# Shaping an Oil-Dependent Nation: A Petrocultural Study of Muslim Burmat's *Puncak Pertama*

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**Abstract**
As previous studies have shown, the discovery of oil in Brunei in 1929 had a transformative impact on the nation's economy and politics. This paper addresses a critical gap by examining the sociocultural effects of Brunei's transition from a largely agrarian and subsistence economy to an oil rentier economy in order to more comprehensively gauge the local impact of oil. Using a petrocultural framework, Muslim Burmat's Malay-language novel, *Puncak Pertama* (*First Peak*) (1988), will be analysed as the story bears witness to on-the-ground changes in Brunei brought about by this momentous shift. This transition entailed a move from material and embodied to abstracted and mediated relations to land, which effected significant social and cultural repercussions. Additionally, the transition was shaped in large part by British economic and education policies in the 19th century and maintained by the dominant local presence of Western-based multi-national oil companies. As the reading of *Puncak Pertama* will show, the effects of this transition to an oil economy include the loss of local knowledges, practices, and beliefs for Euro-Americanist ideologies, the rise in a rentier mentality as well as the enduring difficulty of diversifying away from an oil-dependent economy.

**Keywords**
Brunei literature; petrofiction and petrocultures, Muslim Burmat; *Puncak Pertama*; oil rentier

## Introduction

The discovery of oil in Brunei in 1929 revitalised the nation from "an economic backwater" (Jones 52) to one of the richest ASEAN countries, ranking second

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only to Singapore in terms of GDP per capita. Its massive oil wealth – said to have made Brunei "so rich as to be indecent" (Horton 91) in the early years of exporting oil – led to the independence of the nation, formerly a British protectorate, in 1983. At the same time, the rich oil reserves steered Brunei away from becoming subsumed into the Malaysian Federation and allowed it to remain self-governing. Brunei's oil revenue has also enabled the implementation of its extensive welfare system which provides its citizens with free education until tertiary level, medical services, exemption from personal income tax, generous subsidies for housing, and other amenities. With a booming oil and gas industry, Brunei has thus far not needed to exploit its pristine rainforests, thus preserving much of its extensive forest cover. This paper examines the sociocultural effects of this drastic transition from a subsistence economy to an oil economy in order to more comprehensively gauge the local impact of oil. As previous studies of Brunei's history with oil have tended to focus on the economic and political impact,[2] this study thus adds to the discussion by contributing a literary and cultural perspective. Such a focus requires paying attention to local historical factors which shape the social and cultural values of oil's place in the nation today, which a global outlook of oil might overlook.

This paper thus adopts a localised and historicising lens to re-examine oil and its impact on Bruneian culture. To do so, Muslim Burmat's Malay-language novel *Puncak Pertama* (*First Peak* [1988]), will be analysed as the story bears witness to on-the-ground changes and impact in Brunei brought about by the momentous shift from a subsistence-based economy to an oil rentier economy. A petrocultural framework will be used, that is, the novel will be studied within the historical context of the nation's growing oil economy shaped in large part by British economic and education policies in the 19th century and maintained by the dominant local presence of Western-based multi-national oil companies. Even as oil helped to fortify a post-independent national identity (wherein the promise of oil endures in a globalising and unevenly developing world), the abstraction of land that its extraction, consumption, and exportation entailed also led to a decimation of local cultures, knowledges, and practices that rely on material and affective interactions with the land. Repercussions include the loss of local knowledges, practices, and beliefs for Euro-Americanist ideologies, the rise in a rentier mentality as well as the enduring difficulty of diversifying away from an oil-dependent economy. To transition away from oil, then, would

[2] See Mark Cleary and Shuang Yann Wong's *Oil, Economic Development and Diversification* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994) and B.A. Hamzah's *The Oil Sultanate: Political History of Oil in Brunei Darussalam* (Seremban: Mawaddah Enterprise, 1991).

necessitate not only an energo-technological shift, but also an unpacking and remaking of the social and cultural values and practices surrounding land and labour.

