



Madness of the East: Demystifying the Colonialist Perspective on Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford's *Amok*¹

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Abstract

The colonialist's biased depictions of the East as backward, chaotic and barbaric place are debunked in Edward Said's Orientalism. The exercise of power over the Orient is relentlessly maintained through a set of dichotomies, namely, civilized/savage, reason/emotional and so on. Under the colonialist discourse, the natives are often being associated with negative connotations in both written and spoken colonialist discourses. Hence, the representations of the Orient as savages in the colonialist discourse are in support of the act of colonization in the East. Both Hugh Clifford and Frank Swettenham were British colonial officers based in Peninsula Malaya and they have recorded their experiences in a series of sketches based on the Malay characters they have encountered during their stay in Malaya. Therefore, the present study aims to re-examine the concept of amok and demystify the colonialists' facile generalization of the culture-bound syndrome in the written discourse through Clifford's *In Court and Kampong* and Swettenham's *Malay Sketches*. The amok syndrome is characterized by a sudden violent outburst from a person that is caused by an insult, a cultural phenomenon habitually found in the East. The homogenization of native Malays as prone to the culture-bound syndrome, namely amok, is shown via Clifford's "The Amok of Dato Kaya BijiDerja" and Swettenham's "amok". Consequently, the association of the amok syndrome in the Malay culture creates a stigmatized and biased perception that Malay men are prone to this mental disorder due to the infrequent occurrences of the malady among the non-Malays in the colonialist discourse.

Keywords: Colonialist Discourse, Madness, *Amok*, Culture-Bound Syndrome, Malay Peninsula.

¹*Amok*, or also commonly known as "amuck" is a cultural syndrom, typically afflicted to Malay man who is violently uncontrollable. This involves a sudden mass assault with the intent to murder everyone in sight.