

A new historicist study of Jack London’s novella ‘The Red One’ and Solomon Islands Tribes and Traditions

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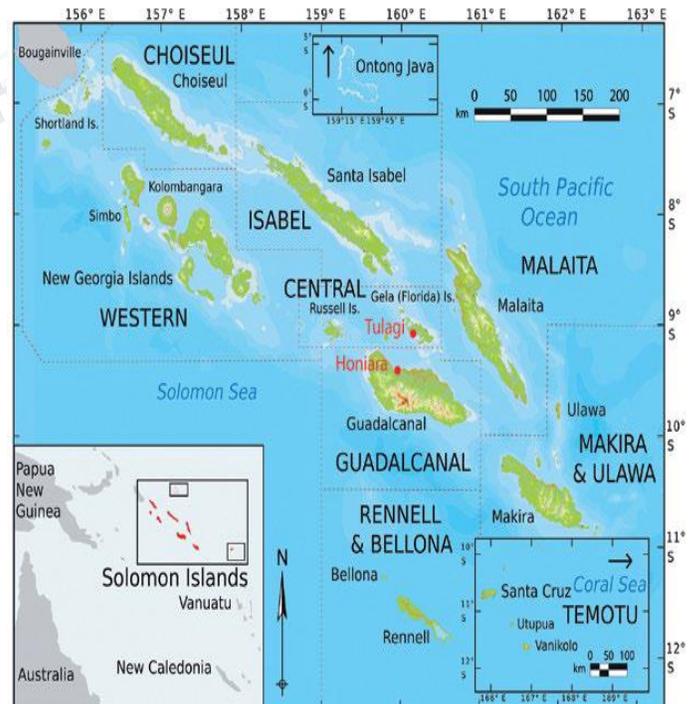
Abstract:- This paper reviews the novella, ‘The Red One’ written by Jack London (1916), in a new historicist perspective. The novella is set in Guadalcanal of Solomon Islands. New historicist practice selects an anecdote. The anecdote is the microcosmic image of the power relations which the critic seeks to elaborate in relation to the main text of discussion. A paragraph from a letter written by a missionary to prospective funders for the church is selected as the anecdote. The anecdote reveals the preconceived ideas of a European visiting the islands for the first time. The description is compared with anthropological studies on the tribes and traditions of the islanders. The traditions of the islanders are viewed from a colonial perspective in the anecdote. Expressions for fear of forest, savages hiding in it for the opportunity to kill and eat the missionaries are analyzed. The novella and the anecdote share the same ideology. Descriptions of practices of the islanders like the head-hunting, cannibalism, mortal fear of the forest, deep-seated covetousness of the protagonists in both narratives are discussed. What emerges is the manifest colonial discourse that seeks to usurp the land, enslave the people to sustain its economy. The power relations between the colonials and the natives are established. Historical accounts of blackbirding or capturing people by force for indentureship, missionary correspondence, legal documents, and letters are used to explore the ideology and social texts of colonialism. The flexibility of new historicist methodology, which does not prescribe a canonical standard for research, is used effectively. Illustrations of the islanders and their artifacts and missionaries are included.

Keywords: new historicism, anecdote, blackbirding, head-hunting, relations of power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Solomon Islands were known to the Europeans in 1568 through Spanish explorer Álvaro de Mendaña de Neira. De Neira panned some gold in the river mouth in the islands. He believed that the treasure of King Solomon originated here. Hence, he christened it as the Solomon Islands. The islands are in Melanesian archipelago consisting about 900 islands in South Pacific Ocean. They lie northeast of Australia. People inhabited the islands since the Holocene period ~2000 BCE. Evidences of Lapita Austronesian people and their pottery remains from ~1500 BCE were found in recent archaeological excavations. These people reared, pigs and cultivated taro and yams. They built excellent canoes, fished, dived for shells and corals. They were adept at sailing. (Foster & Laracy, 2017). They had a complex system of customs and rituals. The natives practiced ancestor cults. For the dead ancestors, they built artistic canoe houses. They made intricately shaped shell ornaments and wooden masks. Shells served as a measure of wealth. More than seventy languages and several local dialects existed. After the advent of Europeans, many of the languages fell out of use. They had no written script for

any of the languages. English is the official language of Solomon Islands today.