**Examining local oil stories**

The story of oil in Brunei is an odd and lesser-known one in relation to those that currently dominate studies of petrofiction, petrocultures, and the wider energy humanities. Oil is often tied to capitalistic and exploitative greed in major urban cities (usually in the Global North), leading to uneven distribution and dispossession of resources, revenue and power at the expense of rural areas (which are mostly in the Global South). In other words, the promise of oil is often fulfilled in cities in the former at the expense of becoming a curse in the latter. With accelerating environmental, climate, and planetary crises that intersect with political injustices, these studies have rightly helped to undo the promise of oil by shedding light on typically exploitative roles of extractive industries and economies.[3] Jennifer Wenzel's insightful study of petro-magic-realism in Nigerian oil boom literature, for example, articulates the detrimental "unimagining of national community" (211). Similarly, Stacy Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi's 2021 edited collection "argue[s] for an understanding of oil fiction that recognises the necessary material conditions of its production as well as the always already intertwined phenomena of extractivist regimes and the dispossession of the poor and marginalized" (4). These studies of petrofiction have necessarily continued to uncover the unjust and inequitable foundations of the promise of oil.

Recent petrocultural studies have applied more localised lenses that both add to and challenge universalised Western and Eurocentric notions of energy that tie it to techno-utopian, capitalist, and imperialist impulses (Daggett 7). In Norway, as demonstrated by Sissel Furuseth et al., oil is seen to occupy an ambiguous space within the national imaginary as encapsulated by "Nordicity," which encompasses the Norwegian sense of nature, petroculture, and Nordic gloom. Similarly, Brazil demonstrates an "eco-patriotic" oil story that goes beyond the "dominant historical narrative of the Anthropocene [that] is very much about the rise of European and North American imperialism" (Acker 171). These studies strongly support the need for more localised case studies of oil to avoid "an essentialist and Eurocentric explanation of the Anthropocene [that]

[3] Corbin Hiday's "Petrofiction as Stasis in Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*" in Stacey Balkan and Swaralipi Nandi (eds.) *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere* (University Park: Penn State University, 2021) discusses the false promise of imperial progress.

produces undifferentiated solutions" (Acker 211). This case study on the impact of oil on Brunei seeks to diversify and deepen understandings of the impact of oil beyond and in relation to its global ecological destructiveness and colonial/neocolonial exploitation to show how present-day local sociocultural factors can also reproduce and maintain national dependence on the extraction of oil.

As part of the global oil market,[4] Brunei's extraction, circulation and consumption of oil is undoubtedly complicit in reinforcing the world's dependence on fossil fuel-based energy, exacerbating its uneven development and altering the global climate. However, this does not entirely capture the story of oil in Brunei. Nor can it provide insight as to the social and cultural ramifications of the oil economy on Bruneians. This paper thus focuses on oil stories in Bruneian literature and culture to attend to its local particularities. This includes giving due attention to local citizens' often ambiguous perceptions of the impact of oil, which are rarely explored in favour of characters and voices that are ostensibly critical of the oil economy and the imperial Euro-American powers that shaped and sustain it. As Amitav Ghosh points out in his essay that revisits his foundational 1992 article on "Petrofictions: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," "much of the current writing on [the oil encounter] is not about an encounter at all but about only one side of it: the Western side. In this sense, today's petrofiction has yet to shrug off the burdens of its past" (21). I would argue that petrofiction and petrocultural studies too need to add to the world-systemic scope of oil studies with more localised examinations at individual, community, and national scales.

The localised framework used in this study might elucidate why the fossil fuel-climate change narrative circulating widely in global literary, cultural, and media discourse may not resonate with Bruneians (Fien et al.) who are responsible for 0.025% of greenhouse gas emissions ("CO2 Emissions") and continue to enjoy political stability and a largely preserved rainforest. As Endre Tvinnereim et al. argue, dominant climate change narratives that fixate on framing the climate crisis as a largely technoscientific issue encourages individuals to absolve themselves of responsibility and handing it over instead to governments and multinational oil corporations. In the case of Brunei and its relatively small percentage of emissions, the burden of responsibility – as it seems – should therefore fall on nations with highest emissions and oil-and-gas corporations. Indeed, Brunei's comparatively low emissions has been touted by the co-chair of the Brunei Darussalam National Council on Climate Change

[4] Brunei exports to Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States, and its ASEAN neighbours.

