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Mapping the Land of Headhunters: János Xántus in Borneo[1]

Abstract

This article studies the travel account of János Xántus on Borneo, presenting the island based on his journey made in 1870. The paper examines how Xántus provides both Hungarian scientists and armchair travelers with fascinating descriptions of the island, often switching between different writing styles and using various tropes of travel writing. Borneo is portrayed not only as unfamiliar but also as uncivilized and particularly un-European. While providing accounts of this little-know area, Xántus does not simply involve binaries of Self and the Other but also reveals his views on European colonization and domination in the region, in particular, he contrasts English and Dutch systems of authority and control, favoring the former and criticizing the latter. Besides the discussion of European influence, the paper also deals with Xántus' portrayal of the Dayak people. At the end of the article, a translation of excerpts from Xántus' publication is provided, discussing Dayak (headhunting) traditions, the situation of Dayak women, slavery, and local customs.
Keywords: János Xántus, travelogue, Hungarian, Borneo, East Asiatic Expedition, Dayak people, colonization

Introduction

János Xántus (1825-1894) travelled the world extensively during the second half of the nineteenth century and popularized his journeys in the East and West in numerous publications. As a result, he came to be one of the best known Hungarian travel writers while he may also be regarded as one of the most contentious ones. In his books, reports, and articles he in-

troduced Hungarians to little-known regions and peoples both in the Americas and Asia, familiarized readers with other cultures and traditions, while also often advertising his own (sometimes invented or exaggerated) achievements within the same publications. His work as a collector, ethnographer, and naturalist deserves the highest critical acclaim, his travel accounts were prominent sources for Hungarians who wanted to learn about distant countries; however, one has to be cautious before taking everything for granted in Xántus' publications.

In terms of the travel accounts of Xántus, most critical attention has been devoted to his books written on the United States, especially due to the fact that they are among those few Hungarian travelogues that are also available in English translation. Less attention has been paid to his descriptions of Mexico, and even less has been written about his publications resulting from his participation in the joint Austro-Hungarian East Asiatic Expedition. This article attempts to make up for this "neglect" and studies Xántus' travel account on Borneo, focusing on the Hungarian's writing style, the use of tropes of travel writing, the author's attitude towards European influence/domination in the region, and in general, the sometimes complicated depiction of the Self and the Other.

As we will see in the overview of Xántus' life, by the time he visited Borneo in 1870 he was already a well-established naturalist, an experienced collector, and popular travel writer. This made his participation in the Expedition possible and also resulted in a logically structured and well-written travelogue. Xántus used numerous foreign sources to be able to introduce not only the flora and fauna of the island but also its history, geography, and population. Borneo is presented as an exotic land: unfamiliar, often uncivilized, and particularly un-European. Xántus expresses a genuine interest in Borneo in his accounts: he writes extensively about nature, the Dayak people, their society and traditions, and the social history of the island. Meanwhile, sometimes openly, in other cases indirectly, he shares his ideas on issues of colonization, race, and his own Hungarian/European identity.

As a result of the multi-faceted nature of Xántus' interests and purposes of the journey in Borneo, the Hungarian mixes different subgenres of travel writing, alternates between diverse attitudes and writing styles: sometimes he poses as a collector, a scientist, in other cases the personality of the traveler comes to the foreground, while in yet another shift he writes as an explorer, a hunter or an ethnographer. This results in a fascinating account of Borneo that is fundamentally sympathetic towards the

diverse population of the island, and uses Hungary as a reference point to bring the unfamiliar closer to the reading audience. However, when contrasting the Self and the Other, Xántus also assumes the (Western) European attitude and establishes binaries of superiority and inferiority, center and periphery, identifying more with the British than the Dutch colonizers' point of view. With his work and publication, he was mapping the land of Borneo in a scientific sense, collecting and sharing both information and artifacts; at the same time, he was also mapping, making sense of the little-known region for Hungarian armchair travelers who were probably looking not only for information of a scholarly nature but also for adventure, exotic tales of the headhunters, and fascinating descriptions of the land.

Life and Writings

The life of Xántus has been studied and introduced in several publications both in Hungary and abroad (see list of examples in the Bibliography), therefore, here I do not wish to repeat these findings in detail. I provide only a brief overview necessary to understand Xántus' role and position in the East-Asiatic Expedition and the reasons for certain types of depiction of Borneo in his accounts. The thoroughly researched work of Henry Miller Madden serves as the basis for this overview; his work is important not only because he included new information on the Hungarian's life but also because it revealed that Xántus often used the works of others without proper referencing when publishing his accounts on the Americas and often made up stories to support his claims and popularize his work.

The love of travel was probably implanted in Xántus at an early age: his father was employed by the Széchenyi family as solicitor, land agent, and steward for its estates at Csokonya; as Count István Széchenyi visited Western Europe at the time of Xántus' birth and childhood, Kubassek claims that this might have influenced Xántus' future interest in travel.[2] Széchenyi "believed that travel was crucial for a country undergoing the process of reform and in need of developmental examples"[3]; England and the United States could serve as such examples and Xántus also traveled in these countries and wrote about the US in his first major publications. However, his journeys were not primarily for the purposes of study: when the Revolution broke out in Hungary, Xántus joined the national guard and fought in the artillery and later in the infantry. In 1849, he was cap-

tured by the Austrians, was imprisoned and later impressed into an Austrian regiment. His mother bought his release but instead of returning home, he joined émigrés in Dresden, which led to his second arrest. He escaped, however, and sailed for America in 1851. The experience of the revolution and its aftermath clearly influenced Xántus' attitude towards Austrian authority that decades later also affected his participation in the joint Austro-Hungarian Expedition.

After his arrival in the United States, Xántus struggled with starting a new life and often took menial jobs; he became a naturalized citizen in 1855 and joined the US army (under an assumed name), which proved to be a clever choice not only in terms of his employment but also because it launched Xántus' scientific career as a collector (that he benefited from after his return to Hungary). Xántus came into contact with the Smithsonian Institution and sent his collections from Fort Tejon and later on Cabo San Lucas (Southern California, part of Mexico). He established a good reputation and was praised for his work repeatedly.[4] It was also at this time, as we will see below, that he published two books on his life and journeys in the Americas that brought him fame in Hungary as well.

