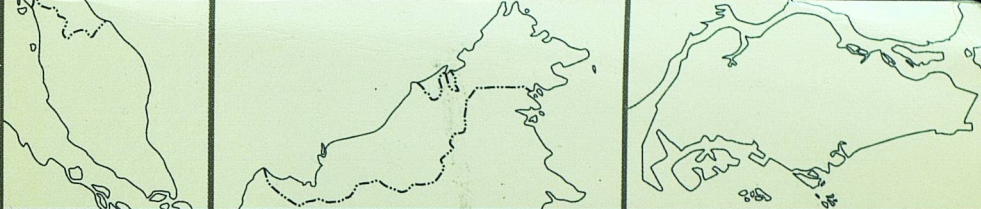


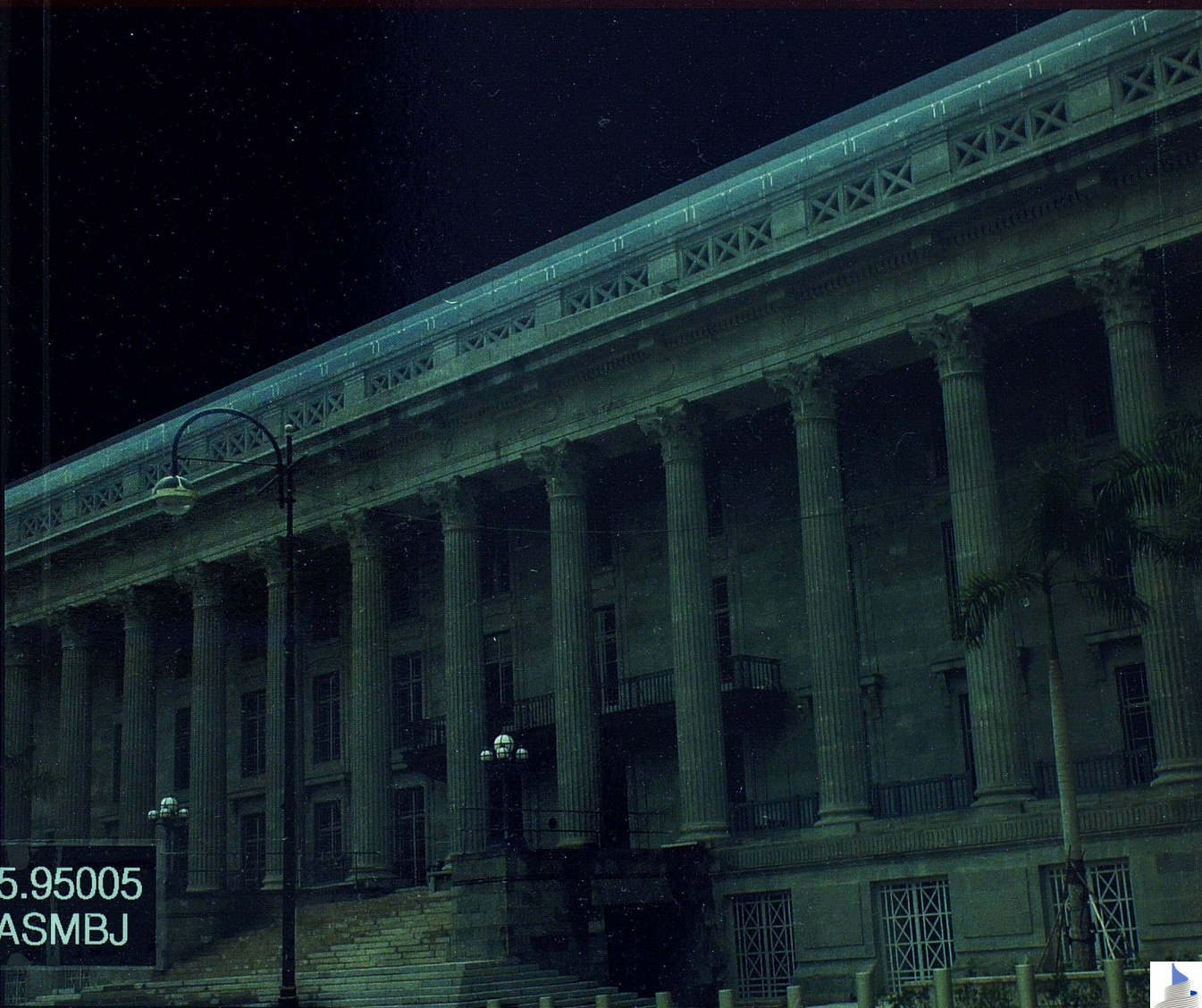
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# Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society