(BNCCC), implicitly curbing the sense of responsibility on the country to decarbonise: "Although Brunei only contributes to about 0.025 percent of the global Green House Gas emissions, we are vulnerable to the changing climate due to our size and location" (Haji Suhaimi 5). Significantly, the Climate Policy Drafting Committee that drafted the resultant national climate change policy (BNCCP) in 2020 also consisted of several local affiliates of multi-national oil companies including Shell, Petronas, and Total E&P (81), hinting at the possible obstructions to plainly pointing out the link between the extractive economy and climate change.

Of course, once the unit of measurement of emissions is changed to per capita, the number jumps drastically to 18.28 tons per capita, rocketing the country's position up to the 8th highest in the world in terms of emissions per person ("CO2 Emissions per Capita"). If this unit of measurement was used instead, the statistics would expose the proportionately high level of emissions in relation to the rest of the world. Furthermore, fueling the notion that Brunei is a low-emissions nation is the notable rebranding of oil-and-gas corporations as "energy" companies, implying a pivot towards decarbonisation and renewable energies. So, through a global perspective of the impact of oil on environment and political unrest, only a relatively tenuous connection can be traced back to the extraction, consumption and export of oil in Brunei. As a corrective, localising the scope of study of the impact of oil would lay bare the social, economic, and cultural effects that are more resonant and impactful to local communities and citizens. This is not to impose the burden of responsibility entirely on citizens. Rather, uncovering these localised impacts would inform and empower them to act in the transition away from fossil fuels.

**Ambiguity in Bruneian oil fiction**

Muslim Burmat's *Puncak Pertama* is a lengthy historical novel written after Brunei's independence. The novel follows the (mis)fortunes of Ahmad, a fisherman husband and father who is forced to bring his family away from the water village, Kampong Ayer. The government has made plans to reclaim their area to build the present-day grand Sultan Omar Ali Saifuddien masjid (mosque), which may be read as a metaphor foreshadowing the struggles and losses that locals would endure as the nation pursued a prosperous and modernised independent identity. Ahmad decides to bring his family to the emerging oil town of Seria after hearing that others have met good prospects in finding work in the growing oil and gas industry. Set in the 1950s to 1980s, the novel also follows the social and political changes in the country as it gears towards independence, further establishing its Muslim, Malay, and monarchical identity as symbolised by

the building of the masjid. Ahmad finds well-paying work at foreign-owned company, South China Construction, contracted to supply services for the dominant oil-and-gas company, Syarikat Minyak Shell. After finding out that South China Construction has been underpaying its employees, the workers including Ahmad unionise to demand better pay. As talks morph into unrest and rebellion, Ahmad is made redundant and he returns to the struggle of finding a place to work and live for himself and his family.

Notably, *Puncak Pertama* has been compared to the more well-known petrofictional text, Abdul Rahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* (1984) (Smith 682). *Puncak Pertama* similarly exhibits anxieties about the fast-growing oil-and-gas industry even as it recognises the hopes of a better life that oil wealth and the oil-and-gas industry offered. It is significant that *Puncak Pertama* ends on an ambiguous note, reflecting the uncertainties of a growing economic dependence on oil: Ahmad ultimately fails to achieve his dream to own a piece of land to live on and he and his wife, Urai, end up back at Kampong Ayer to live with another fisherman's family. In the final passage, Urai says to Ahmad defeatedly: "It looks like we've failed at everything," to which Ahmad responds, "No […] we've won in our hearts and our efforts. So, we've succeeded thus far" (Burmat 363). Ahmad's story appears to be symbolic of the increasing disconnect between locals and their land encouraged by an abstract and immaterial notion of a more prosperous future. This disconnect appears to be symptomatic of the renting out of local land by the oil rentier economy to foreign oil companies for profit.