In 1861, with his assignment ending in Mexico, he returned to Hungary. He was already known in the country especially as a result of his specimens sent to the National Museum and his writings that were already available in his motherland. Although he was "lionized in a number of ways"[5] in 1862 Xántus left Hungary again and returned to the United States. With the help of Spencer F. Baird, Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian, Xántus was appointed US consul at Manzanillo (state of Colima, on the West coast of Mexico). However, as Zwinger claims, "Xántus was a disaster as a consul. He assumed his duties January 1, 1863, recognized the rebel chief of a local tribe who kidnapped an American citizen, paid the demanded ransom, and promptly got sacked by the State Department, who closed the consulate that August."[6] Xántus stayed in Mexico for a few months but due to both personal and historical reasons, he returned to Hungary permanently.

After his homecoming, he was involved in various (scientific) undertakings and took various positions; while still at Colima, Xántus was chosen to be the director of the Zoological Garden in Budapest (he was also one of the founders and had been the honorary president) and the offer was revived after his return. The garden opened in August 1866 with Xántus as director. In 1868 he joined the Austro-Hungarian East Asiatic Expedition (see below), in 1872 he became the keeper of the ethnograph-

ical section of the National Museum, and in 1873 the director of the section.

Based on his journeys in both the Americas and Asia, and his work as a collector, Xántus published dozens of articles and reports. He became famous in his home country primarily as a result of his two books detailing his experience in the Americas.[7] The first of these was *Xantus János levelei Éjszakamerikából* [Letters of János Xantus from North America] published in 1858, while the second book was published in 1860 under the title *Utazás Kalifornia déli részeiben* [Travels in Southern California]. The former was not intended for publication originally, it included fabrications and falsities, while the latter provides an account of an expedition that proved to be an invention and most of it was plagiarized from various sources (see Madden). Xántus also published extensively in newspapers and magazines on topics related to his journeys. His writings appeared in *Győri Közlöny* [Győr Gazette], *Pesti Hírnök* [Pest Messenger], *Magyar Sajtó* [Hungarian Press], *Természetbarátok és Vadászok Évkönyve* [Yearbook of Hunters and Friends of Nature], *Hazánk s a Külföld* [Hungary and Foreign Lands], *Földrajzi Közlemények* [Geographical Review], *Vadász- és Versenylap* [Hunting and Racing Magazine], and *Budapesti Szemle* [Budapest Review] among others.[8]

When discussing the legacy of Xántus as a travel writer, besides highlighting his spectacular achievements, we must note and consider the shortcomings of his character also. It seems that he often invented circumstances and built his works on the texts of others without adequate referencing to advance his own career and popularize his work and journeys. Madden, when studying accounts on the Americas, provided a detailed list of often verbatim correspondence between Xántus' work and publications of various European and American explorers and writers. Many times Xántus changed the original sources to fit his own purposes,[9] in other cases he claimed authorship to texts he did not write, and used sources without proper reference. These findings prompt us to be more cautious when reading other texts of Xántus, including the ones written concerning Borneo, and a close examination similar to that of Madden and the American accounts would be necessary regarding later publications as well.

At the same time, we should not judge Xántus' writing style by today's standards only and besides his shortcomings, we have to acknowledge his unique achievements (as a naturalist, collector, etc.) and influence as a travel writer. Also, he already wrote differently in his accounts on Bor-

neo: as we will see, he starts with the detailed introduction of the sources he used to prepare for the journey and the publication – this is something he "forgot about" in his American accounts. Just as he was an important figure in terms of the development of the US and Mexican image in Hungary, he was pioneering in terms of Hungarian descriptions of Borneo (and the wider region) as well. As Kubassek claims, "the most prosperous period of Xántus' East Asian travels is connected to the island of Borneo […] Xántus made observations of pioneering significance in Borneo and sent home such a valuable ethnographic collection that granted a European rank to the Hungarian National Museum."[10] His work in Borneo certainly deserves critical attention and acclaim.

The Austro-Hungarian East Asiatic Expedition

After the Compromise of 1867, Vienna was looking for possibilities of economic expansion in more distant regions and thus initiated and conducted an expedition of a primarily commercial nature to South-East Asia (China, Japan, Indochina, Malay archipelago) between 1868 and 1870.[11] The government was looking for opportunities to establish commercial contacts in countries with rich resources in a region that was becoming more and more accessible with the building of the Suez Canal drawing to a close. Two steamships carried mostly financial and economic experts (commissioned by the ministries in Vienna and Hungary) while the Austrians also sent naturalists under the leadership of Karl Scherzel. Hungarians urged that a Hungarian collector should also travel with the expedition to enrich the collections of museums at home. Xántus was an experienced and well-known collector at this time, whose popularity was also boosted by his own publications detailing his similar work in North America. Thus, he seemed to be the right choice for this undertaking and with the withdrawal of a Hungarian economist from the journey, he could also participate in the Expedition, not as a commercial agent but as someone sent specifically for the purposes of collection.[12]

Xántus wanted to join the Expedition in Singapore and his journey to this location was already rich in experience: he traveled to Alexandria, Suez, Aden and reached Singapore by way of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), where he spent three weeks collecting. He continued his work in Bangkok before actually joining the expedition heading to China and Japan. What happened afterwards well fits the life of Xántus: he had an argument with the

Austrian scientists who wanted to emphasize the Austrian nature of the undertaking and intended to send most of the collected items to museums in Vienna. Thus, fueled both by his scientific zeal and patriotism (as well as his experience with Austrians after 1849) Xántus parted from the expedition at the end of 1869 and continued his work alone. Just as in North America, he collected vigorously and provided Hungarian institutions with rich collections. He traveled to and worked in Borneo and Java and returned to Hungary in November 1870. Besides his outstanding collections,[13] similarly to his experience in North America, Xántus published extensively, contributing to the understanding of so far little-known countries and peoples in Hungary.

With the aim of presenting the findings of his journeys in Asia, Xántus published several articles in Hungarian newspapers and periodicals (see the table below). In this paper, as a case study, I provide a brief analysis of his accounts of journeys in Borneo published in *Földrajzi Közlemények*, focusing on Xántus' views on the question of European colonization and the portrayal of the Dayak people.