Map 1: Solomon Islands. Credit: Vincent Verheyen (Moore, 2017a).

New historicism:

New historicism emerged as a method of literary criticism in Berkeley University, California. Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, Louis Montrose, and Stephen Orgel were some of the early pioneers of new historicist practice. Greenblatt designated new historicism as Cultural Poetics later. However, the original name persisted. Cultural Materialism is the counterpart of new historicism in England. New historicist method stresses the historicity of a text by relating it to the configurations of power, society, or ideology of a particular age. MH Abrams is succinct in defining the premises of new historicism. "New historicists conceive of a literary text as "situated" within the institutions, social practices, and discourses that constitute the overall culture of a particular time and place, and with which the literary text interacts as both a product and a producer of cultural energies and codes (Abrams, 1999)." Aram Veesser, in his book *The New Historicism* (1989), points out the recurring assumptions of new historicism. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably; that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature; [...] that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (Vesser, 1989) New world encyclopedia summarizes the essentials of new historicism as below. "The movement establishes itself upon four main contentions.

Literature is historical, which means (in this exhibition) that a literary work is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it, therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it. Literature, then, is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history. Like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces—there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs inescapably and irretrievably to the Renaissance. There is no continuity between him and us; history is a series of "ruptures" between ages and men. As a consequence, the historian/critic is trapped in his own "historicity." No one can rise above his own social formations, his own ideological upbringing, in order to understand the past on its terms. A

modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries experienced it." (New World Encyclopedia.org. 2017)

New historicist analysis and Foucault:

New historicism appropriates Michel Foucault in its methodology. Foucault in his work 'Archaeology of knowledge' posits, "Relations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other's existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not concern the same, or even adjacent, fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind (technical, economic, social, political) . To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is not to undertake to re-establish it in an isolation that nothing could overcome; it is not to close it upon itself; it is to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it" (Foucault, 1972a).

In a new historicist analysis, the text can engage the critic and open up possibilities of new understanding. It liberally sources materials for criticism from diverse texts. It does not restrict itself to literary texts alone. It acknowledges that the texts have immanent and concealed relations of power. They manifest in the text as suppressed and emergent voices. The text contains possibilities of subversion and the containment of subversion. Drawing from Foucault, it maintains that the discourse of a period can be inferred from analyzing a range of seemingly unrelated documents.

According to Michel Foucault

"The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it does not say; and this 'not-said' is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said." He further elaborates,

"These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed; we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justifications of which must be scrutinized: we must define in what conditions and in view of which analyses certain of them are legitimate; and we must indicate which of them can never be accepted in any circumstances." (Foucault 1972b).

New historicism relates a literary text to legislative, judicial, medical, and for that matter any text from the

same period. It does not ascribe special merit to a literary text. It considers that social energies are in circulation in dissimilar texts. The key to understand a given literary text may be gleaned from any of the other texts. Thus, they seek to situate a literary text in the milieu of other texts. Unlike new critics, they do not intend to find the exact source for the literary text. The focus of new historicism is to bring the context in which a text arose to the foreground with greater focus.

Anecdote and Stephen Greenblatt:

New historicism does not prescribe a fixed methodology. It celebrates plurality of meanings in a text. This implies multiplicity in criticism too. In this sense new historicist criticism is essentially eclectic and subjective. It is not binding or strict, or demanding sequential, coherent steps for an analysis. This is perceived both as the strength of the method and as its limitation. New historicists do have certain common practices, but they do not attempt to replicate previous studies. Stephen Greenblatt and early new historicists used anthropology, particularly the ideas of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. John Brannigan states,