Many Bruneian writers during this period, including Muslim Burmat, benefited from the nation's increasing prosperity as they were often recipients of government, and therefore oil-funded, scholarships to pursue undergraduate and graduate studies abroad, mostly in the United Kingdom (Ampuan Hj Brahim and Kathrina 205). Their writings are thus imbued with their own ambiguous feelings, as both observer and citizen, towards the quick amassing of oil wealth and an awareness of the material, social and cultural negotiations that need to take place in the shift to an oil rentier economy. Indeed, other writers of this period such as Mohd. Salleh Abd. Latiff (1947–) and Norsiah Gapar (1952–), both of whom were also educated in the United Kingdom, produced similarly ambiguous works: the former wrote *Meniti Hasrat* (*Following Dreams* [1982]), which both warns of the potential moral and cultural decay brought into the country by Western oil expatriates as well as looks towards socioeconomic prosperity brought about by oil. The latter wrote *Pengabdian* (*Servitude* [1987]), which won the national Language and Literature prize in Bureau's annual literary competition (where *Puncak Pertama* received the second place). *Pengabdian* extols the virtues of a Muslim Malay female doctor, who manages to adhere to her religious and cultural

beliefs despite being educated in the West, and ultimately succumbs to a fatal disease on the day of the nation's independence. Like *Puncak Pertama*, both *Meniti Hasrat* and *Pengabdian* are both hopeful and wary of the impact of future oil prosperity in the nation.

**Local impact of a growing oil rentier economy**

In investigating Brunei's economic shift, it is useful to refer to insight from rentier state theories, which I will later relate to increasing abstraction of land and loss of local sociocultural knowledges and practices. Introduced by Hossein Mahdavy and developed initially by Hazem Beblawi and Giacomo Luciani in their studies on oil-rich countries in the Persian Gulf, rentier state theories pertain to the social and political outcomes of economies based mainly on rent paid by foreign individuals or governments for access to its land and natural resources (as opposed to revenue generated through labour). As argued by Beblawi, rentier economies have considerable bearing on the social and political lives of citizens, including the cultivation of a rentier mentality (as opposed to productive mentality), which is a type of behavior that "represents a break with the work-reward relation. Reward is now divorced from work, risk, and/or creativeness" ("'Rentier States' Revisited" 206). Another common effect of rentier states is that citizens become "politically acquiescent," (Hertog 6) as a result of the distribution of wealth and privilege from the state.

Several studies have sought to examine these ideas within the Bruneian context and most are in general agreement with Beblawi and Luciani's arguments. For instance, Aurel Croissant observes that the "government uses oil and gas revenue to provide material incentives in exchange for political loyalty," (20) resulting in little (at least, recorded) resistance to government authority. J. R. Minnis's study of the lack of success in technical and vocational education to boost employment also demonstrated the hypothesis that rentier economies produce rentier mentalities due to the disconnect in the work-wage causation. These effects have detrimental consequences including growing youth unemployment[5] and the persistent difficulty of diversifying the economy away from oil and gas.[6]

Pertinent for this paper is the fact that *Puncak Pertama* too raises concerns about growing stereotypes of Brunei Malays being lazy, complacent, and risk-averse. *Puncak Pertama*'s ambiguous portrayal of the growing oil and gas industry

[5] See Siti Fatimahwati Pehin Musa and Khairul Hidayatullah Basir, "Youth Unemployment and the Rentier Economy in Brunei: Lessons from Norway", *'Abqari Journal*, Vol. 20, no. 2, Nov 2019, 1-22.

[6] See Mark Cleary and Shuang Yann Wong's *Oil, Economic Development and Diversification*.

suggests some internal awareness of the risks of an oil rentier economy, particularly the increasing abstraction of land, which was not perhaps sufficiently accorded to them in rentier state studies. While out fishing in the sea, Ahmad and his friends, Matyasin and Dolah, reflect on the growing shift towards an oil economy:

> 'What kind of work would be better [than working in an office]?' Dolah asked.
>
> 'Being independent. Being self-employed. Gaining rewards from your own sweat and labor like fishing and farming,' Matyasin replied. 'But people just like to earn money without hard work and physical labor nowadays.' (175)

Matyasin's comment reflects the increasing break in the work-reward causation observed by rentier mentality theories, pointing towards a harmful effect of the move away from physical labor to office-based work in the transition towards an oil economy. Additionally, he tellingly connects this thought to a group of ducks he sees nearby, asserting, "These ducks need to be protected, too. Humans are always needing something from them but they don't reciprocate enough, feed them enough" (175). He points out the environmental damage in the loss in direct interaction with the natural resources upon which the oil economy still relies. The connection that Matyasin makes here underscores the unequal exchanges in extractive economies that exhaust the land and its ecosystems. Importantly, this observation is made while they are out on the water, highlighting the formative relationship between the locals and their environment through direct and material interaction.