Title of article	Newspaper/Magazine	Date
"Néhány hét Ceylon szigetén" [A Few Weeks on the Island of Ceylon]	*Budapesti Szemle*	1877
"Úti emlékek Szingapúr és vidékéről" [Memories of a Journey in Singapore and its Surroundings]	*Győri Közlöny*	1879
"Úti emlékek Luzon szigetéről" [Memories of a Journey from the Island of Luzon]	*Földrajzi Közlemények*	1886
"Úti jegyzetek Sziámból" [Travel Notes from Siam]	*Földrajzi Közlemények*	1887
"Borneó szigetén 1870-ben tett utazásomról" [Notes on my Journey to the Island of Borneo in 1870]	*Földrajzi Közlemények*	1880
"Borneó szigetén. Sarawak, jan. 29. 1870" [On the Island of Borneo, Sarawak, Jan. 29, 1870)]	*Vadász- és Versenylap*	1870

Xántus' publications presenting his travels and work in East Asia

Xántus' Notes on Borneo[14]

Xántus read his report of his journey and assignment in Borneo at two meetings of the Hungarian Geographical Society in 1880 and it was published in *Földrajzi Közlemények* afterwards. The account is a fascinating text that introduces Hungarians to an unfamiliar land with people and traditions they had little knowledge of at the time. Xántus introduces diverse topics in a well-structured text: he offers an overview of foreign publications on the island, describes its political geography, history, his travels, and also touches upon topics of clothing, eating traditions, racial, gender and even legal issues. He focuses especially on Sarawak and the portrayal of that state that clearly influences his view of Borneo in general (see Appendix 1 for the map of Borneo). He pays special attention to two groups: the Borneo Malays and the Dayak people (presenting their language, clothes, social organization, life, economy, etc.), while, as we will see in the translated excerpts, he also highlights questions of women's role and position within society, slavery, and social hierarchy.

Xántus' account provides not only descriptive sections of the island and its inhabitants but also reveals the Hungarian's attitude towards European influence and colonization in the region, especially in terms of the question of Dutch and English dominance. Thus, this topic is discussed below in detail. Xántus writes differently than in his American accounts, he is a much more experienced writer by 1880: as we will see, he establishes his authority early in the text and provides clear justification for the significance of his report. Xántus writes as a scientist and explorer when visiting so far unmapped territories and waterways, such sections (e.g. pages 168 and 194) do not lack the "monarch of all I survey trope" emphasized by Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal work on travel writing.[15] When presenting the different people living in Borneo, he writes as an ethnographer while in other cases he poses as a traveler. Xántus' past record in travel writing prompts us to be cautious when reading about exciting adventures and unique achievements but one has to acknowledge that Xántus by this time writes in a much more mature style and avoids many of the mistakes of his texts written decades before. The influence of foreign sources is unquestionable but he acknowledges such an impact and even criticizes some of the former texts. He made preparations and due to his already established reputation and experience he is more aware of expectations and traditions of the genre.

Xántus establishes his authority as a writer and reliable source of information at the beginning of his text and also explains the significance of the region and Borneo for Hungarian readers. East Asia is attractive on its own as no collections had been sent to Hungary from this region before, but Borneo is even more special and should attract even more attention in Xántus' view. This is underlined by the fact that Xántus purposefully left Borneo as his last destination in Asia: "I did this so that if anything happens to me in Borneo at least the collections made in other countries would be safe, at the same time, this way I did not have to hurry on this interesting island and thus I could spend more time with the exploration of its ethnography and natural history" (153). Xántus emphasizes and repeats several times that this is a largely unknown and unexplored territory, information is rarely available, especially for Hungarians, and there have been only a few travelers visiting the island, thus justifying both his presence and the need for his publication.

Xántus attempts to establish a context that portrays him as a reliable reporter on Borneo. He uses various strategies to strengthen his position as a writer: he emphasizes the time spent on collecting information even before reaching the island, he claims to have numerous letters of recommendation, and says that he even learnt the Malay language: "I have acquired all the literature related to Borneo, I have met the agents of the Sultan of Brunei and the Rajah of Sarawak and have also received letters of recommendation from them [...] and I have also learnt the Malay language so that I can make myself understood at least" (153). This attitude is crucial in travel writing as authors have to show that readers can trust them and believe what they report on places that cannot be reached by armchair travelers.

In line with these aims, Xántus provides an overview of foreign books on Borneo that indicates that he has prepared thoroughly for the journey, while the small number and questionable authority of the mentioned books also serves as a justification for the need to publish his own work: "The number of all the modern literature currently available for us is so low that it can be counted on our fingers only" (154). He introduces Dutch, French, German, Italian, and English language books, on the one hand, to show his position as a well-prepared scientist, while on the other hand, he also provides criticism in several cases. He claims that former sources are unreliable and/or not detailed enough. He is especially critical of the Dutch texts and praises the English books, which already foreshadows his attitude towards the presence of these two nations in the region.

He includes many of the topics and issues detailed in the mentioned foreign works as well and lists several publications that focus solely on Sarawak (one written by the Rajah himself). The latter is especially interesting as Xántus also decided to focus on Sarawak and probably relied extensively on these English books that clearly influenced his view of the island and its inhabitants.

The Question of European Domination/Colonization: The British vs. the Dutch

Xántus, besides the detailed description of the island, also deals, both directly and indirectly, with politics and the question of European influence on the island. He focuses especially on the relationship between the English and the Dutch (Borneo was divided into British and Dutch spheres of influence, comprising of the north and south respectively), introduces agreements between the two nations (relating to Asia and Africa) and claims that Hungarian geography books are oftentimes wrong concerning what belongs to the Dutch in Borneo and emphasizes that "there is great confusion in Europe regarding the archipelago" in general. The most striking feature of Xántus's report is his highly negative view of the Dutch and their colonial presence and his praising attitude of English dominance.

The harsh treatment of the Dutch is clearly discernible early on in the text, criticizing them for the low quality and misleading style of the their publications. The low regard for Dutch presence is seen later on as well and negative comments on Dutch colonization pop up throughout the text.

> Due to her well-known greed, Holland wanted to acquire the entire archipelago, however, up to this day she does not actually control anything but a part of Celebes and Java, which was returned to her by the English in a well-organized and pacified way. Holland, with the exception of Java and a part of Celebes, has only as much territory in the archipelago that has her army, and thus the independent states of Borneo are just as independent today as Holland herself; they know nothing about it in Borneo that any of the states there would be the vassals of the Dutch, to the contrary, Holland is paying (considering local circumstances) a large amount of tax for its commercial rights for every state (155).

While Xántus is very critical of the Dutch, he praises English presence as already foreshadowed by the above quotation.