“One of the main methods of beginning a new historicist analysis preferred by Stephen Greenblatt is to recount an anecdote which contains the microcosmic image of the power relations which the critic seeks to elaborate in relation to the main text of discussion (Brannigan, 1998).” Stephen Greenblatt used anecdotes of several kinds. He recounts the advantages of using an anecdote in a lecture writing as a performance in 2007 the following. “The advantage of these beginnings—which became a bit too familiar in my writing, so I had to stop—is precisely that they take you away from the self, the self of the writer as well as the reader. You do not have to write the dreary sentences that say, “In this essay I intended to explore the theme of transvestitism in William Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night. My goal will be...blah, blah, blah.” (Greenblatt 2005)

Stephen Greenblatt and new historicists borrowed two key assumptions from French Marxist-Structuralist Louis Althusser. The classical Marxist conception is that the consciousness of men does not determine their political being. Instead, the political being determines their consciousness. Petkovic’ points out that, Althusser added to the Marxist idea that ideological production is coeval with material production. Apart from material production and production relations, ideological production is also a factor of shaping consciousness. For Althusser there are no individuals, only subjects. For reproduction of production relations, ideological production converts individuals into social subjects. The consciousness-shaping power of ideology is inescapable for a social subject— something that Greenblatt would later call as self-fashioning (with all the

immediate associations of submissiveness and helplessness). (Petkovic’, 2004)

Plot summary:

The Red One is a novella about a scientist Basset, who was aboard a blackbirding ship. He alights at Guadalcanal to collect a butterfly of rare beauty as a specimen. He is drawn by a mysterious loud peal deep in the forest. A head-hunting tribe captures him. He stays with the witch doctor Ngrun. The loud peal comes from an ancient metal sphere of unknown origin. He ‘discovers’ that the giant red sphere object is of extra-terrestrial origin. The natives sacrifice humans to the object. Basset rues the fact that a high artifact of unknown knowledge potential is forever lost to the civilized nations. He believes that Guadalcanal does not deserve to possess it. Enfeebled by malaria and other diseases, his desire to transport the object itself or at least informing civilized men does not fructify. He bargains with the head-hunting witch doctor that he is willing to exchange his head for curing for seeing the object once again and hear its peal. He succeeds in seeing the object. Ngrun beheads him. Moments before his death, he visualizes his head slowly getting cured over smoke in the rafters of the Devil-Devil house.

Anecdote selected from a report sent by a missionary:

“This is Malaita, of evil fame. A hundred miles long and twenty-five across, the island is one vast forest, which, clothing the sides of a thousand hills, rises to far off mountains. Through this dim jungle there swarms a hidden people, naked, silent, desperate, treacherous too, and venomous, who, under cover of the forest darkness, kill and are killed, and feast on human flesh. And from the bag slung around the neck of many a warrior, as he glides along the trail, hangs a fragment of human flesh, a bone, a talisman, a trophy of some dark murder.”

—Northcote Deck, South Sea Evangelical Mission, 1910. (Moore 2017)

Discussion: Analyzing the anecdote and applying to text:

Though Europeans sighted Solomon Islands in 16th Century, the European traffic to and from the islands increased after colonial trade sourced copra, beche-de-mer, shells, and timber from them. After slavery was abolished in America, Europeans used the slave ships for South Pacific human trafficking. They forcibly capture the islanders to work as indentured labor in sugar plantations in Australia, Fiji, and Samoa. This practice was termed as blackbirding. The late 19th Century vessels in South Pacific saw a profitable trade out of blackbirding. Britain banned blackbirding in 1901. A lecture (1950) found in ‘A Brief History of the South Sea Islands Labour Traffic’ justifies blackbirding with this rationale.

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“Ungoverned by law, moral or civil, they established a tradition and laid the foundation for the "pay- back" code of a primitive people. There is no intention here of discussing the ethics of this traffic; much of the condemnation it called forth was based upon emotional rather than realistic views. It may be fairly said there was a measure of inevitability in it. Past history shows that, where there is a clash between primitives and more advanced peoples and the conflict has an economic basis, material ends subdue ethical standards” (Stevens, 1950).