The urban-rural difference between Matyasin, a fisherman who lives in a rural part of Brunei, and Ahmad, who now works on a ship and has grown used to the urban comforts of the capital city and the burgeoning oil town of Seria, is also being highlighted here. Matyasin is a rising political activist, which surprises Ahmad and Dolah who think that a fisherman "didn't need to" be involved in political matters (173). Notably, his ideas are shown to be shaped by the close relationship he has with the land and sea, enabling him to see the linkages between the injustices inflicted on the environment and the capitalist and extractivist injustices brought about by the international oil companies. Ahmad, on the other hand, is only focused on himself and his family's survival, unable to see that Matyasin's concerns about "organization, politics, neocolonialism, feudalism, imperialism" (173) are connected to his own struggles. Ahmad's disconnect from his surroundings is underscored when Matyasin has to remind him and Dolah that even though it seems like "in Brunei now, people aren't struggling as much," they need to look beyond the cities and into "the villages,

the outskirts [where] many are suffering" (173). In contrast to Matyasin's determined declarations, Ahmad remains mostly quiet during this exchange. At times, he agrees with Matyasin's sentiments, and at others he seems conflicted due to the fact that he has "enslaved [him]self to become a lowly worker" in the industry for the sake of his family (175). His compromise and silence appear to foreshadow the rentier mentality of political acquiescence and risk aversion. However, *Puncak Pertama* also helps to contextualise these traits by including in the story's timeline the historic period of uncertainty before Brunei's period of oil prosperity.[7] By understanding Ahmad's family's struggles exacerbated by Brunei's own struggle for independence as well as their hopes enhanced by an emerging and uncertain oil and gas industry, the need for stability through political acquiescence and risk aversion becomes clear. Ahmad's concerns for his family are repeated throughout the novel as he mulls again and again over the "good and the bad for him and his family to stay [or to leave]" (1). What rentier mentality theory would later identify as typical traits of a rentier economy is shown here to be borne out of socioeconomic struggle and insecurity.

**Brunei's pre-oil culture: Deep ties to land and sea**

Matyasin's criticism and Ahmad's hesitation towards the oil and gas industry can be better understood when the long history of fishing and agriculture in Brunei is considered.[8] One need only look at Brunei-Malay proverbs, place names, and local myths and folklore to understand the deep, formative relationships between local communities and land in Brunei before the growth of the oil economy.[9] People did not only live off the land and rivers but their values and practices were also informed by natural occurrences and events. In *Puncak Pertama*, after some time working as a labourer for South China Construction laying a pipeline into the ground, Ahmad confesses that, "their old life at sea felt so far away and

[7] For a historical overview of the early years of the oil industry marked by several fruitless exploration and prospecting attempts, see Jatswan S. Sidhu, "Brunei's Oil Industry, 1906-1929: The Early Years," *SEJARAH: Jurnal Jabatan Sejarah Universiti Malaya*, Vol. 8, 2000, 141-154.

[8] See Asbol bin Haji Mail, "Peralihan Dari Ekonomi Tradisional ke Ekonomi Perusahaan Minyak 1929-1941" and Nani Suryani Haji Abu Bakar, "A Historical Overview of Brunei's Economy Before the Discovery of Oil, and Some Subsequent Issues," *Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 7, 2006/2007, 3-16, 89-103.

