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words

Amok as viewed by British administrators in colonial Malaya

Ee Heok Kua

Two British colonial administrators, Sir Frank Swettenham and Sir Hugh Clifford, wrote about amok in 19th-century Malaya from a sociological perspective. Clifford noted that 'amok is a result of a condition of the mind which is described in the vernacular as *sakit hati* – sickness of the liver, the centre of sensitiveness'. He felt it was caused by an emotional problem which precipitated the *sakit hati* or Malay equivalent of depression, leading to the homicidal–suicidal rage. The fate of the person was discussed by Swettenham: 'he is regarded as a dangerous beast. As a rule he is not taken alive'.

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