Monographs compiled in ‘Missionary Lives’ trace the experience of early missionaries from 1874-1914. Between 1874 and 1914, 327 European missionaries lived and worked in Papua. John Patterson Coleridge was the first to land in Solomon Islands in 1855. He became the first Anglican Bishop of Melanesia in 1881. The islanders killed him in 1887 to retaliate blackbirding. Four major missions worked in the islands namely, the London Missionary Society (LMS), the Sacred Heart Mission (SHM), the Australasian Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (AWMMS), and the Anglican Mission. The missionaries often came with families. With native materials they built residences in the European style replete with ‘English fashion furniture’ with pride. (Langmore, 1989, ed. Kiste)

Northcote Deck was a missionary of South Sea Evangelical Mission (SSEM). He arrived in 1910. He wrote the report to seek funds from prospective donors for the missionary work among Solomon Islanders. The chosen anecdote is part of the report. The Red One was written in May 1916 – posthumously published in 1918- In their cruise Snark, Jack London and his wife Charmian reached the Solomon Islands in 1908.

Deck was an energetic doctor and an evangelist who worked with his sister and a team in Malaita, Solomon Islands until 1928. The Solomon Islands had established coconut plantations to support colonial economy well before his arrival. The plantation owners invited Deck for evangelical mission. Plantation owners were few in numbers. They employed the islanders to harvest copra from nuts. Converting the native workers was necessary to ensure an obedient and God-fearing work force. A string of adjectives “naked, silent, desperate, treacherous, and venomous” qualifies the report of Deck about the islands. He further presents the natives as ruthless killers who ‘feast on human flesh.’ He depicts a grim picture of a savage cannibal who sports the trophy of a human limb as a talisman in a bag.



88 The Mission included Florence Young's relatives from the Deck and Griffiths families, whose backgrounds were Baptist and Plymouth Brethren. In this photo, Northcote Deck was sitting in the centre, with his sister Kathy (Catherine) on his left and his wife Jessie standing behind her. In full, the photo was labelled: [Left to right, back row] 'Miss Searle, Mr McBride, Jessie'. [front row] 'Miss Mitchell, Northcote, Kathie, Miss Dring'.
N. Deck photo, 1908–10s (British Museum)

The plantation owners financed the missionaries to indoctrinate the native workers. An uneasy relationship prevailed between the plantation owners and the islanders. The colonizers always viewed natives as a hostile and vengeful group preventing extraction of natural resources. They promoted the trope or allusion of naked head-hunting savages, and simple pagans waiting for the word of God and ushered to civilization. The ships sailing back and forth the islands exchanged words of caution about the savagery of the islanders. There was an active maligning of the native sustained by the opinionated voyagers. They carefully constructed an image of the islanders that justified their exploitative methods. The bag carried by natives with human trophy reported by Deck is one such story concocted in the middle of ocean. It was neither witnessed nor true. Clive Moore in the introduction to the exceedingly well-written book ‘Making Mala-Malaita in Solomon Islands, 1870s–1930s’ brings out bags of truth or the truth of bags.

“The trophy bags Deck mentions, called wa`ifirua in the Kwaio language of central Malaita, did exist. They were hung on a string around the neck, hanging down the back, and decorated with woven rings that were trophies of pig theft (almost a sport for young men), cone shell rings for secret murders, and tiny bags representing shell wealth thefts. Along with these wa`ifirua, men sometimes wore beautiful pearl-inlaid batons on cords around their necks, often with a stone, typically a pyrite nodule, plaited to one end. These batons are called fou`atoleleo or

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founisulesikwanga in Kwaio and hauanoreereo or wariihau in `Are`are, and they were carried while collecting shell wealth and pig bounties awarded for killings. Deck did not understand what he was seeing” (Clive, 2017b).

