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# MANTRA, SOVEREIGNTY, AND THE ANIMAL OTHER: RETHINKING MALAY KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE MANTRA GAJAH

## *(MANTRA, KEDAULATAN DAN HAIWAN LAINNYA: PENILAIAN SEMULA ILMU MELAYU MELALUI MANTRA GAJAH)*

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**Abstract**

This article re-examines Mantra Gajah, a Malay manuscript traditionally used in elephant management, as an epistemological archive of indigenous environmental knowledge and symbolic sovereignty. While prior studies have treated Mantra Gajah as ethnographic or folkloric material, we approach it as a text of performative power and ritual knowledge that challenges Eurocentric conceptions of wildlife management and domestication. Using a qualitative methodology grounded in textual hermeneutics and postcolonial critique, we analyse the tripartite structure of elephant hunting, such as preparation, operation, and post-operation, as a ritualised choreography anchored in magical incantations. These spells are not merely functional; they represent an animistic cosmology where language, nature, and authority are entangled. We argue that deploying charms for spiritual protection, trap-setting, and healing signifies a non-modern ontology where knowledge transmission operates through embodied practice and sacred utterance. The post-operation phase, marked by ceremonial feasting and taming rituals, reveals a symbolic performance of communal gratitude and ecological stewardship. Rather than viewing these spells as superstition, we interpret them as strategic instruments of human-animal governance deeply embedded in Malay cosmopolitics. Our analysis situates Mantra Gajah within the broader Malay intellectual tradition, demonstrating that the manuscript not only reflects sophisticated ecological insight but also asserts a vernacular epistemic sovereignty against the backdrop of colonial epistemicide.

**Keywords:** Malay Manuscript, Postcolonial Epistemology, Symbolic Sovereignt Indigenous Environmental Knowledge, Mantra Gajah, Elephant

***Abstrak***

*Artikel ini mengkaji semula Mantra Gajah, manuskrip Melayu yang digunakan secara tradisional dalam pengurusan gajah, sebagai arkib epistemologi pengetahuan alam sekitar orang asli dan kedaulatan simbolik. Walaupun kajian terdahulu telah menganggap Mantra Gajah sebagai bahan etnografi atau cerita rakyat, kami mendekatinya sebagai teks kuasa performatif dan pengetahuan ritual yang mencabar konsep Eurosentrik pengurusan dan penternakan hidupan liar. Menggunakan metodologi kualitatif berasaskan hermeneutik tekstual dan kritikan pascakolonial, kami menganalisis struktur tiga pihak memburu gajah, seperti penyediaan, operasi dan pasca operasi, sebagai koreografi ritual yang berlabuh dalam mantera ajaib. Mantra ini bukan sahaja berfungsi; mereka mewakili kosmologi animistik di mana bahasa, alam semula jadi dan autoriti terjerat. Kami berpendapat bahawa menggunakan azimat untuk perlindungan rohani, penetapan perangkap dan*

*penyembuhan menandakan ontologi bukan moden di mana penghantaran pengetahuan beroperasi melalui amalan yang terkandung dan ucapan suci. Fasa pasca operasi, yang ditandai dengan upacara jamuan dan ritual menjinakkan, mendedahkan persembahan simbolik kesyukuran komunal dan penjagaan ekologi. Daripada melihat mantera ini sebagai khurafat, kami mentafsirkannya sebagai instrumen strategik tadbir urus manusia-haiwan yang tertanam secara mendalam dalam kosmopolitik Melayu. Analisis kami meletakkan Mantra Gajah dalam tradisi intelektual Melayu yang lebih luas, menunjukkan bahawa manuskrip itu bukan sahaja mencerminkan wawasan ekologi yang canggih tetapi juga menegaskan kedaulatan epistemik vernakular berlatar belakangkan epistemicide kolonial.*

***Kata Kunci:*** *Manuskrip Melayu, Epistemologi Pasca Kolonial, Pengetahuan Alam Sekitar Orang Asli Berdaulat Simbolik, Mantra Gajah, Gajah*

## INTRODUCTION

The historiography of Malay civilisation has long been dominated by maritime narratives that highlight the community's prowess in shipbuilding and oceanic navigation. Indeed, scholars such as Ahmad Jelani Halimi (2006) have rightly underscored the significance of the perahu as a technological and cultural artefact that facilitated inter-island mobility, trade, and regional diplomacy across the so-called Sunda Continent. These aquatic ventures positioned the Malay world as an important intermediary between East and West, generating a cosmopolitan maritime identity embedded in strategic seafaring and knowledge transmission. However, this historiographical emphasis on oceanic mobility often sidelines equally vital inland strategies of movement and domination, particularly the use of elephants as vehicles of terrestrial power and ritual authority.

We contend that such selective emphasis reflects an epistemic bias shaped by Western modernist frameworks, which privilege technologies such as the wheel and land-based infrastructures as markers of civilizational advancement. As Mohd Rohaizat et al. (2018) argue, the geography of the Malay Archipelago, shaped by its archipelagic terrain and mountainous interior, necessitated waterborne solutions that differ significantly from the land-centred cultures of the West. In the Western imagination, the invention and evolution of the wheel symbolised linear progress, industrialisation, and the mastery of terrestrial space. The Malays, in contrast, developed a non-linear epistemology of movement rooted in fluid geographies and ritualised relationships with nature, including animals.

In this context, the elephant emerges not merely as a beast of burden but as a political and spiritual agent within the broader cosmology of the Malay world. Historical evidence, including oral traditions, classical manuscripts, and courtly rituals, reveals that elephants were integral not only to transportation but also to the performative enactment of power. As Azharudin Mohamed Dali (2017) notes, Malay polities incorporated elephants into statecraft, warfare, and royal processions, symbolising both dominion over the land and harmony with the natural world. Yet this layer of Malay ingenuity remains underexplored in the dominant narratives of Southeast Asian civilisation, which continue to privilege tangible technologies over ritual knowledge systems.