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Singapore's City Hall Building, site of Japan's formal surrender ending the Pacific War on 12 September 1945



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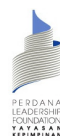
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 110 John Munroe Hall  
 Newark, DE 19716 USA  
 Email: [pswhite@udel.edu](mailto:pswhite@udel.edu)

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### **The Cover**

Each issue of the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* features on the cover a picture of a building or location that is a significant part of the national heritage of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

Constructed in 1929 and known as the Municipal Building until 1951, Singapore's City Hall building is located on St Andrew's Road facing Singapore's Padang. It was the site of Japan's formal surrender on 12 September 1945 and of Singapore's proclamation of self-government in 1959. The Singapore government gazetted it as a National Monument in 1992. In 2015 the building was renovated to house Singapore's national art collection and, along with the former Supreme Court building adjacent to it, became the country's National Gallery.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

At the end of 2014 Dr Cheah Boon Kheng stepped down as editor of the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JMBRAS) after serving in that position for nearly 17 years. Largely as a result of the high professional standards he maintained for the journal, JMBRAS has been accepted for inclusion in Elsevier's Scopus citation index starting in 2015. Scopus will track citations of JMBRAS articles in other publications and is used both by the *Times Higher Education* and Quacquarelli Symonds in calculating world university rankings.

In recent years JMBRAS has made strides in adjusting to modern standards of scholarly communication. Since 2010 university libraries have been able to offer electronic access to current issues of JMBRAS through Project MUSE, a digital distribution service operated by Johns Hopkins University Press. In addition, all back numbers of the journal, starting with the first issue of the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1878, are now available in digital format through JSTOR. Readers from 112 countries in every continent except Antarctica downloaded JMBRAS articles through JSTOR in 2014, and Project MUSE reported 1,749 article downloads for the year.

Every scholarly journal has a distinct personality. While editors set parameters that position them in terms of time, place and subject matter, journals are shaped by the authors who write for them and the people who read them. Those that survive over long periods of time pass through several generations of readers, writers and editors, and their character inevitably changes. JMBRAS is now in its 138th year of publication.

British officials posted to outlying districts of Malaya in the early years of British intervention, a process that began in 1874, entered a world that was little known in Europe. They explored the physical environment of Malaya and the history, society and culture of the people among whom they worked, and reported their discoveries in official correspondence, talks delivered before learned societies, and in some cases in articles submitted to the *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*. The way they approached their material has a distinctly old-fashioned air about it and their work is burdened by the opprobrium now attached to colonial rule, but much of the information they gathered would otherwise be irretrievably lost, and this material remains of considerable value to scholars and local residents alike. The journal dealt primarily with the parts of the Malay world that were in one way or another under British colonial administration: the Straits Settlements (basically Penang, Melaka and Singapore), the nine Malay states in the peninsula (Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Negri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor and Trengganu), Sarawak, Brunei and North Borneo (now Sabah). These territories remain the focus of JMBRAS today.

Elsewhere in Asia, branches of the Royal Asiatic Society were set up in Korea (1900), Hong Kong (1847–59; revived in 1959), Shanghai (the North China Branch, 1847–1952; revived in 2006), India (where there were branches in Calcutta, Bombay, Bangalore, Madras, and Bihar), Sri Lanka (1845) and Japan (the Asiatic Society of Japan, 1872). Many of these organizations published journals, and several maintained libraries with significant collections of books and manuscripts.