The account of Cote is not a shortfall in understanding or borne out of ignorance. It is a typical colonizing European narrative enunciated with a specific purpose. Recruiting of islanders as indentured labor flourished since 1870. These workers prepared the virgin soil in Australia, Fiji and Samoa for cultivation of sugarcane and other crops. They toiled as family units to plant the crops, nurture, and harvest the produce for colonial trade. They dressed as white people do and started changing their native customs. They spoke a Creole language. In due course, the process of acculturation was complete. When the white people recognized Australia as a potential colony, they wanted the land for their people with noncriminal background too. Earlier, England exiled criminals of their country to Australia. Now the influx of colonizers constituted people who wanted free land in the new continent. The central region of Australia is arid and unsuitable for agriculture. Hence, to accommodate the newcomers in the cultivated lands the natives were evicted. To prevent increasing the number of islanders in Australia, blackbirding was banned in 1901.

The natives had to return to the islands. This continued until 1907, a year before Jack London visited Solomon Islands. When Deck accepted the missionary post, the exodus was completely over. Established missionary stations were present. Yet, Deck is unhesitant to describe the natives as people ‘feasting on flesh’ faithful to the preconceived and prejudiced European perspective. The need to paint the native as a cannibal stems out of the need to paint the Other as inferior to justify European management and to bolster their superior self-identity.

Manufactured myth of Cannibalism among tribes:

On cannibalism, which Deck asserts with great flourish, a few anthropological studies are cited below. Several anthropological studies accept that accounts of cannibalism are not from actual eyewitnesses. A lot of them were purely imaginative yarns. William Jennings in his article “Kai Tangata (Māori Cannibalism) in Marist Correspondence” summarizes various anthropological studies on cannibalism.

“William Arens (1979, 1998) has asserted that cannibalism in every society he studied was largely European myth-making based on expectations of how non-Europeans behave. He conceded that occasional human sacrifice and consumption may have occurred within highly ritualized contexts, but maintained that widespread cannibalism did not take place. Gananath Obeyesekere offered the same argument in his study of accounts of cannibalism in the

Pacific, carefully distinguishing cannibalism, a European “fantasy that the Other is going to eat us” (Jennings 2005a).

Frank Lestringant (1997), a specialist of French Renaissance travel writing, has argued that European reports of cannibalism involve two layers: the European fantasy of the Other, enhanced by such imagery as the explorer in the cauldron, and the reality of the cannibal. Lestringant strips away the fantasy to contextualize cannibalism as a cultural practice in some societies, notably the Tupinamba of Brazil. Arens and Obeyesekere have argued, however, that once the European fantasy is stripped away, almost nothing remains (see, for example, Arens 2006). It is simplistic to say that they deny cannibalism—Obeyesekere states unequivocally that his research affirms anthropophagi (2003: 18)—but it is perhaps reasonable to state that they view any account of cannibalism with very deep suspicion. (Jennings 2005b)”

The cannibalistic discourse is an outcome of conflict between the native and colonial settler and is a powerful trope. The stereotyping of savage cannibalism operates as a discursive patterning of the otherness of the natives. New historicists use Foucault’s precept of power and its operation. The dominant employs strong dynamics to influence and shape the ideology of the oppressed. This dynamics of power is omnipresent and is reflected all kinds of social texts. The letter of Deck is an evidence of the operation of power in a text. Though the work of Jack London is a literary text by definition, it also exhibits the same power relationship seen in the anecdote. The all-pervasive nature of power can construct an idea and sustain it by reiterations. Law and judiciary are no exceptions to this intermeshed power relations.

Katherine Biber in Sydney Law Review provides an account happened in 1826. Henry Preston, a white settler, went out on hunting trip in Australia. He did not come back for several days. A rumor circulated that the Aborigines were seen with sugar rations in the vicinity. Jamieson, another settler, organized a search party and arrested 10 aborigines, a girl, 4 boys, 2 men, and 3 women. He claimed that four of the children admitted to him that another aborigine, called Hole-in-the-book, killed Preston and quartered him for eating. Jamieson went in pursuit of the man. Jamieson captured Hole-in-the book. On seeing the rope to hang him, the aborigine fled. Jamieson shot him dead. Jamieson extracted confession from other arrested aborigines of the roasting and eating of Preston. Jamieson saw the place where they lit the fire for roasting and buried entrails of Preston. Later, a surgeon would testify that the bones were from a man. Jamieson intimated the foul deed to the Governor. Several days later, Preston returned to the station unharmed. He had just lost his way and wandered