This paper takes a critical step toward rebalancing this historiographical imbalance by examining Mantra Gajah, a classical Malay manuscript that encapsulates the indigenous knowledge of elephant management through magical incantations. Unlike the utilitarian approach of modern zoology or veterinary science, the spells contained in Mantra Gajah operate within a symbolic framework where language, nature, and cosmology are interwoven. We argue that this manuscript is not merely a folkloric record of pre-modern practices but a codified system of environmental governance, embedded in ritual authority and animistic philosophy. In this sense, Mantra Gajah serves as an epistemological archive that contests the hegemonic narrative of scientific rationality and offers an alternative mode of knowing rooted in the Malay intellectual tradition.

By analysing the tripartite phases of elephant hunting, like preparation, operation, and post-operation, as described in Mantra Gajah, we reveal how the Malays developed a structured approach

to controlling and taming elephants through a complex system of spells, ethics, and ceremonial acts. The preparation phase, which includes spiritual self-purification and protective chants, underscores the belief that human-animal interactions must begin with spiritual alignment. The operation phase involves not only the setting of traps and the use of lures but also specific incantations directed at the forest and its spiritual inhabitants, reflecting a deep respect for the metaphysical landscape. Finally, the post-operation phase, which features thanksgiving feasts and healing rituals for both human and elephant, highlights a moral ecology where care, reciprocity, and restoration are central.

In foregrounding these phases, we do not romanticise the past nor claim a timeless authenticity. Rather, we suggest that Mantra Gajah represents a sophisticated knowledge system that warrants recognition alongside other global epistemologies of animal management and environmental control. Its integration of the magical and the practical, the spiritual and the ecological, challenges the Cartesian dualisms that continue to inform development discourse in Southeast Asia. Moreover, the manuscript invites a rethinking of sovereignty, not merely as juridical or territorial control, but as a performative and symbolic act that extends into the realm of ritual, spell, and animal governance.

Ultimately, this article contributes to a broader project of decolonising knowledge production by retrieving suppressed or marginalised intellectual traditions within the Malay world. It aligns with recent scholarship that seeks to pluralise the sources of theory and expand the canon of Southeast Asian studies beyond colonial archives and Western epistemologies. Through Mantra Gajah, we encounter not only a practical guide to elephant management but also a philosophical meditation on power, nature, and the sacred elements that remain deeply relevant in contemporary debates on ecological stewardship, indigenous sovereignty, and knowledge justice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The elephant (gajah in Malay), a mammal from the family Elephantidae, has long held an ambiguous yet powerful presence in Southeast Asian cosmologies and courtly traditions. Anbia and Abdullah (2019) classify elephants into three species: the African bush elephant, African forest elephant, and Asian elephant—the latter being native to the Indian subcontinent and much of Southeast Asia. In the context of Malaysia, the Asian elephant occupies both ecological and symbolic roles. Despite their biological vulnerability, only around 1,000 remain in Peninsular Malaysia due to habitat destruction and poaching (Perhilitan 2005). Elephants retain cultural endurance as royal emblems, ritualised labourers, and cosmological agents. Modern zoological accounts offer rich data on elephants' physiology and behaviour, yet such positivist framings risk erasing the deeper symbolic and ritualistic functions of elephants in indigenous knowledge systems.

Our review highlights that Malay engagements with elephants span multiple genealogies: Indian Sanskrit-Hindu traditions, Siamese royal cultures, and autochthonous animistic belief systems. The etymology of gajah, believed to derive from the Sanskrit gaja, points to deep Indic influence, especially visible in the Bujang Valley artefacts such as the Ganesha statue dated to the 8th century CE (Salman Saaban et al. 2011). However, localised Southeast Asian iconography such as the Prambanan temple reliefs from the 10th century (Prisma Yustana 2011) suggests that the symbolism of elephants was already integrated into indigenous Southeast Asian polities before full-scale Indianisation.

Accounts from the classical Malay world ranging from Hikayat Abdullah (1845) to the lesser-known Tengku Menteri manuscript (1790–1895), demonstrate that elephants were not only deployed for transport and warfare but also embedded within ritual and governance structures (Hamzah Hamdani 2007). The Mantra Gajah manuscript, though less popularised in mainstream Malay studies, offers perhaps the most codified documentation of how elephants were ritually engaged through incantations. These mantras are neither folkloric novelties nor primitive remnants; rather, they are textual technologies of power. They evidence a Malay cosmopolitics in which control over the animal world required spiritual negotiation, linguistic mastery, and cosmological knowledge.

Existing literature on Mantra Gajah often treats the manuscript as a cultural artefact reflecting pre-modern beliefs. Yet such interpretations, while informative, tend to under-theorise the epistemic framework in which these spells operate. Our study diverges by reframing Mantra Gajah not merely as a compilation of magical spells but as a ritual archive of indigenous ecological governance. Unlike prior work that positions the Malays as passive recipients of Indic or Siamese traditions (Talib Samat 2004), we argue for a more active epistemic agency whereby Malay elites adapted, localised, and indigenised foreign knowledge through performative rituals like mantra.