[9] See Yabit Alas, "Environmental Awareness Education through Proverbs in Brunei Darussalam," *SOSIOHUMANIKA: Jurnal Pendidikan Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan*, Vol. 10, no. 2, 2017, 139-150; Maslin Jukim, *Legenda: "Di Mana Tu ah?" Siri 1* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Maslin Haji Jukim/Jukin, 2021); F. Merlin Franco and Misa Juliana Minggu, "When the Seeds Sprout, the Hornbills Hatch: Understanding the Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Ibans of Brunei Darussalam on Hornbills," *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine*, Vol. 15, September 2019.

unconnected to their current life. Now, they rarely touch the water except when they miss the sea" (103). The relationship between locals, the sea, and land is not only one built for financial security but is also a deeply affective one. It seems to be a reciprocal one too: for Ahmad's wife, Urai, moving from Kampong Ayer to land to farm would have been a more secure option than moving to the unknown Seria for a job that is not guaranteed. From their previous experience as farmers, she knows that "the land available is fertile, with nearby water sources and easy access via river and road […] and it is guaranteed that they would be able to build a home there on their own land" (3). In light of Urai's reasoning, that Ahmad decides to go to Seria instead in the beginning of the novel foreshadows their ultimate homelessness in a new economy that divorces the locals from their land.

As evidenced by previous studies,[10] such deep knowledge about land and sea are and have been in decline mainly due to a shift away from agriculture and fishing towards office-based work in growing urban areas. This shift is largely due to the British Residency system established in 1906, whereby a British Resident was appointed to advise the Sultan on all matters except for those concerning religion. The residency introduced a new economic system based on natural resource-based capitalism that would allow Brunei to compete on a more international level to replace the subsistence and agricultural economic system. In line with this shift, the British Resident also encouraged the residents of Kampong Ayer to move on land to build a new political and economic centre (Pg. Khairul Rijal 96). The significant growth and eventual dominance of the oil and gas industry also had no small part to play in this shift, "drowning other economic activities such as agriculture, fishing, the rubber industry, coal, and cutch. […] Fishing and agriculture should have been invested in for the sake of the country's economy in the long-term" (Asbol 10). The oil rentier economy thus drew people away from the land and rivers, transforming them into abstract income-producing sites where resources are extracted through mechanised forms. Without material and reciprocal interactions with the land, local knowledges, and practices are further eroded and the wage-work causation further obscured. This becomes clear when Ahmad observes the development of the Seria oil field:

> Everywhere on the beach, pipelines were laid where liquid gas would eventually flow and be burned at the end, pump jacks were pumping up and down on the coastline. Pipelines were becoming longer and many were laid here and there, dividing the small town that was becoming more and more populated. Ahmad watched these rapid new developments

[10] See the studies mentioned in footnotes 5 and 6.

> with amazement and pride. He was proud that his country was becoming more prosperous and more jobs were becoming available, which meant that his labour was still needed. But a part of him was also questioning whether labourers like him were getting wages that truly compensated their work. (91)

Notably, oil and its infrastructure seem to come alive in this passage, seeming to replace living beings, as they appear to grow in size (the pipelines becoming longer) and become more dynamic – the liquid gas flowing and burning, and the pump jacks moving up and down. They appear to increasingly invade Seria, emphasised by the image of the infrastructure splitting the town into several sections. It is significant that this image evokes in Ahmad an abstract sense of pride even when the "prosperity" that the developments seem to signify is undercut by the low pay that he and his fellow labourers receive. The disconnect between Ahmad and the land that he now sees is emphasised by the prosperity of the nation that he observes but is yet to enjoy himself. The unfulfilled promise here seems to hint at the compromises locals would have to make with an economy dependent on oil rent: while economic prosperity may be had, it would be reliant on the world market – symbolised by the ending of the novel where Ahmad and Urai become homeless and dependent on the kindness of their old friends to take them in – and locals would have to navigate sociocultural changes upon increasing internationalisation of their land.

**Environmental and cultural impact of the British Residency and international oil companies**

The British and European-based oil companies that established the industry in Brunei brought with them Western forms of knowledge and practices that led to the devaluing of local expertise especially in relation to the environment. The devaluing, for instance, of water-based living in the city centre was seen as an obstruction to the nation's well-being when the British Resident insisted that the "country will not, and cannot, ever really advance until the capital is on dry land" (Pg. Khairul Rijal 96). Several examples can be found in G. C. Harper's collection of accounts in *The Discovery and Development of the Seria Oilfield* (1975) where local knowledge of the environment is ignored. For instance, when Seria was largely a mangrove swamp and home to a great number of crocodiles, the Brunei Shell Petroleum Company (BSP) sought to catch them with metal hooks baited with buffalo meat. When this method failed, "the wise ones nodded their heads and informed the trappers that Borneo people never used metal hooks to bait crocodiles. The accepted method was, apparently, to use bamboo hooks […] baited with decomposed chicken meat" (38). Such an oversight highlights the