English and Dutch colonialism is often contrasted directly, the English presented as "the good colonizers," with "good colonial institutions," and the Dutch representing the failure of European dominance in the region. Xántus clearly favors the English and supports their system of control, identifying with the English point of view (probably also encountered in his readings on Borneo).

> In Borneo two states have been founded by English subjects that receive English patronage and recognition and are destined to bring entire Borneo and Celebes under English influence and English civilization in the next few decades, which will undoubtedly be a great luck and profit for the benefit of civilization because although Holland has achieved great, moreover, extraordinary results in Java in terms of finances, success was achieved by means of the iron rod, absolute tyranny, and the ruthless treading upon all human rights, and is maintained the same way even today, while England brings in to all its colonies the English self-government, shares its freedoms with the conquered people and although it forces upon them her products and dresses the naked citizens in the cloths of Manchester – she also gives them good schools, pays for work in cash, and does not exclude anyone from the benefits of the state due to their color, religion or nationality (156).

While the Dutch "come and go" on the island without being able to solidify their power, in Xántus' point of view, real progress will come to the island with the English. This is reminiscent of the Hungarian's description of Mexican progress that depended greatly on the influence of the Northern neighbor and English commercial interests (Venkovits 2011). The contrast between the two nations is clear in terms of their reception and success as well: "The Dutch otherwise have not really established any noticeable colonization in Borneo up to this point, they face the antipathy of the native populace and blackmail the people in alliance with the Sultan, they themselves decide the price of everything, and do not allow foreigners into the country, not even natural scientists" (159). This is directly contrasted with English success in the region: "there are already more than 50 thousand people living," on Labuan island (off the coast of Borneo, also under English control at the time), "immigration is continuous and it seems that in a short time there will be such a European colony as in Singapore or Hong Kong" (159).

As already mentioned, Xántus stayed mostly in Sarawak and traveled extensively from there. The most detailed descriptions are thus provided of this state and the English influence on the Hungarian's view of the island is even more striking from this place. The first impression of Sarawak is mostly concerned with nature and the unique and unfamiliar flora and fauna of the area. Soon, however, Xántus switches to tell the history of the state. Interestingly, the historical overview starts only in the nineteenth century with the arrival of "our hero" Sir James Brooke, an Englishman (161). Brooke received the governorship of Sarawak in 1841 and Xántus presents him as a gentleman who alone started and maintained a dynasty in Borneo. "Brooke this way came to control the entire country, which in terms of its size is larger than many kingdoms but in terms of its productivity probably one of the richest countries in the world" (162). The Dutch, writes Xántus, supported every rebellion that was aimed at removing Brooke (162).

Brooke is presented as the leader of a civilizing mission, carrying the white man's burden with the objective of changing the barbaric customs of the locals, including the regulation of headhunting (163). Xántus is clearly supportive of Brooke and he sees his system as an efficient one that "Europeanizes" the local conditions; the superiority of the European (English in particular) system is clearly discernible as it is seen that only a handful of Europeans are capable of "regulating" the uncivilized masses: "It is the task of these 14 European men to keep under control the entire empire, and to carry out the wish of the Rajah, by force if necessary, against hundreds of thousands of unruly wild men unfamiliar with the law, who are always belligerent and of unmatched bravery" (165).

Xántus illustrates the success of British colonization with the great transformations taking place under British rule. Just like in his Mexican accounts, progress and civilization come from Anglo-Saxon influence that serves as a guarantee for improvement. Before, for example, Sarawak city was nothing but a "few dirty villages in which the miserable palm and reed huts were built on wooden legs, i.e. piles, so that the sluggish and lazy people might throw their garbage and dirt straight from the room to under the house through a hole to avoid any unnecessary movement" (165). With the British, transformation and development are visible and clearly supported by Xántus himself: "recently the city has gone through enormous changes as the Rajah has built a so called government house," (166) while schools, storage houses, etc. are also available now. The Ra-

jah brings in European (English) civilization in legal matters as well (see p. 170) and the maps are correct only if drawn by the British (192).

Why is Xántus so supportive of British colonization and why does he treat the Dutch so harshly? This is due to several factors. On the one hand, Xántus used mostly English books as his sources and this could influence his view of the island and provided him with a point of view that he could also build his narrative on. On the other hand, he spent most time in Sarawak (controlled by an Englishman) and clearly enjoyed the support and help of the government as emphasized by Xántus himself throughout his report (see for example p. 167). Thus what he saw was clearly influenced by politics and the local government officials largely determined what Xántus could see and visit. At the same time, this attitude might be a reflection of Xántus' generally supportive and overtly positive view of Anglo-Saxons that is visible in his earlier accounts as well, including his descriptions of Mexico (and its relationship to the United States).[16] Such an approach might also be a reflection of a Reform age mentality with England often seen as a model for modernization, progress, etc. for Hungary and other nations as well.

The Dayak People of Borneo

Xántus shows genuine interest in the population of Borneo, especially the social organization and traditions of the Dayak people. Just as he tried to establish his authority and reliability in terms of general knowledge and preparedness regarding the island, he posed as a trustworthy source on information concerning the population as well. He emphasizes his personal contacts with the people living in Borneo, showing that his information is not solely based on the records of other people: "I established personal contacts not only with the Malays but also with the native people of the island, the Dayaks, whom I have visited at their own fires and with whom I lived together under one roof for a long time […]" (159-60). He also stresses that the report on the population is "the result of direct experience and the perception of a Hungarian man of the conditions of this little-known country and its peoples."

Xántus divides the population of Borneo into Malay, Dayak, and Chinese groups (162-164) and describes the first two in more detail in his account. In general, he expresses his sympathy towards these groups and finds their life and traditions fascinating but, as already indicated, a belief

in European (especially English) superiority is obvious and paramount. While the Dayaks, for example, are presented as exotic, brave, "well-grown and handsome," they are depicted as un-European, thus necessarily primitive, uncivilized, and barbaric. Xántus was especially interested in the Dayak people and their (headhunting) traditions (the excerpts selected for translation also deal with them). He mentions this group several times, either as passing references when talking about the island in general, or separately detailing various issues related to this group: their physical characteristics, language, houses, dressing, social organization, weapons, economy, etc.