The novelty of our research lies in theorising Mantra Gajah as a form of symbolic sovereignty and ritualised environmental management. We move beyond biological or philological analysis to investigate how ritual language structures relations between humans, animals, and metaphysical forces. In doing so, we reposition Malay manuscripts not as cultural relics but as intellectual repositories worthy of comparison with other global systems of environmental knowledge. By reading Mantra Gajah through a postcolonial and epistemological lens, we illuminate the sophistication of Malay ecological wisdom and its enduring relevance in rethinking the boundaries of science, magic, and power.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive and postcolonial methodologies to investigate Mantra Gajah as a site of indigenous ecological knowledge, ritual sovereignty, and symbolic statecraft. Rather than treating the manuscript as a static cultural artefact or repository of superstition, we approach it as a living epistemological archive embedded in the cosmopolitical practices of the Malay world. Our methodology reflects a conscious shift from positivist and philological treatments of Malay manuscripts toward a hermeneutic approach that prioritises indigenous ways of knowing, performing, and remembering.

At the core of this inquiry lies a textual hermeneutics framework, which enables us to decode the layers of meaning in the Mantra Gajah beyond its literal content. The manuscript is examined not only for its linguistic structure and content but also for its performative dimensions—how the spells functioned within ritual contexts to produce socio-political order, spiritual alignment, and human-animal interaction. This form of hermeneutics draws upon Paul Ricoeur's interpretive theory of symbol and Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" to make visible the cosmological logic that animates the text.

Our primary sources include two key versions of Mantra Gajah: the English-language version transcribed by Sir William George Maxwell in 1906, and the earlier Jawi-script manuscript believed to have been authored circa 1900. We engage in comparative manuscript analysis to explore how meaning shifts across language and colonial translation. The Maxwell version is treated not merely as a translation but as a text that reflects colonial epistemic framing, potentially refracting or reducing the ritual potency of the original. By closely reading both versions, we trace epistemological discontinuities and examine how colonial knowledge regimes have historically reshaped indigenous textualities.

In addition to textual analysis, the study incorporates contextual historiography. We situate Mantra Gajah within broader traditions of Malay elephant governance, ritual sovereignty, and environmental management, drawing on historical sources such as Hikayat Abdullah and accounts of Sultan Mahmud's court (Talib Samat 2004; Hamzah Hamdani 2007). These secondary sources provide the socio-political and cultural backdrop against which Mantra Gajah was conceived and used.

We also adopt a postcolonial critique of knowledge systems, informed by scholars such as Walter Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, to challenge Eurocentric taxonomies of science, magic, and animism. This approach allows us to position Mantra Gajah not as a remnant of irrational tradition but as a coherent system of ecological governance and ontological engagement with the

more-than-human world. The manuscript's mantras are therefore analysed as forms of indigenous techné ritual technologies with both symbolic and functional dimensions.

Data coding and thematic categorisation were conducted manually through close reading, with particular attention to recurring symbols, ritual patterns, semantic fields, and the sequencing of incantations. Three primary thematic clusters were identified: (1) ritual preparation and protection, (2) negotiation and capture, and (3) post-subjugation care and cosmological restoration. Each theme is analysed not merely descriptively but critically, to understand the ontological assumptions underpinning these practices.

Ethically, this study is committed to epistemic justice, acknowledging the intellectual agency of Malay manuscript authors, ritual practitioners, and oral traditions that have long been marginalised or folklorised within dominant academic discourse. We resist reductive categorisations of Mantra Gajah as mere superstition and instead foreground its role in constituting a coherent, if alternative, model of human-animal-environment relations.

Ultimately, the methodology adopted in this study reflects an effort to restore Mantra Gajah to its rightful place within the intellectual history of Southeast Asia. By combining close textual reading, postcolonial epistemology, and contextual cultural analysis, we aim to demonstrate that this manuscript is not only of historical interest but also of contemporary relevance in debates over knowledge pluralism, ecological ethics, and the politics of ritual power.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that synthesises symbolic anthropology, postcolonial epistemology, and cosmopolitical theory to recontextualise Mantra Gajah as a Malay epistemological system of power, nature, and ritual. At its core, we engage Clifford Geertz's (1980) notion of symbolic sovereignty, which frames ritual as a cultural performance that constructs political legitimacy and affirms cosmological order. In this view, the mantra functions not merely as a magical utterance but as a performative act that symbolically subjugates both the elephant and the metaphysical forces associated with it, producing a structured sense of sovereignty beyond the legal-rational model.

To interrogate the marginalisation of Mantra Gajah in academic discourse, we utilise Walter Mignolo's (2011) concept of the coloniality of knowledge, which challenges the hierarchical separation of knowledge systems that renders indigenous ritualistic practice as inferior or irrational. This theoretical lens allows us to reposition Mantra Gajah not as superstition but as an epistemic archive reflective of Malay cosmological rationality. The critique extends to colonial-era translations, such as Maxwell's (1906) English rendering of the manuscript, which we argue function as instruments of epistemic displacement, often stripping the ritual from its ontological depth and local cosmopolitical context.

We also adopt Victor Turner's (1969) ritual process theory, especially his concepts of liminality and communitas, to analyse the tripartite structure of the elephant subjugation ritual—preparation, operation, and post-operation. These phases mirror classic rites of passage wherein danger (the wild elephant) is transformed into order (the tamed animal) through symbolic mediation. In the Malay context, this mediation is achieved through ritual speech, bodily conduct, and ecological ethics rather than physical coercion.