eighty miles from the station. He returned after finding his way again. Jamieson was tried for manslaughter. In the trial, Justice Stephen directed the jury ‘It should never be understood for a moment, that the natives [are] not equally under the protection of the laws with any of His Majesty’s subjects in the Colony.’ The jury returned an immediate verdict of Not Guilty by reason of justifiable homicide. The whole narrative is a colonial stock story. Biber asserts, “So cannibalism produces law, just as law — in the case of John Jamieson — produced a cannibalism that had hitherto not been there. Henry Preston turned out not to have been eaten. But this did not prevent law from imagining that he might have been” (Biber, 2005). Often, these ‘might have been’ conjectures give birth to the popular cannibal stories. Even to this day, there are very few eyewitness accounts of cannibalism. However, the idea dates back to the story of Cyclops in *Odyssey*. Herodotus, the father of history populated the then unknown regions of world with anthropophagi. It survived in fairytales like Jack Spriggins and the beanstalk (1734) and Brother Grimm’s Hansel and Gretel (1812). Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) described an industrious sailor stranded in an island chain of cannibals. Later R.M. Ballantyne wrote, *The Coral Island* (1858) with a cannibal narrative interwoven. Between *Robinson Crusoe* to *The Coral Island*, a parallel development took place. About a century after Vasco da Gama found the sea route to India, British East India Company (1600) came into being. Dutch and French East India Company followed suit. As explorations and colonial trade commenced, the European nations-Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, Holland, Germany, and Belgium among others- claimed various places as their domains. The mantle of civilizing the barbarians fell on the shoulders of the white race. This colonization was justified by the social texts including literary production of the time. The excesses perpetrated by the colonizer were seen as necessary evil. Kipling (1899) saw the large-scale rapine as the ‘White man’s burden’ of civilizing the others. The ‘new caught’ colonized people were considered as ‘sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child’ Solomon Islands came under the British Protectorate in 1893, and is a prime example of exploitative colonialism. The Althusserian concept of ideological production is relevant to examine the operation of power in all social texts including literature. Jack London had a high opinion of Kipling as a poet. The poem exhorts America to take over Philippines as a noble enterprise. London inherits the trait of Othering the native for colonial ambitions. In the novella, Basset fears of cannibalism and assumes that his assistant was killed for eating. He did not see him eaten nor was Basset eaten. Basset in his long stay with the witch doctor never witnesses a cannibal feast. London imputes cannibalism with unquestioning obedience to colonial ideology.

Fear of Forest and colonial covetousness:

The forest is an unknown to the Eurocentric viewer. It conceals savage, head-hunting-cannibals, and other dreadful things. Forest is perceived as an impediment to colonial trade. According to Deck “, the island is one vast forest, which, clothing the sides of a thousand hills, rises to far off mountains. Through this dim jungle there swarms a hidden people, naked, silent, desperate, treacherous too, and venomous, who, under cover of the forest darkness, kill and are killed, and feast on human flesh.” This paranoid imagination of being eaten by cannibals runs amok in most of the European narratives. The power operates by clearing the forest. The social texts legitimize the act by distributing real and imagined accounts. The material production reason for the hatred for forest is the need to build plantations that could sustain colonial trade. In order to acquire land, the people and the forest are vilified. In *The Red One* Jack London reproduces all the above typical tropes.

Consider this description from *The Red One*.

“But seared deepest of all in Basset’s brain, was the dank and noisome jungle. It actually stank with evil, and it was always twilight. Rarely did a shaft of sunlight penetrate its matted roof a hundred feet overhead. And beneath that roof was an aerial ooze of vegetation, a monstrous, parasitic dripping of decadent life- forms that rooted in death and lived on death. And through all this he drifted, ever pursued by the flitting shadows of the anthropophagi, themselves ghosts of evil that dared not face him in battle but that knew that, soon or late, they would feed on him.” (London, 1916a) (Emphasis added)

The depiction of forest is similar in the descriptions of Deck and London. In the case of London, the Othering of place is even more emphatic. How London views the land from a colonial perspective can be seen in the excerpt below.