Xántus claims that visiting the Dayak people was the most important part of his assignment: "After finishing my work in Sarawak and its surroundings, came the most important part of my mission, which was about acquiring all ethnographic objects from the areas inhabited by the Dayak people in the interior of the country, as well as the animals that can be found there, especially the giant monkeys living in the area, the so-called orangutans" (185). He also believes that Hungarians would especially be interested in this group and again, he distinguishes himself from earlier writers and poses as an authoritative source: "I have perceived and experienced a lot of things differently from the above mentioned writers, and in every respect where I have found their statements corresponding to reality and fact, my description will be the same as theirs; because it is not my habit at all to contradict other people even at the price of truth only to appear as if saying something original" (200-201).

Xántus visits those Dayak tribes that support the government and thus where he can enjoy the patronage and protection of the authorities. The first mention of the Dayak people, thus the first encounter of Hungarian readers with this group, is rather favorable, while their image is also closely connected to the headhunter culture and the tradition of smoking heads - this is seen as exotic and fascinating from the point of view of the ethnographer but is also perceived as barbaric.

The Dayak people are claimed to have stayed with their patriarchal traditions and their main occupation is warfare, as well illustrated by their "excellent ancient custom, i.e. cutting down the head of the enemy in war" and "smoking it just as ham is smoked" (163). As Xántus writes, the Dayak people are "undisputable members" of the Malay race and at the same time they are the most uncivilized and wildest (201). As for their physical characteristics, the Hungarian notes the following:

> The Dayak is a perfect Malay in terms of his color as well, except that its darker with a strong tone, one could even say it is completely brown. Their eyes are a bit slanted, their nose is rolled up as that of a bulldog, the cheekbone is protruding to a small extent and they have no hair on their face and body. Otherwise the Dayak is more beautiful than the Malay in many respects (201).

Their physical appearance is described as strong and masculine and as a result of the latter Xántus believes them to be more trustworthy. Xántus also writes about their clothing and building traditions, social hierarchy, and just as in his earlier accounts, he writes about women separately, expressing not only his interest but sympathy as well (see the translation below).

At the same time, although sympathetic towards the Dayak people in general, Xántus portrays them as primitive. This is not only shown by their uncivilized traditions but by such things as their (lack of) furniture (205) or even their primitive language "that is not capable of expressing various notions and thus these can be explained only with long descriptions and hand gestures" (201). When the aboriginal culture clashes with English civilization, the latter is perceived as superior and the subjugation of the former seems to be in order. This is clearly visible when discussing the achievements of Brooke, for example, his success in restricting headhunting when not at war. A sense of European superiority is also visible when describing the Dayak populace as childish (see for example page 170 or 198). As opposed to this, Xántus often poses as a hero and claims to be perceived by the Dayaks as a celebrity, especially for his great skill in killing orangutans (195).

Conclusion

Xántus recorded his experience in Borneo in a fascinating report of his travels and work on the island as a collector. Due to his wide-ranging interest and multifaceted purposes of his journey, he combines different writing personas in his account of this island that Hungarians were largely unfamiliar with. Due to his special assignment as a collector, he mapped the island (at least parts of it) both for Hungarian museums and armchair travelers; due to a temporary assignment, he could pose as an explorer mapping the unknown regions of the island (192-94); as an experienced travel writer, he introduced politics, social issues, and his journey itself;

as a naturalist, he described flora and fauna; while also sometimes writing as an ethnographer, presenting the unique traditions and customs of the Dayaks and other inhabitants of the island of Borneo.

Just as all travel accounts, Xántus' account of Borneo abounds in comparisons between the Self and the Other. As Carl Thompson writes, travel itself is a "negotiation between self and other that is brought about by movement in space" and "all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed."[17] Hungary serves as a constant reference point, comparisons with Lake Balaton or the river Tisza help to bring the unfamiliar closer to the reading audience, help them understand and imagine this far-away land. The Self, however, also meant the assumption of a foreign identity and with it a superior point of view. This manifested itself in his case especially in the unconditional support of English colonization, domination that was seen as beneficial for Borneo (unlike Dutch control). If the English leave (for example when a mine is abandoned), nature takes over civilization again in Xántus' text: "there was no sign whatsoever of the former bridges, we had to cut bamboo everywhere […] the former mine […] was almost completely covered by forest and we haven't found a single wood from the several hundred houses that stood there years ago, we saw a few bricks and piles of stone only here and there, the remains of former furnaces and fireplaces" (191).

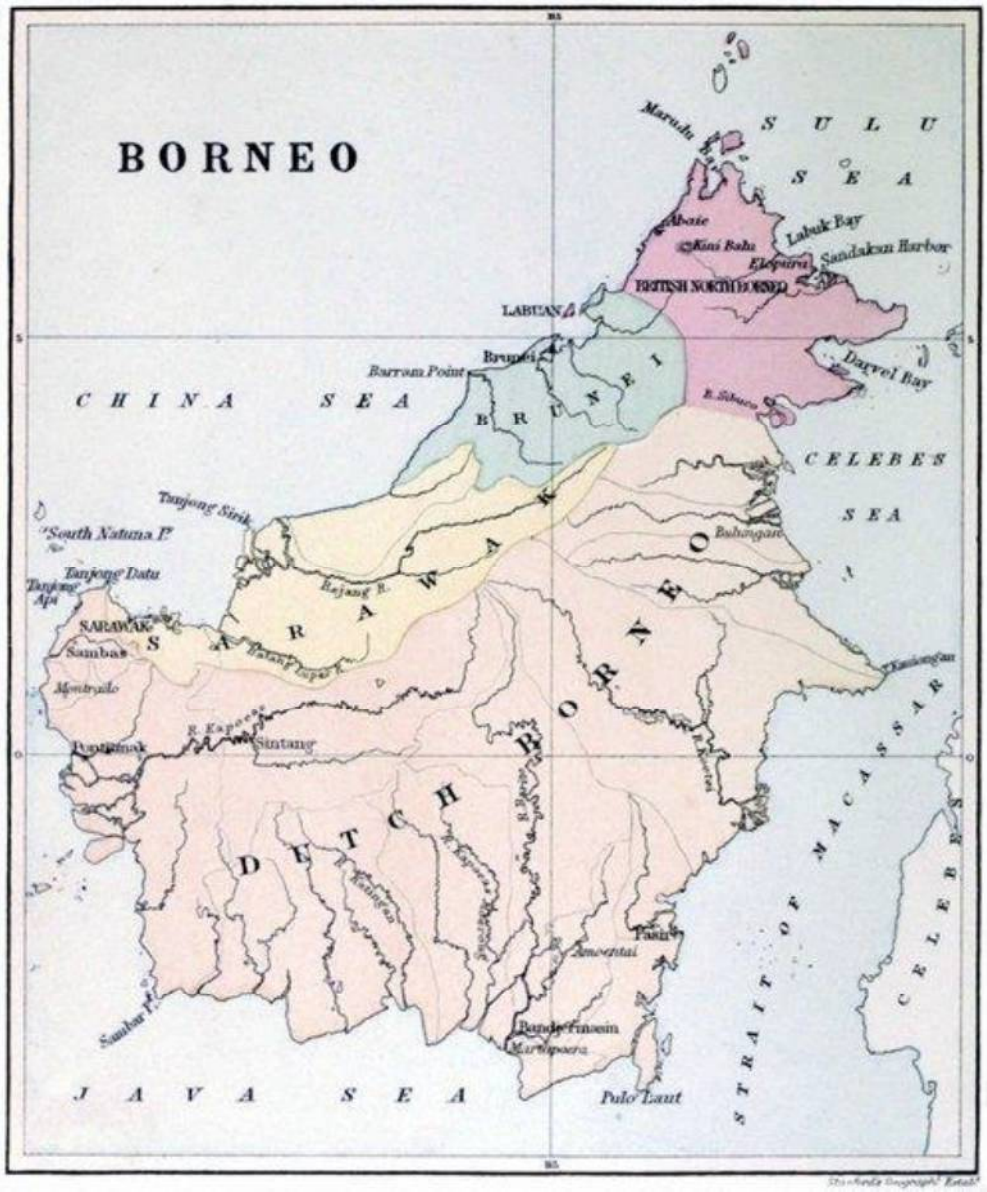
Besides the comparisons with Hungary, the major reference point is (Western) Europe: women are compared to their European counterparts (178-9) and Xántus seemingly believes that change and progress can come to the island if it becomes Europeanized that, as we have seen, for him primarily meant colonization by the English. Such progress would have also meant the abandoning of customs, traditions, as well as religious beliefs: "with time this [i.e. uneducated status of Malay women] might change as well if the Malays of Borneo rise on the steps of civilization, but only in a way if they would be able to leave behind the religion of Mohamed because I believe no European state and European civilization can be imagined with the religion of Mohamed" (179).