Furthermore, we mobilise the notion of cosmopolitics developed by Isabelle Stengers (2005) to argue that the elephant in Mantra Gajah must be understood as a sentient actor—not a passive object. Cosmopolitics posits that non-human entities (such as elephants) participate in ontological negotiations, and thus any exercise of control must be spiritually and ritually negotiated. This resonates with Nurit Bird-David's (1999) anthropological reconceptualisation of animism as a relational epistemology, wherein animals possess subjectivity and agency within a moral and spiritual ecology.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives allow us to reconceive Mantra Gajah as a form of ritual governance, deeply embedded in Malay political theology and ecological thought. By integrating Geertz's symbolic anthropology, Mignolo's critique of epistemic hegemony, Turner's ritual theory, and Stengers' cosmopolitics, our analysis bridges localised textual traditions with broader theoretical debates on power, nature, and postcolonial knowledge production.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Mantra Gajah: Malay Ritual Epistemology and the Subjugation of the Elephant

In the longue durée of Malay civilisation, the subjugation of elephants was not merely a practical exercise in domestication, but a deeply ritualised performance of symbolic sovereignty, danger management, and cosmological negotiation. Unlike modern zoological frameworks which emphasise physical mastery through tools or tranquilisation, the Malays developed a system of engagement rooted in spiritual invocation, linguistic command, and metaphysical alignment. We argue that the Mantra Gajah represents not simply an instructional manual, but a coded epistemic system that reveals the ontological foundations of Malay ritual knowledge.

Traditionally, only selected individuals were permitted—or capable—of attempting to subjugate elephants. These individuals were not random villagers or warriors, but ritual specialists often affiliated with elite or chieftain classes. As Nurul Izzati and Adnan Jusoh (2018) note, the Mantra Gajah was historically associated with Dato' Seri Andika Raja, a chief of Hulu Perak whose domain bordered Siamese territories. The socio-political positioning of this figure reflects a deeper pattern: that the knowledge of taming elephants was both exclusive and politically charged. It was knowledge embedded in hierarchy and access, not unlike the control of written texts in premodern courts.

The Mantra Gajah exists in two known versions—an English translation by Sir William George Maxwell (1906), a British colonial administrator in the Straits Settlements, and a Jawi script believed to be written around 1900, six years prior to Maxwell's transcription (Khairul Ashraf Muhammad 2019). The presence of these two manuscripts—one colonial and one indigenous—offers a rare opportunity for comparative textual reading. The English version, although useful for scholarly accessibility, may also reflect a translational shift that sanitises or secularises the deeper ritual logics embedded in the original Malay cosmology.

At the core of the Mantra Gajah lies a belief in the performative power of language. The spell (mantra) is not a symbolic embellishment; it is an operative technology. In this cosmology, utterances channel spiritual energy, realign cosmological imbalances, and assert human will over non-human subjects. Elephants are not viewed as mere animals, but as sentient beings with spiritual agency—beings who must be approached with ritual protocol and metaphysical diplomacy.

The process of elephant subjugation as prescribed in Mantra Gajah unfolds in three ritualised phases: preparation, operation, and post-operation (Maxwell 1906). Each phase is imbued with linguistic prescriptions, ethical parameters, and spiritual protections. The preparation phase involves mental and bodily purification, including invocations to shield the practitioner from metaphysical harm. Mantras recited during this phase act as protective enclosures, insulating the hunter from the potentially vengeful forces of the jungle and its guardians.

The operation phase, which takes place in the forest, is perhaps the most elaborate. The practitioner must construct traps and lures while maintaining ritual silence and adhering to strict behavioural codes. Each act—from knotting ropes to selecting the site—is accompanied by specific mantras designed to invoke forest spirits, seek permission, and beg forgiveness. The elephant is not violently captured but ritually persuaded—an act of cosmopolitical negotiation rather than brute force. This reflects a Malay ecological ethic where domination is balanced with deference.

The post-operation phase includes thanksgiving ceremonies and healing rituals. Once the elephant is caught, the practitioner performs spells to soothe and tame the animal's spirit. Feasts are often held as a communal act of gratitude and as a reaffirmation of social harmony. Significantly, the Mantra Gajah also includes verses for curing sick elephants, suggesting that the relationship does not end with subjugation but continues as a form of care, maintenance, and custodianship. This aspect is critical—it reframes the human-elephant relationship as a continuum rather than a conquest.

What sets our analysis apart from existing literature is our reframing of Mantra Gajah not merely as an exotic curiosity or functional manual but as a repository of ritual epistemology. While earlier studies (e.g. Nurul Izzati & Adnan Jusoh 2018; Hamzah Hamdani 2007) have documented the manuscript descriptively, our intervention situates it within broader theoretical frameworks of performativity, symbolic sovereignty, and indigenous ecological governance. By approaching the text as an intellectual artefact of ritual governance, we uncover a sophisticated system of knowledge that challenges colonial binaries of modern versus primitive, rational versus magical.

Furthermore, the dual existence of Mantra Gajah in both colonial and Jawi form allows us to interrogate how indigenous knowledge is transformed, filtered, or displaced through colonial textuality. Maxwell's version, while invaluable, may inadvertently flatten the cosmological dimensions of the original. Thus, our reading restores Mantra Gajah to its rightful epistemic universe, where spell, sovereignty, and species coexist in an animistic world-view that resists Western scientific hegemony.

In conclusion, Mantra Gajah offers profound insight into how ritual knowledge mediates human-animal relations, enacts symbolic statecraft, and codifies ecological ethics. The manuscript is not merely a vestige of Malay tradition—it is a living text that reveals how the Malays understood and governed the more-than-human world with linguistic precision, ethical caution, and cosmological respect.