exclusion of locals who would have managed to advise properly in the first place. Besides the exclusion of local expertise, local forms of knowledges were also undervalued or unacknowledged. When the BSP finally hired a crocodile catcher, they treated his methods with "a great deal of scepticism" as they involved "magic, gold and chicken bait ingredients" (39). Needless to say, Mat Yassin the crocodile catcher, was successful, demonstrating an intimate knowledge of the land foreign to the Western expatriates.

Similar condescension towards the expertise of local and indigenous peoples could be seen in the process of developing other parts of the oil town of Seria such as expat housing. In a 1955 *Town and Country Planning* report, the writer bemoans,

> [T]he training of Asian workmen [is] in the use of modern equipment. The Dyaks and Malays who comprise the bulk of the labour force in Seria, although quite adaptable and of good physique, are not accustomed to 'Western' methods of building houses. The Dyaks come from remote villages where they live in 'Kadjang' huts and perhaps cultivate smallholdings for their own needs. […] They bring with them plenty of enthusiasm but little knowledge. ("A New Oilfields Town" 340)

The tone of the report seems to blame the Dyaks and Malays for their lack of knowledge in Western methods of building without acknowledging their expertise in building in tropical equatorial climates. The report also suggests that little consultation with the locals and indigenous peoples was done concerning building over land that was mainly a swamp only a few decades ago. This devaluing of local expertise continues its legacy in modern urban planning as argued by Noor Hasharina Hassan et al. (2022). Studying the history of the development of an industrial area in Brunei, the researchers traced similarities between urban planning during the time of the British Residency and the presently common practice of strip-clearing. In the former, the government "sought to systematically transform Brunei culturally and physically into a modern nation-state after its image" (118). The disregard for Brunei's unique identity is repeated in the latter, where land "is often treated as a blank canvas" and "designs are often based on abstract concepts with little consideration for existing culture and history" (118). The present-day local reproduction of this practice is evidence of the on-going repercussions of devaluing local knowledges and practices.

The international oil companies operating in Brunei can also be seen to contribute to the devaluing of local and indigenous expertise. This is made clear in *Puncak Pertama* with the unequal pay between the expats and the local and indigenous workers. Moreover, the benefits of the growing petro-modernisation

of life in Brunei appears to be limited to expats. At one point, Ahmad observes that once the flow of gas through the pipelines was established, it relieved the burden off Shell expat housewives' shoulders by providing gas directly to their kitchens to enable them to cook more easily (70). This is in contrast to the living conditions of workers like Ahmad, who have been provided housing at the edges of the town close to the jungle where "not only mosquitoes bred but where a lot of their neighbors threw empty tins and bottles into the nearby ditch, which helped to breed more mosquitoes" (18).

The cumulative effect of being treated unequally and being devalued contributes to the sense of inferiority Ahmad feels in relation to the Western expats and companies who come to Brunei for oil. It is therefore understandable why he becomes hopeful regarding oil's potential to bring prosperity to the nation – and by extension to his family – despite the drawback of deteriorating local knowledges and practices in the process. This was a time when the newly oil-rich Bruneian government started to send students to the United Kingdom to pursue further studies. Although this would lead to further draining of local knowledge and expertise as more youths are being educated and trained to support the growing oil and gas economy, being awarded a scholarship would become a goal for most local citizens. The government scholarships even become a source of contention between Ahmad and his daughter Hamidah, who becomes pregnant out of wedlock by a foreign Shell employee: he worries that his grandchild will not be able to get the chance for a fully-funded scholarship if they were not a Bruneian citizen (99). Hamidah's sinful pre-marital relations, especially with a non-Bruneian, can be seen as a metaphor for the cultural and material negotiations that must take place in the internationalisation of Brunei's economy. This means that while the nation itself can afford to be self-governing with a booming oil economy, there will be certain cultural and material losses that must be suffered too.