One should not hold nineteenth-century writers accountable for their way of writing and beliefs retrospectively, still, it is remarkable that Xántus does not express any criticism of (especially English) colonization and its negative consequences on local traditions and patriotic feelings. This is especially strange in light of Xántus' past and his participation in the Hungarian War of Independence fought against a major power that

wanted to impose its institutions and customs on his motherland. When traveling to Borneo it seems that Xántus completely identifies with the imperial view of Western European (in this case English) travel writers and presents Borneo as a periphery that needs the help, guidance, and control of a European power to achieve progress.

Appendix I.

Map of Borneo from *Sketches of Our Life at Sarawak*
by Harriette McDougall
(London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1882)



Appendix II.

Notes on my Journey to the Island of Borneo in 1870 (Excerpt)

For the English translation, I have chosen an excerpt from Xántus' text (pages 208-214 of the original) that features some of the most interesting topics and issues for contemporary Hungarian readers. In the sections below, Xántus introduces the Dayak people focusing on the most "exotic" and "un-European" features of this group: headhunting and related customs, traditions. The description of unique boats turns into an account of battles, warfare and the discussion of headhunting that Xántus presents as barbaric yet fascinating, especially from the point of view of a scientist and ethnographer. He also discusses family relations and the role and situation of women in Dayak communities. The Hungarian spelling of local words, expressions used by Xántus were modified according to English spelling, if available, or remained as used by Xántus.[18]

Warfare is common among the Dayak people even today; they still have things to settle with their old enemies thus they willingly take every opportunity to get square with them. They have kept records for centuries and they know how many heads a tribe is leading with as after every encounter they recorded how many heads were cut off and carried away by each party. The present ruler has tried to settle these accounts numerous times and he has managed to make peace between the tribes in several cases. If a tribe had more human heads on its account, it was paid back by the enemy in the form of money or other valuables. This worked at several places and male heads were paid back in an amount of 25 dollars while female heads were simply returned. On these occasions, the new friendship and peace was celebrated with great festivities. Still, these examples are exceptions and the settling of the accounts is still generally and widely continued even today.

Boats, head houses, and smoked heads

As the boat is the other major necessity of life for the Dayak people, they have reached a high level of perfection in the preparation of these as well, moreover, they have managed to create such light and fast boats that outrival not only the other Polynesian boats but even the famous Singapore and even more famous Siam *Sampans*.

The Dayak people, it seems, abandoned the use of boats carved from a single tree trunk centuries ago, which are still used by almost every wild people even today. In the case of the Dayaks, not even the smallest boats, suitable for one or two people, are built in that fashion. The boats used for military purposes, called *bangkong*, are usually very long, sometimes reaching 70 or 80 feet in length. In the front and back they are extremely tall so that when they are not loaded one might believe that only their middle section is touching the water, and when they are loaded they still remain rather tall in the front and back; however, the body of the boat sinks so deep into the water that only a plank can be seen. They are all built on a flat bottom and they are connected with rattan strings and the connections are made through holes, which are at a 1.5 feet distance from one another; the planks are placed upon each other as shingles, then they cover the holes with barks and, finally, they coat the whole thing several times with dammar oil. Finally, they paint the front and the back with horrible and fearsome looking dragons and other monsters.

Sometimes there is steering on such boats, but it is usually moved by hand oars and as everyone is very experienced in rowing, they handle the long boat so skillfully that for a single command it can turn around from a standing position in a second. It has happened more than once that by the time the boats of the English warships could turn in a circle, the Dayak pirate boat had already been far away, gaining time, and luckily escaping from its certain demise.

The people rowing are protected from the rain and sun by the *kajang*, a bulrush tent made from palm leaves. If it turns to fighting, this *kajang* is removed and is placed in the back of the boat where the steersman is sitting. The *panglimas* or fighters then take their positions in the middle of the boat, while the oarsmen remain seated in their places. Next to every *panglima* there is a whole pile of bamboo sticks and they start throwing these at the enemy boat. They do not use iron headed spears for this purpose because these are rather expensive; they are used only if the boats get close enough to one another or when they collide with each other, for

combat. Such fighting usually takes place close to the bank and due to the extraordinary determination and frenzy it usually does not last too long.