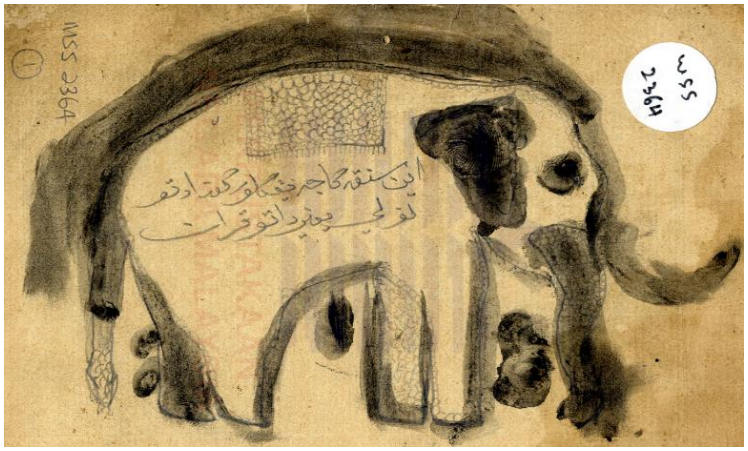

Figure 1. Front Page of Malay Manuscript of Elephant
*Source:* National Library of Malaysia

**First Phase: Ritual Preparation and the Invocation of Sovereignty**

The preparatory phase in Mantra Gajah is far more than a preliminary act, it constitutes a moment of ontological recalibration. Before the bomoh (ritual specialist) and his followers enter the forest, they perform a powerful ritual incantation aimed at establishing spiritual protection and asserting symbolic dominance. This phase, as transcribed by Sir William Maxwell (1906), initiates the transformation of the bomoh from a physical actor into a metaphysical agent. The jungle, far from being an empty natural space, is conceived as an animate realm, populated with unseen entities whose cooperation must be ritually negotiated.

The mantra begins with the invocation:

"*Assalammualaikum Hei Sri Chahia, Janganlah engkau berdusta dan janganlah berbuat bohong kepadaku. Akulah bersifat dengan sifat tuan, engkau bersifat dengan sifat hamba. Tunjuklah alamat yang sebenarnya kepadaku*."

Translated by Maxwell (1906) as:

"Hail! Bright and gracious one! Do not be untrue to me, and do not tell me a lie. I stand here as master, you as slave. Show me a true sign."

This passage reflects the complex structure of power embedded in Malay ritual epistemology. Through this invocation, the bomoh constructs a moral and cosmological distinction between master and subordinate, human and spirit, clarity and deceit. The binary is not merely symbolic; it enacts a performative claim to sovereignty in the Geertzian (1980) sense. The speaker positions himself as the lawful bearer of divine sanction:

"*Aku jadi daripada Nur Allah, engkau jadi daripada thelmak Allah. Aku menanggung amanat Allah, engkau menanggung khianat Allah*."

"From the brilliancy of God is my creation, yours is from the darkness of God. I am supported by the protection of God; you have abused the confidence of God."

Here, the speaker does not simply petition for protection, he claims ontological legitimacy as one who operates under divine mandate. This aligns with Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, where ritual speech transitions the speaker into a sacred state, reordering the cosmological hierarchy before engagement with the animal other.

Moreover, the chant closes with a striking affirmation:

"*Akulah bersifatku berkat Ilaallahu*."

"I have the attribute of the blessed saying 'Allah is God'."

This affirms not only spiritual alignment but a positioning within a theocentric order that justifies the act of subjugating the elephant as cosmologically sanctioned. The forest is not merely entered, it is addressed, challenged, and ritually subordinated.

From a postcolonial perspective, this phase resists the epistemological violence of colonial simplification. As Mignolo (2011) contends, colonial modernity has historically marginalised non-Western knowledge systems as "superstition." Yet, within the Mantra Gajah, we see a ritual technology of negotiation, not unlike diplomatic protocol, embedded in Malay ontologies. The bomoh does not confront the forest with force, but with carefully structured language, cosmological etiquette, and spiritual ethics. Thus, the preparation phase is not peripheral—it is foundational. It is here that the bomoh enacts symbolic sovereignty, distinguishing himself from the chaotic realm he enters, while simultaneously acknowledging its agency. The spell is not a prayer for success, it is a formal declaration of order, mastery, and sacred alignment.

**Second Phase: Operation – Ritual Spatialisation and Containment of the Animal Other**

The second phase in Mantra Gajah begins not with the physical confrontation of the elephant, but with the ritual transformation of the forest into a manageable and legible space. This phase exemplifies how the Malay bomoh does not impose sovereignty through force, but through a ritual process that symbolically restructures nature, invoking spiritual actors and cosmological legitimacy. It is a process of what Clifford Geertz (1980) would call the "theatre of power"—where sovereignty is performed, not merely enforced.

Before any physical trap or enclosure is constructed, the bomoh and his entourage recite a mantra to displace or pacify the forest spirits, who are believed to govern the unseen realms. As transcribed by Maxwell (1906), the chant reads:

> "*Om kilai maiyut kachari kachari kilai dak kilai dan terbang kachang ke kanan sah pindah turun ka wai hantu kamat kamaia nyamisan changrai maiyu katuwai.*"
>
> "Fly to the right without fail, leave your place, and descend."

This incantation symbolically clears the ritual space, expelling interferences and making way for human activity. Through Victor Turner's (1969) lens, this moment represents a ritual liminality where the sacred and the profane overlap, transforming the jungle into a controlled domain under cosmological sanction. The next step is the construction of the elephant enclosure (pendiat gajah), a spatial device consecrated through layers of mantera directed at both cosmic entities and metaphysical forces. For the bomoh, the primary incantation asserts spiritual sovereignty over all potential harm:

> "*Hei Azazil dan Samil Akbar... Jangan engkau beri mengaru-garu menyakiti... Aku berdiri dengan firman Allah Taala...*"
>
> "Oh Azazil and Samil Akbar... Do not interfere with me... I stand here with the command of Allah Taala."