In Britain's other major Southeast Asian colony, Burma, a Research Society was formed in 1910 and began publishing a journal the following year. The society was dissolved in 1980, and the journal ceased publication. Similar organizations, and comparable publications, appeared elsewhere in the region. The Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde (presently called in English the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies) was established in 1851 and published the *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* [Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia] until 2013, when the journal and the Institute's monographs were taken over by the Dutch commercial publisher Brill. The *École française d'Extrême-Orient* was founded in 1900 and had its base in Hanoi until Vietnam became independent, when it shifted to France. The first issue of its *Bulletin* appeared in 1901. The Siam Society and its journal were born in 1904, and the society remains an important locus for Thai studies in Bangkok.

Society members receive the journals published by MBRAS and its counterparts as part of their membership. Generally published in English, French or Dutch, these publications formerly catered mainly to expatriates. Following independence, retired civil servants made up a significant part of the readership but as they aged and passed away, the journals found fresh audiences in the burgeoning university sector in Asia, and among amateur and professional scholars interested in the region. The journals acquired additional readers when employees of international NGOs and volunteers with groups such as the Peace Corps began seeking information on the peoples and cultures of the region, but they have struggled to cast off the impression that they are colonial relics.

The Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society retains a variant of the name it has used for more than a century, but it has no formal ties with Britain's Royal Asiatic Society, and its governing council consists entirely of citizens or permanent residents of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. As a major Malaysian journal with international distribution and a worldwide readership, JMBRAS is an important outlet for work by scholars in Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, and for students of these countries who are based elsewhere.

The MBRAS Council has invited me to succeed Dr Cheah as editor of JMBRAS. In accepting the position, I will become the journal's 25th editor. My goal is to increase the number of articles published in each issue and broaden the scope of the journal while maintaining Dr Cheah's high standards. In working toward this end, I will be assisted by an enlarged editorial team. Dr Cheah has agreed to act as Editor Emeritus. Dr Loh Wei Leng and Dr Abu Talib Ahmad will serve as Associate Editors, Datin Dr Kobkua Suwanathat-Pian as Book Review Editor, and Dr Liew Khai Khiun as Associate Book Review Editor. In addition, a number of younger scholars have agreed to join the journal as Assistant Editors: Dr Sandra Khor Manickam, Dr Arunima Datta, Dr Rachel Leow, Dr Kirsty Walker, Dr Koh Sin Yee, Dr Ang Ming Chee, and Jason Sze Chieh Ng. With their assistance I hope to maintain the journal as a major home for scholarship relating to Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei.

Dr Paul H. Kratoska  
 Editor, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*



## ‘I am Ali Wallace’: The Malay Assistant of Alfred Russel Wallace

JOHN VAN WYHE\* AND GERRELL M. DRAWHORN\*\*

*The famous naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace collected natural history specimens throughout Southeast Asia from 1854–1862. One of the least known of the players in Wallace’s story is his Malay assistant Ali, from Sarawak. This article combines the surviving evidence to bring Ali and his role in the expedition out of the shadows. Several corrections to traditional accounts are emphasized; these include the fact that Ali was not always a collecting assistant, but at first a cook; Ali did not travel with Wallace for the rest of his voyage, but left him for an entire year; and Ali may have collected the majority of Wallace’s bird specimens. In addition, Ali’s wages and itinerary are reconstructed for the first time. It is concluded that Ali made a major contribution to Wallace’s scientific understanding of the Malay archipelago, not just with new ornithological discoveries like Wallace’s Standard Wing (*Semioptera wallacii*), but by his contributions of knowledge.*

### Introduction

Alfred Russel Wallace’s eight-year expedition in the Malay archipelago is one of the classic tales from the history of science. As a professional specimen collector, Wallace and teams of assistants procured 125,660 natural history specimens between 1854 and 1862. In addition to discovering hundreds of new species of insects, birds and mammals, Wallace also identified the zoological discontinuity now known as the Wallace Line and, independently of Charles Darwin, formulated a theory of evolution by natural selection.