One of the intercultural negotiations that can be seen to have taken place because of the growing presence of international oil companies is in terms of language and education. As shown by Gary M. Jones, there was a "pressing need to learn English" for Bruneians who were working with mainly English-speaking oil workers (53). Hence, the first English language classes in Brunei began in 1928 and have since evolved into a mainstay of the current bilingual Malay-English education system. While the bilingual education system in Brunei has certainly made significant contribution to the economic and national prosperity through producing English- and Malay-fluent workers, there are still long-held debates on the tension between prioritising the Malay language as a way of preserving Malay national identity, traditions and culture, and the need for fluency in English for

"international connectedness" (Noor Azam and McLellan 491). Indeed, His Majesty the Sultan of Brunei Darussalam himself delivered a *titah* (speech) urging local academic institutions not "to change or blur our national aspirations in empowering the Malay Language as our mother tongue and official language" (Noor Azam and McLellan 491) when developing English-language training programs. While Brunei would most likely have integrated the English language into its education system even without the encouragement of the oil and gas industry, the international oil companies' presence does seem to play a significant part in the design of the curriculum. In 2018, for example, the Energy Industry Competency Framework (EICF) was published to highlight the collaboration between the "Institute of Brunei Technical Education (IBTE), Ministry of Education, Ministry of Energy and Industry (MEI) and Oil and Gas Industries […] to ensure a constant supply of local skilled workforce in Oil and Gas sectors" (2). The high employment rate of 93.2% resulting from the implementation of the EICF would certainly see more youths heading towards oil and gas career paths.

Of course, the appeal of working in the oil and gas industry had already existed much earlier, as Ahmad's choice shows in *Puncak Pertama*. Even then, Bruneians recognised that their children could "reap greater rewards through education and government or oil-related employment than they could as farmers or fishermen," (Jones 53) which means that more and more of the younger generation were leaving behind not only the traditional jobs of fishing and farming but also the knowledge and ways of living associated with those jobs. The impact of this knowledge and expertise drain can still be felt today as Brunei struggles to diversify its economy (Roslee and Hartini 275). In a recent review of the economic and social progress in Brunei, it was reported that while economic diversification had been a national priority for more than two decades, the country's growth rate was still "well below the targeted annual rate of 5 to 6 per cent" that was set to achieve the goal of being in the top 10 ranking on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index. In the agricultural sector, for instance, while the country has seen some growth, there are still "many reported challenges [including] lack of local farmers," (272) which points to the drastic loss in expertise since the growth of the oil and gas industry. This present-day drainage of local knowledges and practices in non-oil and gas sectors illustrates the economic as well as sociocultural detriment wrought by over-investing and over-relying on the extraction of oil. Belying the promise of oil then, are not only economic stagnation and ecological devastation but also the loss of valuable ecological knowledge and more harmonious relations with this particular environment.

## Conclusion

As the climate crisis grows in urgency, ramping up the need for decarbonisation particularly in countries with high emissions, there is a need to identify localised obstacles to an effective energy transition. Brunei can be seen to have taken steps to limiting carbon emissions through various campaigns across government and corporate sectors, however these rarely critically address the connection between Brunei's emissions, its politico-economic dependence on the oil-and-gas industry, and the attendant petroculture fortifying this dependence.

Through a contextualised reading of Muslim Burmat's *Puncak Pertama*, this paper has attempted to trace the ways in which that dependence has its roots in the British Residency period and the growth of the national oil and gas industry, particularly the decline and devaluing of local expertise and practices to do with the land and seas through the transition away from a subsistence-based economy to a rentier state economy, land development policies, and the development of an education system that caters to the fortification of the oil and gas industry. Moreover, the localised focus used in this study allows for identification of feelings of ambiguity regarding the growing oil economy and prosperity portrayed by the fictional characters as well as the writers at the time – ambiguity that could partly explain the enduring local attachment to oil. This ambiguity would perhaps have been overlooked or neglected in Global North-oriented petrocultural readings that view most instances of oil extraction as mainly destructive and exploitative. For an effective energy transition away from fossil fuels, then, it is necessary to assess the sociocultural values attached directly or indirectly to the place of oil in a nation like Brunei.

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