This is not merely a prayer but a formal declaration of jurisdiction over the enclosure space. Invoking figures such as Azazil and Samil Akbar gestures toward an esoteric Islamic cosmology, one where jinn, devils, and badi (malevolent spirits) must yield to the authority of divine speech. The followers then recite their own enclosure protection spell, invoking Betara Guru and Betara Kala:

> "*Jangan engkau beri segala rakyatmu mengaru-garu dan menrencanai... Aku pun seorang hamba Allah... Engkau duduk di dalam murka Allah.*"

The rhetorical contrast between "I dwell in the handiwork of Allah" and "you dwell in the wrath of Allah" reaffirms a dichotomy of moral space, placing the practitioners within divine order and the spirits outside it. This is a cosmopolitical reterritorialisation (Stengers 2005), where space is reordered through ritual speech. After the enclosure is established, the team recites a spell for hunting the elephants:

> "*On genaling pachanaru pachanari serbang kom bangkak... Ke rimba yang maha besar salah ke kananku salah ke kiriku...*"
>
> "Descend, move to the boundless forest... You are wrong if you turn right or to the left."

This spell operates as both a directive and a metaphysical restriction, compelling the elephant's movement within a symbolically encoded space. The forest becomes not just terrain but ritual topography mapped and regulated by the spoken word. To dull the senses of the elephants and prevent them from detecting the presence of the hunting team, the perabun charm is used:

> *"Om kundang ding kundang... Kau turut kataku. Jikalau kau tak turut kataku, mati dibunuh Sri Rama... Kaluh! Kaluh! Kaluh!"*
>
> "Om kundang ding kundang... You obey my words. If you do not obey my words, you shall die by the hand of Sri Rama... Kaluh! Kaluh! Kaluh!"

This chant frames the elephant not as prey but as a moral subject. By referencing mythological figures like Sri Rama and Maha Rishi, the spell imposes a moral binary of obedience and consequence, positioning compliance with the practitioner as cosmologically virtuous. The ritual continues with the King of Elephants spell, designed to halt the herd:

"*Om pawpang maha pang pit om taw sahom sitikon tana sahom... Pantang pok chakai...*"

"Stop the herd... Keep the herd fixed in one place... Will restrain the elephants."

The performance of this chant is spatially embodied: it involves stepping in circles, removing earth, placing it upon one's head, and replanting it. These bodily gestures manifest ritual control through embodied action—an integration of speech, movement, and cosmological invocation.
As the elephants approach the enclosure, the final set of incantations guides them in and secures them:

*"Om kaw kata changramai ku ikat pekarang ku serta pegang kau perang lengan tangan kita... Om genaling bating tamdit batkaling..."*

"Om kaw kata changramai, I bind my noose, I hold you, we engage in battle, arm to arm, hand to hand... Om genaling bating tamdit batkaling..."

These mantras not only manipulate the elephant's senses but prepare the physical noose, aligning its tightening with the will of sacred figures such as Nabi Sulaiman. The rope, the spell, the enclosure, and the elephant form an integrated ritual system component reliant on the ethical and spiritual orientation of the practitioner. This phase demonstrates that in the Malay cosmological order, hunting is not a mechanical or tactical event; it is a ritualised negotiation. Through the lens of Mignolo's (2011) coloniality of knowledge, this system has been dismissed as superstition, yet it reflects a sophisticated mode of environmental governance, relational ethics, and performative sovereignty. By embedding every step within Mantera, this phase articulates a ritualised choreography of power one where mastery over the animal other is legitimated not through violence, but through invocation, ethical restraint, and spiritual reciprocity.

**Third Phase: Post-Operation – Ritual Reconciliation and Moral Reorientation**

The third and final phase in Mantra Gajah marks a shift from capture to spiritual and moral restoration. While earlier phases asserted cosmological sovereignty over the wild, this stage enacts the reconciliation between the human and the more-than-human realm. As Turner (1969) posits in his theory of ritual structure, no rite of passage is complete without reaggregation a moment where social and spiritual bonds are reaffirmed after symbolic disruption. In this context, the elephant, now subdued, must be reintegrated through a series of ethical, performative, and curative acts.

The phase begins with a ritual feast held at the gate of the enclosure, where the bomoh and his followers celebrate the successful mission. The ritual items like beras kunyit (turmeric-dyed uncooked rice), beras basah (washed rice), nasi pulut (sticky glutinous rice), fish, a piece of gold, and a white cloth serve as offerings to spiritual forces that may have aided or permitted the hunt. These materials are deeply symbolic: rice signifies fertility and abundance; gold represents wealth and sacredness; white cloth marks purity. As the team gathers, they recite the grateful mantra:

"*Pawbob yabob kindi judi tangpong ngai malab mia ji chanak pasta tabu chaikol chakukaing... Parpom chanti rang turun disitu karong pali... kaiku kaiku kaiku ah ah ah*"

"As a symbol of thanks for catching the elephant"

This chant transforms the act of capture from an act of subjugation to a ritual contract, acknowledging the role of unseen entities and reaffirming ethical reciprocity. The feast is not merely celebratory; it functions as a closure to liminality and a reintegration into moral order.

Following this, the elephant undergoes ritual purification through a mantera meant to expel malignant spirits:

"*Om gunaling parih pamparit pai pana barasin marong balik samsatom sarpatom parpai tatbon tingtai pat kauchat pi hai hakatitom bangtom*"

"To free the elephant from evil spirits"

In the animistic framework of the Malays, influenced by Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic cosmologies, wildness is not just behavioural—it is spiritual. The elephant is viewed as a sentient being with interiority, susceptible to both divine and demonic influences. Hence, healing the animal spiritually becomes a moral imperative. The next mantra is recited to teach the elephant obedience through symbolic ritual performance:

"*Om bawk kau nak kau nai rengah patsuwat patsuwat patsuwat*"

"To teach the words of command by humans"

Accompanied by the symbolic striking of the elephant with the angkusa gajah (elephant goad), this ritual does not represent violence, but rather performative pedagogy, an embodied command ritual rooted in ethical discipline. The repetition of the strike, three times, and its pairing with speech reflect a symbolic initiation of the elephant into the realm of human instruction. The most complex mantra follows the mantra of full control, in which a practitioner mounts the elephant's neck while another retrieves the goad thrown behind:

"*Om genaling genali genaling nukting genaling nuktai kot kot taking kala gumlut kot genaling taking kala om singku pasing changrai om sah kupasah changrai arah arah tarong prat tinjau bali turun bertanti salah dibatang tubuh ku wahai mitarau kaumiluh sidikan guru batia parakau hei galuh ah ah ah*"

"To have full control of the elephant"

This ritual choreography is profoundly symbolic it is an assertion of authority through cooperation and repetition, not brute force. It reenacts hierarchy while embedding relational ethics and submission through spiritual persuasion. Finally, the phase culminates in a healing spell for a sick elephant suffering from fever, headaches, or internal pains:

"*Om pata bura maisak kau cha ngau angkat matang pin pindah au kau koklak mata changrai changrai kachat pi tokpamin kumi pailu sarapa changrai changrai kau miman tara angalia sitikan guru mu yatia om sitidak sitidang sitigarang kana parak batu sam diau samdak sakaiak sakaiak sakadongna angnong champaran sian angong champaran pat pat changrai ansaksi pataradi sarapa chanarai matarang changrai kau miman teringlu sitikan guru mu batia*"

"Spell to cure a sick elephant"

This final act reflects the deeply integrated cosmology of the Mantra Gajah, in which the animal is not only tamed but cared for, restored, and dignified. Contrary to colonial narratives that dismissed such rituals as irrational, this phase reveals an ethical system grounded in cosmopolitical relationality (Stengers 2005) and postcolonial resistance to exploitative models of domination (Mignolo 2011). Through this post-operation ritual, the Malays demonstrate that control is not the end of ritual power healing and responsibility.


Figure 2. The Elephant Goad
Source: http://sejarahbangsamelayuyanghilang.blogspot.com/~

**Mantra as Political Speech: Rethinking Sovereignty through Ritual Language**

In this section, we interrogate Mantra Gajah not merely as ritual utterance or magical incantation, but as a form of political speech—a performative assertion of sovereignty that reorders relations between the human, the animal, and the spirit world. Drawing upon Geertz's (1980) understanding of symbolic power and Mignolo's (2011) critique of epistemic coloniality, we argue that the mantra in this context functions as a mechanism of vernacular governance: it enacts control, commands obedience, and authorises legitimacy within a cosmological framework that predates colonial administrative rationality.

Across all three phases, such as preparation, operation, and post-operation, the mantera is highly structured and rhetorically complex. These are not arbitrary utterances but carefully sequenced declarations that invoke divine authority, reposition power hierarchies, and negotiate with invisible actors. For instance, in the self-protection chant:

"*Akulah bersifat dengan sifat tuan, engkau bersifat dengan sifat hamba...*"

"I stand here as master, you as slave..."

The speaker proclaims moral and spiritual superiority over the forest spirits. This is not a private prayer, it is a public performance of authority, analogous to royal proclamations or ritual court speech, where sovereignty is not asserted through violence but articulated through speech acts that reorder the cosmos. Moreover, the repetitive use of phrases such as "*Aku berdiri dengan firman Allah Taala*" ("I stand here with the command of Allah Most High") aligns the bomoh with a higher legal order. This connects Malay ritual epistemology with broader Islamic cosmological jurisprudence, reframing the act of elephant subjugation as lawful under divine authority. In this way, the mantera functions as a symbolic law, embedded in the oral tradition and spiritually enforced.

What is particularly striking is how the language of the mantera mediates between domination and ethics. In the final phase, the spell to heal a sick elephant does not command, but cares. It begins:

"*Om pata bura maisak kau cha ngau angkat matang...*"

"Spell to cure a sick elephant..."

and ends by invoking the guru as witness and moral anchor. The elephant is not merely a resource it is a relational subject worthy of healing, instruction, and respect. This echoes Bird-David's (1999) thesis on relational epistemology, where human-nonhuman interactions are premised on

recognition and ethical entanglement. Framing mantera as political speech also allows us to critique colonial misreadings of these texts. When Maxwell (1906) translated the Mantra Gajah, he did so from a linguistic perspective devoid of performative context, stripping it of its political and ontological force. By re-situating the mantera within their ritual ecology, we expose how colonial textualisation often erased the indigenous logic of governance and its complex spiritual infrastructure.

Ultimately, we argue that the mantera are not residual cultural artefacts but active technologies of power speech acts that govern, persuade, heal, and sanctify. In this sense, Mantra Gajah offers us a radical possibility: to theorise Southeast Asian sovereignty not as colonial inheritance, but as something already articulated in ritual, in speech, and the quiet authority of the bomoh.

Figure 3. Sultan Hussein Muazzam Shah ibni almarhum Sultan Mahmud III Shah Alam (1776-1835), the Sultan of Johor and Sir John Crawfurd on the Royal Elephant
*Source:* Illustrated London News Ltd

**What We Learn About This: Mantra as Archive, Sovereignty, and Epistemic Resistance**

From our sustained engagement with Mantra Gajah, we have come to view it not merely as a relic of Malay mystical tradition but as an epistemic archive a text that encodes sovereignty, ethics, and human-animal relations in ritual form. What we learn through the close reading of these mantras, when placed against the backdrop of colonial knowledge production and postcolonial theory, is that the ritual language of the Malays constitutes a mode of governance and world-making that defies Western categorical boundaries between the magical, the political, and the ecological.