Wallace’s story has been recounted thousands of times in books, articles and documentaries. Another character in this story who is usually mentioned is his Malay assistant known only as Ali. He accompanied Wallace from December 1855 in Sarawak, Borneo until February 1862 when Wallace returned to Britain from Singapore. Wallace clearly developed a stronger attachment for and trust in Ali than any of his other assistants. Yet Ali remains a shadowy and unknown character in the story of Wallace in the Malay archipelago. This article attempts to shed as much light as possible on Ali by bringing together all the known records of him in Wallace’s

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\* John van Wyhe (BA, MA, PhD (Cantab)) is a historian of science and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Biological Sciences and a Fellow of Tembusu College at the National University of Singapore, 14 Science Drive 4 Singapore 117543. Email: dbsjmvw@nus.edu.sg.

\*\* Gerrell M. Drawhorn (AB, MA, PhD) is a biological anthropologist and Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Sacramento State University.

publications, journals, notebooks and letters and other sources. By doing so, Wallace's own work is revealed in further detail.

Wallace left England for the Malay archipelago in March 1854, taking with him a teenage London lad as a collecting assistant, Charles Martin Allen (1839–92).<sup>1</sup> They arrived in Singapore on 18 April 1854. Allen assisted Wallace with collecting birds and insects in Singapore, Pulau Ubin and then at Malacca and Sarawak. As Wallace's letters make clear, he was exasperated with Allen's carelessness, untidiness and failure to improve.

## Sarawak, Borneo

In October 1854 Wallace and Allen sailed to the territory of Sarawak then ruled by the charismatic Englishman, Sir James Brooke, known as the White Rajah of Sarawak. Wallace and Allen collected in various parts of Sarawak before heading north to a mining works at Si Munjon in March 1855. It was here that Wallace encountered orangutans. Wallace and Allen returned by separate routes to Kuching, the capital of Sarawak, in early December 1855.

Shortly after Christmas 1855 Wallace first mentions Ali (although retrospectively): 'A few days afterwards I returned to the [Serambu] mountain with Charles and a Malay boy named Ali.'<sup>2</sup> Writing in his autobiography many years later, Wallace described Ali:

When I was at Sarawak in 1855 I engaged a Malay boy named Ali as a personal servant, and also to help me to learn the Malay language by the necessity of constant communication with him. He was attentive and clean, and could cook very well. He soon learnt to shoot birds, to skin them properly, and latterly even to put up the skins very neatly. Of course he was a good boatman, as are all Malays, and in all the difficulties or dangers of our journeys he was quite undisturbed and ready to do anything required of him. He accompanied me through all my travels, sometimes alone, but more frequently with several others, and was then very useful in teaching them their duties, as he soon became well acquainted with my wants and habits.<sup>3</sup>

As will be shown below, Ali did not actually accompany Wallace through all his travels. The term 'boy' does not necessarily refer to Ali's age; the term meant servant in the colonial east.<sup>4</sup> Ali is very often referred to by modern commentators as if he was a collecting assistant from the start. However, as Wallace here states, and as the

<sup>1</sup> On Allen, see Rookmaaker and van Wyhe (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Wallace (1869: 1, 132).

<sup>3</sup> Wallace (1905: 1, 383).

<sup>4</sup> Thomson (1865: 32).

contemporary evidence substantiates, Ali was at first a cook and servant, and only gradually became a collecting assistant. Eventually he would become Wallace's chief assistant or 'head man'.

The ethnography of Sarawak peoples is very complex.<sup>5</sup> It is not known exactly which group of people Ali came from. We cannot be sure that what Wallace meant by calling him 'Malay' would be exactly the same as current usage. It does mean that we can exclude peoples distinct enough for Wallace to have called by a different name, such as the indigenous Dayak. To be called 'Malay' by Wallace it is likely that Ali was from the groups of Muslims living in various small villages of houses on stilts along the Sarawak River (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> He may also have come from the village of Santubong where Wallace stayed in February 1855. Ali was perhaps about 15 years old, dark, short of stature with black hair and brown eyes. He would have grown up on and around boats. He would have spoken the local dialect of Malay and was probably unable to read or write.