“Came the day of the grass lands. Abruptly, as if cloven by the sword of God in the hand of God, the jungle terminated. The edge of it, perpendicular and as black as the infamy of it, was a hundred feet up and down. And, beginning at the edge of it, grew the grass - sweet, soft, tender, pasture grass that would have delighted the eyes and beasts of any husbandman and that extended, on and on, for leagues and leagues of velvet verdure, to the backbone of the great island, the towering mountain range flung up by some ancient earth-cataclysm, serrated and gullied but not yet erased by the erosive tropic rains. But the grass! He had crawled into it a dozen yards, buried his face in it, smelled it, and broken down in a fit of involuntary weeping.” (London, 1916b) (Emphasis added)

The verdant grass immediately appeals to Basset. He sees the presence of such grassland as an act of God. He weeps as a colonizing husbandman. The possibilities of putting the land into best use appear quite alluring and

irresistible. The congruence of dominant ideologies in circulation is evident in a report sent to Queen Victoria. In an 1883 document elaborately titled “Annexation of Islands in the Pacific ocean. Dispatches to His Excellency the Governor and Correspondence. Between the Governments of Victoria and Tasmania on the subject. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by His Excellency’s Command” the following is seen.

“And as soon as civilized Government is extended over these islands in connexion with either of the established Governments of Fiji or New Guinea, as may be most convenient, the rapid commercial development and progress certain to take place in them will speedily secure more than the defrayment of their proportion of the expense of Government; for these islands will become the Australasian Indies, and will yield cotton, coffee, and cocoa-nut oil, sugar, and spices, and all other tropical products in large quantities. The islands in this group are generally very rich in soil and in tropical products, so that, if a possession of Great Britain, and the labour traffic stopped, so as to retain what remains of the native populations on them, they would soon, and for ages to come, become rich sources of tropical wealth to these colonies, as sugar cane is extensively cultivated on them by every native of the group even in his heathen state. For natives they are an industrious hard-working race, living in villages and towns, and like farmers depending on the cultivation and products of the ground for their support their plantation. The islands also grow maize, cotton, coffee, arrowroot, and spices, &c., &c., and all tropical products could be largely produced on them” (Ferres, 1883).

The land, its fertility, people and the produce, all appear as commodities and therefore must be possessed by the colonial power. They have the potential to boost trade for ages to come. For achieving this end, man power is essential. Blackbirding in which the native himself is but a commodity should be stopped because that will deplete the work force. The native then can contribute much more to the colonizer. This line of reasoning pervades all the texts of the time.

The possessive and covetous mind of Europeans is evident by the Subi-a sort of club- displayed in British Museum. This fine piece of work was possessed but its exact origin or identity is unknown. (Burt, 2012). It will not be judgmental per se to state that had Basset managed to bring the exotic sphere to the civilization, it too would have suffered fate of this Subi. It sad destiny would have been remaining as an obscure exhibit in some museum with forgotten origin and identity.



46 This Malaitan sub-i-club was obtained by Alexander Duffield while visiting the Solomons on a Queensland labour-recruiting ship in the early 1880s. Like most Malaitan artefacts obtained by Whitemen in those times, its precise origin and identity were forgotten. (British Museum, Oc+2343, length 79cm)¹³

Fig 2: Subi in British Museum. (Burt, 2015)

Curing of Heads and Head-Hunting

“I would like to have the curing of your head,” Ngurn changed the subject. “It is different from any other head. No devil-devil has a head like it. Besides, I would cure it well. I would take months and months. The moons would come and the moons would go, and the smoke would be very slow, and I should myself gather the materials for the curing smoke. The skin would not wrinkle. It would be as smooth as your skin now.” (London, 1916b)

What is this head curing in the light of modern anthropology?