Firstly, Mantra Gajah reveals that sovereignty in the Malay world was performative and cosmological. It did not rest solely on administrative control or territorial demarcation but was enacted through ritual speech that repositioned the human within a hierarchy of visible and invisible forces. When the bomoh declares, "Aku berdiri dengan firman Allah Taala" ("I stand here with the command of Allah Most High"), he does more than assert personal authority he invokes divine mandate to discipline spirits, animals, and space. Sovereignty, in this sense, is not a monopoly of power but a morally situated right to command, enacted through words, gestures, and offerings. This ritualised cosmopolitics (Stengers 2005) challenges the Weberian definition of sovereignty as secular, legal-bureaucratic domination.

Secondly, we learn that the mantera operates as a form of vernacular knowledge transmission, not only preserving instructions for elephant subjugation but encoding moral limits and responsibilities. The act of celebrating with food offerings, the healing of sick elephants, and the repeated invocations of "friendship" and "companionship" with spirits and animals all point to a non-exploitative cosmology. This resonates with Nurit Bird-David's (1999) concept of relational

epistemology, where human-nonhuman relations are predicated on care, mutuality, and negotiated authority. This is also echoed in the idea of adat—a moral framework embedded within Malay socio-cosmology—which, as Hooker (1972) argues, functions as a customary law inseparable from belief systems and spiritual order.

Moreover, our analysis reveals how Mantra Gajah can be read as resistance to colonial epistemic violence. British figures like Sir William Maxwell translated these texts through philological methods, extracting vocabulary while ignoring ritual context, theological foundations, and symbolic logic. This reductive mode of knowledge production flattened complex indigenous governance systems into "folklore" or "superstition." By re-situating the mantera within their performative ecology, we reclaim them as legitimate expressions of political theology, where power is always tethered to metaphysical obligation. In doing so, we answer Walter Mignolo's (2011) call to delink from Eurocentric epistemologies and recover the pluralities of knowledge.

What is also striking is the gendered absence in the Mantra Gajah. The bomoh and his team are male-coded agents, invoking male spirits, male ancestors, and performing masculine labour over nature. The elephant—often feminised in other Asian traditions—is here desexualised and reimagined as a site of moral instruction. Future research might engage with feminist critiques of ritual authority to explore how gendered power operates within these texts, especially when viewed through the lens of Carol Laderman's work on Malay midwifery (wok meroyan) or Ong's (1987) ethnography of spirit possession and female agency in Malaysia.

Ultimately, what we learn from Mantra Gajah is that Malay ritual knowledge is not marginal or residual it is a complete cosmology of governance, rooted in ethics, performance, and metaphysical accountability. It challenges the colonial-modern framing of religion as irrational, animals as mute, and magic as obsolete. By reading the mantera seriously, we confront the limits of our disciplinary assumptions and open ourselves to a Southeast Asian political thought that speaks through chant, gesture, and cosmological persuasion.

This study thus contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to deprovincialise theory and recognise Southeast Asia not merely as a site of application, but as a site of theoretical production in its own right (Chua 2021; Anderson 1972). In doing so, we affirm that the Mantra Gajah is not just a manuscript it is a manuscript of the Malay mind, an archive of sovereign relations between man, nature, and the divine.

Figure 4. The Perak Sultan's royal elephant crossing the river
*Source:* Malaysia's New Straits Times

## CONCLUSION

What we ultimately learn from the study of Mantra Gajah is that it offers a comprehensive and integrated system of knowledge one that bridges cosmology, governance, and ecological ethics within the Malay world. This text is not a fragment of forgotten folklore, nor is it a simple instruction manual for animal control. Rather, it stands as a sophisticated epistemological artefact that reveals how Malay society understood its relationship to power, nature, and the unseen.

At the heart of this ritual system lies a worldview in which sovereignty is not enacted through domination alone, but through spiritual alignment, moral responsibility, and performative speech. The bomoh, as ritual agent, does not only manage the physical act of capturing the elephant but also maintains a delicate balance between the visible world of humans and the invisible realm of spirits. This governance is exercised through words, symbols, and rituals that sustain cosmological order, offering us a window into a form of rule that predates and resists the colonial-imposed categories of rationality and legality.

We also see that Mantra Gajah is built upon an ethical cosmopolitics. The treatment of the elephant from capture to care demonstrates an underlying philosophy of relationality. The elephant is never reduced to a mere tool; it is an active subject within a moral economy that demands respect, healing, and negotiated submission. This holistic understanding of human-animal relations challenges contemporary notions of utilitarian resource use, offering instead a ritualised model of coexistence rooted in obligation and spiritual accountability.

Furthermore, this study invites us to recognise that Malay ritual knowledge, so often marginalised or dismissed in modern academic discourse, should be understood as theory in its own right. It encodes a system of power, communication, and ethics that is fully capable of responding to the complexities of political life. Through Mantra Gajah, we are reminded that ritual is not static tradition; it is dynamic statecraft, pedagogical method, and spiritual infrastructure. The rhythm of the chant, the sequence of actions, and the invocation of authority all serve to bind the community, secure control, and protect ecological order.

The status of the elephant within Malay society reinforces the political significance of this knowledge. It was an animal of kingship, diplomacy, and prestige yet it also served in daily life, warfare, and commerce. Its management was thus a reflection of broader social structures, symbolic hierarchies, and regional entanglements. To master the elephant was not just to tame nature, but to perform legitimacy, to mark authority, and to embody cosmological alignment.

In conclusion, this study has re-centred Mantra Gajah not as a mystical curiosity but as an archive of indigenous statecraft. It stands as a powerful counter-narrative to colonial dismissals of ritual knowledge and affirms that Southeast Asia possesses deep intellectual traditions that speak powerfully to questions of governance, ethics, and ecological harmony. By recovering, reading, and theorising these texts on their terms, we do more than preserve heritage; we engage in epistemic repair and reclaim the voice of the Malay cosmological imagination.

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