A contemporary English resident described the dress of the Malays at Sarawak. The clothes worn by the Malay men and women are very graceful, and suitable to the climate. The men use a handkerchief of some dark colour, edged with gold lace or fringe, twisted into a turban, round their heads — loose trousers, of striped cotton or silk, according to the wealth of the

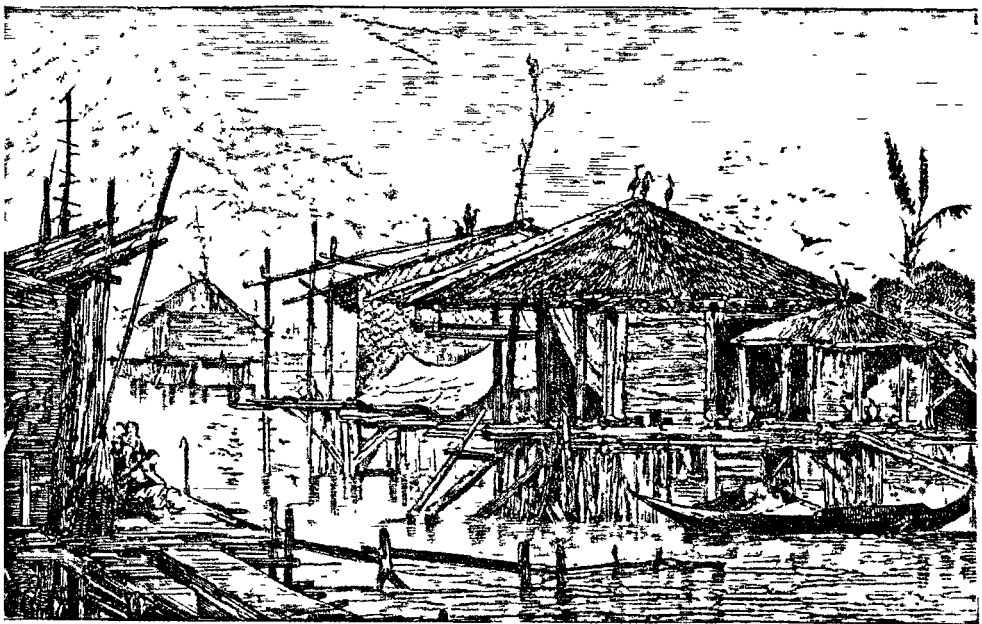


FIG. 1. 'A village in Borneo' (Source: Kingston 1871: 550)

<sup>5</sup> King (1993).

wearer — a white calico or silk jacket — and a sarong or long scarf, sewn together at the ends, which the Malay women weave in pretty checks or tartans, gathered in graceful folds round the waist — and, sticking up from this last, is the *cris*, without which no Malay gentleman would consider himself dressed, though the poorer sort sometimes wear a *parang* or long knife, for cutting jungle, in its stead. They use neither shoes nor stockings.<sup>7</sup>

## Singapore

On 10 February 1856 Wallace departed forever from Sarawak. Charles Allen chose to stay behind and try to become a teacher at the Christian mission. Wallace wrote to his sister about the loss of Allen: 'I must now try and teach a China boy to collect and pin insects.'<sup>8</sup> This underlines the fact that Ali was not doing such duties. Wallace took Ali with him to Singapore. We have no information about what Wallace and Ali might have discussed. Was Ali prepared to leave his homeland for several years or even forever? We don't know.

They arrived at Singapore on 17 February 1856 and stayed for 96 days. We have no record of what Ali thought of the bustling and exotic *entrepôt* of Singapore. It was far bigger and more complex than anything he had ever seen before. But as the *lingua franca* on the streets was Malay, he would have had little difficulty communicating. We know from a recollection by Wallace (mentioned below) that at some point during their stay Ali saw a live tiger. This was likely the tiger captured alive on Bukit Timah on 10 May and put on public display.<sup>9</sup> This and possibly other tiger sightings formed the basis of some tall tales Ali would later tell in the Moluccas.