The weaker party soon jumps into the water so as to run into the forest and the victors cut off their heads one by one, moreover, in most cases they chase their enemies in the forest as well and they return with a few heads from there also. Such a boat fight is not regular although it happens often. It is, however, a usual tradition of the Dayak people not to attack the enemy openly and by force, as long as possible. It seems from all the successful headhunting expeditions that the enemy is attacked with tricks and surprise. This can be understood as we know that their objective is never to achieve military fame or manly prowess and glory coupled with recklessness, nor it is to gain profit from robbery; the only aim is to hunt down a few human heads so that they can smoke them and meanwhile be able to organize a grand ceremony and celebration.

Although it can generally be said that the Dayaks are also as brave as other similar barbaric peoples, and although sometimes one can hear about their especially brave and courageous actions which even the heroes of civilized nations would be rightly proud of: in general we can see from their history that they do not strive for personal military honor and fame resulting from it.

As the Dayak people have headhunting expeditions during the favorable monsoon on the seacoast and this monsoon lasts only from April to October, they do not use the large military *bangkongs* at other periods of the year; at this time, they cut up the connecting rattan strings, disassemble the entire boat and put together its planks nicely. With the arrival of favorable monsoon, they paint and oil it again and thus with such care a *bangkong* lasts for a hundred or even more years. I have seen myself on the Sarebus river a large *bangkong* that had been used supposedly for a 130 years and was still in good condition during my visit even if it suffered many shots from canons of both Spanish and English war boats.

Forrest mentions in his outstanding work on Borneo that once a Spanish warship trapped such a pirate *bangkong* in a shallow cove close to the Pontianak river, believing that they would starve the people forcing them to surrender. However, after the Dayaks saw that it was impossible for them to escape to the sea, they took the boat apart during the night, carried it away on their backs through the forest to the Pontianak river where they quickly reassembled it and escaped to the sea successfully. The *bangkong* requires such effort as we know that the Dayaks are completely unfamiliar with the use of the saw and their only tool is the *biliong*, a

small ax with a long handle with which they cut the giant trees and carve out the plank. With such unimaginable effort they are capable of carving out only two planks from a tree as due to the building method of the boat, all planks necessarily have to be as long as the boat itself and carved precisely to the shape of the boat. In the case of open war, the Dayak people are capable of carrying an immense force on their *bangkongs* and putting them into battle; the current Rajah claims in his book that in the warfare against the Kayans of the Rajang river only the Dayaks of the Batang Lupar and its tributaries participated with 270 *bangkongs* and each *bangkong* carried at least 1 *lilla*[19] and 60 *panglimas* which meant close to 15 thousand fighters and at least 300 cannons, not even counting the oarsmen who could also be put to fight if needed.

Due to their special way of building, of course, these boats cannot bear the storms on the sea and the crosscurrents, as due to their length, the gaps of the planking expand and a lot of water enters the body of the boat. In these cases it often happens that all of the Dayaks jump into the sea, clinging to the boat for hours until the storm leaves, and secure the *bangkong* only afterwards, which came to the surface after released from the load and thus avoided sinking.

If one spends several nights with the Dayaks, he can hear numerous *bangkong* related stories on the veranda, ranging from the marvelous to the stunning. Hunger and other miseries the Dayaks often suffer are truly heartbreaking. Sometimes it happens that the *bangkong* is lost on the sea and they are forced to travel for weeks in enemy territory, hiding in the forest until they find their home; as there are no fruits deep in the thick forest, in these cases they survive on reed sprouts and various ferns. Many die of starvation, others of the hands of the enemy.

If the expedition is fortunate and they have managed to obtain heads, as the *bangkong* flotilla is approaching the village its fortunate endeavor is announced by monstrous yelling and shouting, which is answered immediately by drums, gongs and squealing by those who stayed home. The heads are carried to the shore wrapped in nipa palm leaves and they immediately remove the brain through the so-called large opening, then it is placed over charcoal and is smoked with slow firing in a way that the hair, the flesh and the skin all remain on the skull. When the operation is finished in 10-12 days, it is completely black as, for example, smoked ham. Then it is placed on the veranda and is treated as kindly as possible: they put rice and other food in front of it, they put a pipe into its mouth, as well as ateca[20] nut and betel leaves, and it is expressed that that it is now

the member of the village, not an enemy any longer, from now on they would be good friends, relatives and brothers – forever.

The most remarkable is that none of this is a joke or mockery: all the Dayaks firmly believe that the soul of the head's owner (*antu*) is now really among them and is a member of their family; thus, they strive to propitiate and appease it to win its good will for the village.

Then all this is followed by several days of celebration and merriment; in these cases they slaughter pigs, eat delicious rice, fish, and all kinds of dishes in such abundance as possible and meanwhile they drink for the well-being of the newcomer. The drinks used at these occasions are spirits made of different palms but at many places they use rice spirits as well, the preparation of which they learned from the Chinese.

While drinking, the men also dance, with their heads hanging down they stagger hither and thither on the veranda, while screaming loudly every now and then, and the monstrous sounds of the gong, canang, tamtam, and torvac can be heard continuously.

When, after 4-5 days, everyone grows tired of the celebration because due to the disgust they sober up, they march with the newly acquired and thoroughly celebrated head to the *panga* or head house and hang it up there among the other ones.

In every village the *panga* is a round or octagonal building standing separately but close to the village on tall, slender legs. The heads are located here, owned by the village, and are protected by armed guards day and night as the emblems of heroism and glory of several centuries.

In each *panga* they keep a nice basket with a cover ready so that in case of an enemy attack they can wrap the heads immediately so that they can be carried to a safe place.

The *panga* is used for other purposes as well, the military council is held there as they believe that the glorious acquisitions of the predecessors can have a beneficial effect on the young *panglimas* and can motivate them to accomplish valiant deeds.

At the same time, the *panga* also serves as accommodation for the more famous and distinguished guests. In these cases they wish to show the wealth of the tribe in terms of heads, and impress them with the symbols of victory that they own.

I myself have been accommodated in such a *panga* several times.

Marriage, women, and slaves

Marriage in the case of the Dayak people is not marked by any kind of ceremony or ritual. The parents of the people involved simply agree that the couple may live together and when this happens a small feast is organized by the *manang*[21] in which the whole village participates to celebrate the day when their village has expanded with a family and a house. Virtue is rather loose in general at the Dayaks. They themselves told me several times, and I have seen it with my own eyes, that almost all 14-15 year-old girls have a lover and they change these lovers often without causing the smallest stir or criticism; it is only the party cheated on that is hurt by such unfaithfulness at least until he can get another lover, too.