Solomon Islands are a highly heterogeneous society that practiced ancestral cult and animism before Christian contact. In animism, the spirits, called Mana, of ancestors, enemies, male and female spirits, spirit of snakes, turtles, sharks, and the alike always surround an individual. They have to honor, worship, appease, and revere spirits at all times. The skull is considered as seat of soul. After interring, the skull is retrieved and preserved. Sometimes, the heads of chiefs are also cured for verisimilitude for worship. These were rare and the skulls were the most common objects of veneration. The skull of the dead man is the repository of his Mana. Mana of ancestors brings good fortune. In the case of enemies, the skull is preserved to prevent it from bringing evil to the killer. Even the lower mandibles of slaughtered pigs were preserved in their homes. They believed that the jaws assured abundant food in future to the owner. Different tribes in the Solomon Islands had different spirits to worship. This tradition dates back to prehistory. The colonial market forces played a role in changing the traditional practice of head-curing for ancestral worship. The cured heads became a curiosity for the Europeans. They procured the heads as curios to sell in their homelands. Arming the native with guns and the exchange value accelerated head-hunting to a degree. When sold in European markets, the trope of a savage race was further reinforced. The head-hunting myth was manufactured for the market. Contrary to the putative

noble objective of civilizing the native, the practice was actually expanded for the market. Christian missionaries did not completely erase the ancestor worship. The cult is still latent in the Solomon Islands. Earlier, the missionaries blessed, anointed, and baptized at these skull shrines. The result was a mixture of hybrid Christianity that accommodated pagan elements. Recent anthropology treats head-hunting as a form part of a set of power relationships in which head-hunting plays a fundamental role. "The institutionalized violence associated with head-hunting has no direct archaeological signature. However, in the Roviana case it sits within, supports, and is supported by a political, economic, and symbolic structure that is accessible archaeologically. Our archaeological examination of head-hunting draws on a model in which power or efficacy derived from ancestors is materialized, channeled and circulated through an interconnected set of cultural media (ancestors-skulls-shrines-priests/chiefs-exchange valuables- skulls-ancestors See. Fig. 3)" (Sheppard, 2000)

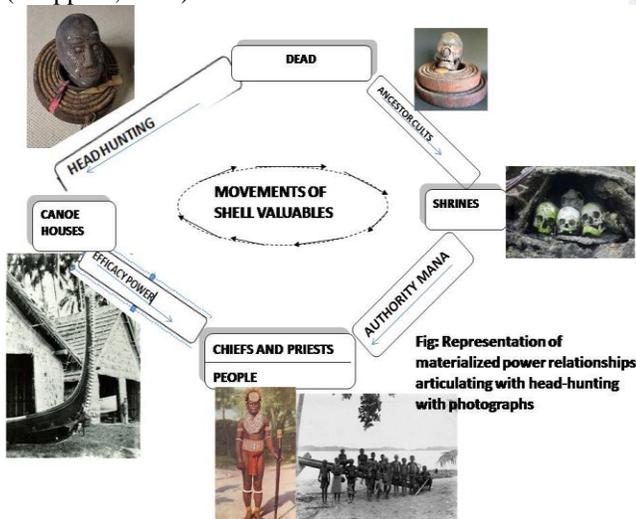


FIG 3: Sheppard's scheme of power relations recreated with added visuals

II. CONCLUSION

The new historicist method of seeing social texts like government reports, judicial accounts, missionary letters, and public lectures in conjunction with literary text is employed in this paper. Literature cannot be autonomous but a subset of prevailing power structure and relations. There is no value judgment made. Jack London proclaimed himself as a socialist. He is known to be on the side of the underdog both in fiction and in real life. Nevertheless, the expressive acts are actually embedded in a intermeshing of material practices. The ideology of the times continually seeks to contain the possibilities of subversion. In the case of the Solomon Islands, it achieves the objective by

discriminating the native, and constructing and sustaining tropes to perpetrate an Otherness to the land, people, and their practices.

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