## Lombok

Wallace's next voyage was from Singapore to the island of Lombok, stopping en route at Bali for two days. Wallace noted that he took with him 'my two servants, Ali, the Malay lad from Borneo, and Manuel [Fernandez], a Portuguese of Malacca accustomed to bird-skinning'.<sup>10</sup> They arrived at Ampanam, a trading town on the west coast of Lombok, on 17 June 1856. Wallace was assisted by a resident English merchant named Joseph Carter. On 22 June Wallace noted in his *Journal* that together with Carter and 'Mr V. (the dutchman) & my men Manuel & Ali with other servants to the hills at the N. side of the bay for a picnic. Similar country, numerous rivers – Pretty place – A few birds & insects – Home evening.'<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> McDougall (1854: 37–8).

<sup>8</sup> Wallace to F. Sims, 20 Feb. 1856, in van Wyhe and Rookmaaker (2013: 58).

<sup>9</sup> *Straits Times*, 13 May 1856, p. 5. See van Wyhe (2013: 142–4).

<sup>10</sup> Wallace (1869: 1, 242). A 'plant collector' named Emanuel Fernandez from Malacca was mentioned by the botanist William Griffith (1847: xxix–xxx).

<sup>11</sup> *Journal* 1, 7. Linnean Society of London MS178a.

Once the collecting operations got under way, Fernandez shot and skinned birds but, as far as Wallace recorded, the young Ali cooked, collected wood and fetched water. A few days later, Wallace went south to a sheltered harbour called Labuan Tring where he stayed in a house built on six-foot stilts owned by a Malay man named Inchi Daud from Amboyna. Wallace wrote later:

One evening I heard Manuel, Ali, and a Malay man whispering earnestly together outside the door, and could distinguish various allusions to 'krisses', throat-cutting, heads, &c. &c. At length Manuel came in, looking very solemn and frightened, and said to me in English, 'Sir—must take care;—no safe here;—want cut throat.'<sup>12</sup>

A rumour was abroad that the local Rajah had 'just sent down an order to the village that they were to get a certain number of heads for an offering in the temples to secure a good crop of paddy'. It should be noted that Fernandez, as Wallace takes care to indicate, spoke in English, perhaps because it was a language unintelligible to everyone else around. Because of the rumour, Fernandez wanted Wallace to accompany him out shooting birds and 'Ali was afraid to go and look for firewood without a companion, and would not even fetch water from the well a few yards behind the house unless armed with an enormous spear.'<sup>13</sup>

In August Wallace and his team together with another Westerner, named Clunies Ross, set off to visit the village of Coupang in the interior of the island. Ali and Fernandez followed later in the day on foot, guiding the packhorse with Wallace's supplies. When leaving the following day, Wallace wished to ask their host for 'a horse for Ali, who was lame'.<sup>14</sup> When they departed, Wallace noted 'I gave Ali my horse & started on foot, but a little way on he mounted behind Mr Ross' groom & we got home very well though rather hot & tired.'<sup>15</sup>

Near the end of August Wallace wrote in his *Journal* that Fernandez had left his employ: 'I was now therefore again left alone to work at all the various branches of Natural History in which I feel interested.' Note that Wallace says he was thus alone in collecting and preparing. Yet it is at this point that we hear for the first time of Ali helping in the operations. 'However Ali has learnt to skin a little & I must make him work exclusively at it when I get to a productive ornithological region.'<sup>16</sup> Thus it seems that Ali first contributed to the specimen assembly line, if only tentatively, in Lombok.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace (1869: 1, 252). Almost identical to the original *Journal* passage.

<sup>13</sup> *Journal* 1, 13. Linnean Society of London MS178a. On Clunies Ross see van Wyhe (2013: 153).

<sup>14</sup> Wallace (1869: 1, 262).

<sup>15</sup> *Journal* 1, 24. Linnean Society of London MS178a.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*: 29.

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