Although the slips by the women are overlooked in girlhood or even entirely ignored, the unfaithfulness of the married woman is seen as a serious crime in all cases, and very often the woman pays with her life as the husband has the right to kill the unfaithful wife.

The Dayak people love their children excessively and are very proud if their families have many members. They are so proud of their children that they give up their own names and they name themselves after their children. I have never heard of this strange tradition in the case of other peoples. The father places the word *Pá* in front of the child's name, which is actually the abbreviation of the word *bapa.* Thus in the case of the Senna Dayaks, for example, an *orangka*[22] called Gila changed his name to Pá Szingir as Szingir was the name of his first born son.

Má, which is the abbreviation of *ama* means mother and this is used everywhere to signify the mother of the entire family.

It is also a very strange custom that if someone's oldest son dies, then the father takes up the name of the next son in line and so on.

The duties of women are very diverse and extensive. Although they are responsible for taking care of the entire household, this does not mean at all that they would be exempt from the numerous and rather cumbersome work on the fields. Without exception, they are awake before sunrise and at the time of work on the fields they follow their husbands to the paddy fields carrying the day's food on their backs in a basket, what is more, if they have one, then the breastfed baby as well.

Their work in the field consists of collecting the twigs and spikes after clearance, sort out the ones used for fences and burn the rest, then they sow the paddy, i.e. rice, and when it starts to grow, they weed it; once it begins to ripen, they harvest it. The rice, however, does not ripen all at

once, thus it is not really harvesting but cutting it down bush by bush and as one can easily imagine, this is a very tiring and boring business.

In the evening, women usually go home half an hour earlier than their husbands to be able to prepare the simple evening meal, which rarely consists of more than cooked rice. They have enough chickens, they have pigs and goats as well everywhere, however, these are slaughtered only for exceptionally large celebrations – for example, when smoking heads.

Women cannot enjoy the *dolce far niente* even after the tiring and long work on the fields. Then they weave and spin, make baskets and other tools necessary for the household incessantly. In the meantime, they clear the rice from its chaff so that it may be eaten or sold. If we add to all this that they also have to take care of their children, then they cook, fetch water and wood, we can imagine that they have little time to rest; if we see that these poor women are always clean, perform their duties smiling and with a happy face, what is more, if we are amongst them, sometimes until late after midnight they participate in the chatting on the veranda – they may be the subjects not only of our admiration but also of serious study.

It also has to be noted that while the American Indians and the inhabitants of the Polynesian islands leave all the work for the women and they themselves do nothing but smoke pipes and lay around, the Dayak men are just as hardworking as the women. The tough work on the paddy fields, as, for example, clearing and fencing, are completed by them; they are also responsible for doing business with the Malay merchants, they build the boats, houses, farm and gardening tools; they take good care of their fighting, hunting and fishing tools – thus, they have enough to do also.

As a result of warfare, there are also many slaves among the Dayak people, partly Malays and also members of distant Dayak tribes. These slaves are treated so nicely as if they were members of the family, they eat together, work together, are dressed the same way, moreover, they may also marry children of the family. With such treatment, many slaves who were taken from their parents at a young age grow to love their keepers so much that they never leave once set free. The Rajah himself said that several years ago he had set 300 slaves free at the Sakaran Dayaks and out of the 300 only two wished to return to their parents; the rest stayed home with the conquerors, where they lived and grew up.

Although the typical food of the Dayak people is cooked rice and nothing else, if time permits they also hunt and fish and whatever they catch in

these cases they eat with no difference. They cook the rice in brass or clay pots called *pruik.* The birds, mammals, fish, turtles or frogs are first half-roasted on a skewer, then chopped up, thrown into a thick bamboo, they pour some water over it and cook it in the bamboo. They eat only what is cooked, with plenty of salt, sometimes even with pepper and they cook it with green pepper.

As fire is necessary only for cooking, of course, there is no stove or chimney in the house and thus the smoke rises up to the roof and leaves through the gaps. This seemingly very unsuitable condition is a pretty useful institution for the Dayaks as the smoke chases away all mosquitoes and flies from the village. If someone approaches such a large Dayak house in the evening, one would think that it could catch fire at any moment, the entire roof is covered in a thick cloud of smoke and sometimes it is only the lower part of the house that can be seen from it.

Noten

[1] I would like to dedicate this article to my wife, Judit, and our daughter Lotti, who was born at the time when I was working on this article.
[2] Kubassek, *Útkeresők: Magyar utazók és földrajzi felfedezők,* 184.
[3] Popova-Nowak, 'The Odyssey of National Discovery: Hungarians in Hungary and Abroad, 1750-1850.' 199.
[4] Madden, *Xántus, Hungarian Naturalist in the Pioneer West,* 95.
[5] Ibidem. 156.
[6] Zwinger, *John Xántus: The Fort Tejon Letters, 1857-1859,* 31.
[7] In an 1862 portrait in *Vasárnapi Újság* it was written that "before 1848 Xántus, as a hopeful and honest young men, was known by his friends and native county only; his name was recognized and became respected nationally when in the last decade his two excellent travelogues were published in Pest." *Vasárnapi Újság*, 9 February 1862.
[8] For a detailed list of publications see Madden and Mocsáry.
[9] Madden, *Xántus, Hungarian Naturalist in the Pioneer West,* 224, 228.
[10] Kubassek, *Útkeresők: Magyar utazók és földrajzi felfedezők,* 191-192.
[11] The overview of the expedition is based on Dénes Balázs, *Magyar utazók lexikona* (Budapest: Panoráma, 1993), 293-94.
[12] Mocsáry, 'Emlékbeszéd Xántus János levelező tagról.' 244.
[13] see Mocsáry, 'Emlékbeszéd Xántus János levelező tagról.' 245 for a list of items sent to the Hungarian National Museum.
[14] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Xántus' text are mine.
[15] Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 201.

[16] See Venkovits, "Describing the Other, Struggling with the Self. Hungarian Travel Writers in Mexico and the Revision of Western Images."
[17] Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 9-10.
[18] I would like to thank Dr. István Kornél Vida for reading the first draft of this translation and providing insightful suggestions and recommendations.
[19] Cannon
[20] Probably Xántus meant areca.
[21] The second most important person in the village in terms of hierarchy, also responsible for healing.
[22] The leader of the village.

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