protest against violence and [my] eyes, in all the harm and suffering they encountered, saw a resemblance to the fate of the distant Homeland. And everywhere, on land and on the ocean, in the glowing subtropical light and in the splendour of starry nights, Poland appeared at the bottom of the heart [...]. (Marcinowska 1925: 2-3).

The vision of melancholic Java can therefore be read as the image of Poland. Struggle for independence was one of great topics of Polish literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Besides heroic visions, there are also widespread images of passivity and degradation under subjugation.²⁰ In the minds of Polish readers, Marcinowska's description of royal ceremonies, stripped of meaning and the sad faces of the proud Javanese, could be easily translated to their Polish situation. David Crowley claims that, during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, Poles were "seeing Japan, imagining Poland" (David Crowley 2008); in her travel account, Marcinowska was seeing the melancholy as she imagined her homeland in sunny Java.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

In this article I have analysed different representations of the natural world in both Polish and Serbian travel writings. My enquiry into images of wildlife, landscapes, and climates has been divided into four key topics which reflect their main visions of the tropics.

Firstly, travellers wrote about the lush vegetation, fertile soils, and the beauty of the landscapes, thereby constructing an image of the luxuriant tropics. Polish and Serbian visitors were elated by the tropical verdure and their impressions were conveyed using such tropes as wonder and inexpressibility. A figure of an "earthly paradise" was recurrent. Significantly, many of the examples quoted praise cultivated nature. Another interesting point is a comparison of how travellers from different backgrounds employed similar tropes in a variety of ways. Simple, down-to-earth admiration in the writings of Sienkiewicz and Rajčević can be compared with the more literary style of Jovanović and scientific approaches of Siedlecki and Raciborski.

Secondly, the tropics were seen as an area burdened with unbearably hot and humid climate, infested with wild beasts and insects, plagued by deadly diseases and natural disasters, in a word, the perilous tropics. Some accounts report the dangers of the tropics in an informative, distant manner, like Ivelić's remarks on cyclones. There are also very personal narratives which bear testimony to multifarious, mostly unpleasant, bodily sensations: Sapieha's and Fałat's complaints about how they were unable to sleep, constantly harassed by mosquitos and heat. Images of the perilous tropics can also be linked to other intellectual discourses: for Sapieha's tropical inconveniences provided an argument in a discussion about the limits of European expansionism; and through her description of volcanoes, Marcinowska articulated a romantic philosophy of nature.

Thirdly, the natural world was also seen as an area of potential exploitation. Fertile soils could be exploited economically, while rare plants and minerals, even tigers, were seen as valuable commodities. One aspect of this vision of

²⁰ The postcolonial perspective was also applied to Polish literature, see for example, Dariusz Skórczewski (2013).

²¹ This can be treated as an example of the building of self-identification across ethnic lines, "imagining yourself as the Other and vice versa" (Anna Kołos 2020).

the tropics is a description of the natural world from a utilitarian perspective: Jurkiewicz wrote about the numerous applications of the bamboo, Rajčević made similar comments about coral, rattan and trading in animals. Two Polish travellers, Sierakowski and Zaleski, wrote about the more systematic exploitation of the tropics. Their discourse combined the image of tropical fecundity with the stereotypes of lazy and incapable natives to justify the Dutch colonial exploitation of Java.

Finally, nature could also be used as a framework to assess the identity of local peoples, even of travellers themselves. Raciborski classified Javanese fungi after characters in Polish romantic literature. Descriptions of nature were a vehicle for Polish patriotism, as was Marcinowska's narrative of melancholy in sunny Java. Siedlecki's conviction that local peoples were intricately connected with their tropical environment led to a discourse on othering, in which the inhabitants of Java were considered as different from Europeans as tropical nature is different from the fauna and flora of the temperate zone, even though the Polish traveller generally wrote with great knowledge and compassion.

Now at the end it is time to return to the question posed in the introduction: why Polish and Serbian travellers? Taking into account the numerous sources available in other languages, examining accounts written by travellers who were often merely passing through Southeast Asia does not help significantly in a historical reconstruction of the situation "on the ground". However, scrutinizing a corpus with such narratives can contribute to the study of the perceptions of Southeast Asia, "the way people viewed this region and its environment with all their personal biases and interests and cultural prejudices and stereotypes" (Savage 1984: xv). Under a label such as "Polish and Serbian travellers", one encounters persons from very different backgrounds. Zaleski, a Polish Roman Catholic missionary born in Russian-ruled Lithuania, had similar views on the Dutch colonial system to those of Sierakowski, a Polish lawyer and landowner from German-ruled Warmia, while a Polish university professor and biologist from the Austro-Hungarian empire, Siedlecki, was more critical of it. Two Serbian writers, Jovanović and Rajčević, wrote travel accounts widely diverse in style and content, but with the latter inserting into his otherwise very personal narrative some stories analogous to those told by the former, thereby showing how representations depended as much on the observed reality and persona of the observer as on previous texts. This multiplicity of voices is also a reason it is not easy to reconstruct a unified Polish or Serbian perspective but, by studying Polish and Serbian images of the natural world, we can develop, even improve, our knowledge on multifarious factors that influenced various depictions of Southeast Asia from the period under consideration.

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