

The Man who Spoke Javanese

Lima Barreto

(1881–1922)



(My translation of the short story [*O homem que sabia javanês*](#), which was published in the *Gazeta da Tarde* in 1911)

I was in a coffee shop, telling my mate Castro how I'd conned people in order to earn a living. Once, when I was in Manaus, I'd even had to pretend I hadn't been to university so that my clients wouldn't think me unqualified for being a fortune-teller-cum-magician.

My mate listened in silence. He was fascinated by this real-life Gil Blas sitting opposite him.

When we'd finished drinking, all he said was: 'You've had a pretty racy life, Castelo!'

'It's the only way to live... All that business of having the same old job, leaving home at such and such a time, coming back at such and such a time... What a bore! I don't know how I stuck it at the consulate!'

'True enough, it's a bore, but that's not the point. What amazes me is how you've managed to have such a jolly time of it in this cretinous, bureaucratic country.'

'No problem! You can have a wonderful life here in Brazil, Castro. Did you know – by way of illustration – that I used to teach Javanese?'

'When?! Here?! After you came back from the consulate?'

'No, before. As a matter of fact, that's how I became consul.'

'Get away!.. More beer?'

'Why not?'

I ordered some more bottles, we filled our glasses, and I continued: 'I'd just arrived in Rio and was down on my luck, making midnight flits from one dig to another, without a clue how to make any money, when I came across an advertisement in the *Jornal do Comércio* for a Javanese teacher. Testimonials required etc.

"Well", I said to myself, "there ain't gonna be many applicants for that job!" So I decided to learn a few words of Javanese and apply. I left the cafe I was in and strolled through the streets, imagining myself a Javanese teacher, earning money, able to afford the trolleybus, not being pestered by landlords... I headed, in a sort of reverie, to the National Library. I didn't really know what book I was looking for, but I walked in, left my hat with the doorman, picked up my ticket and went upstairs.

'As I went up I had the bright idea of asking for the volume of the Cyclops Encyclopaedia containing the letter J, so I could look up an article about Java and the Javanese language. No sooner said than done. After a few minutes I'd discovered that Java is a large island in the Sonda Archipelago, a Dutch colony, and that Javanese is an "agglutinative Malayo-Polynesian language with a respectable literature and a script derived from the ancient Brahmi alphabet."

The article cited some books about this Malayan language, so I asked for one of those. I ended up copying the alphabet, together with a latinised version of the pronunciation, after which I left and wandered the streets, chewing over the letters.

Hieroglyphs danced around in my head. From time to time I consulted my notes. I roamed the parks, only stopping to scrawl those funny letters in the sand of the paths in order to fix them in my brain and get used to writing them.

I slipped into the house that night, avoiding unwanted questions from the commissionaire, and carried on ingesting that Malayan alphabet in my room, with such success that – come the morning – I knew it perfectly. Having convinced myself it was the easiest language in the world, I left, but not soon enough to give the lettings agent the slip:

"Ah, Mr Castelo! When are you going to settle your account?"

"Shortly. You don't mind waiting a little bit longer? I'm about to be appointed Professor of Javanese and..."

He interrupted me: "What the hell is that, Mr Castelo?" which tickled me, so I decided to call upon his patriotism:

"It's a language spoken somewhere near Timor. You know where Timor is?"

'Ah! What an innocent soul! He immediately forgot about my debts and informed me, in his slushy Portuguese accent:

“Well... I’m not entirely sure, but I’ve heard that Timor is a part of our Empire, near Macau... And you speak that language, Mr Castelo?!”

‘Once I’d got away – and feeling rather smug about my Javanese escape route – I pulled the advertisement out of my pocket again. There it was! *Yessiree! I’m definitely gonna apply to be a professor of this Oceanian idiom.*

I wrote my application and went to hand it in at the offices of the *Comércio*, after which I returned to the library and continued my study of Javanese.

‘But I didn’t make much progress that day, possibly because it occurred to me that all a professor of this Malayan lingo really needs to know is the alphabet. Or perhaps I’d been concentrating too much on the bibliography and the literary history of my subject.

‘After two days I received a letter inviting me to an interview with Dr Manuel Feliciano Soares Albernaz, otherwise Baron Jacuecanga, in Count Bonfim Street – I don’t recall the number. Don’t forget I was carrying on, in the meantime, learning Malayan... I mean, Javanese. In addition to the alphabet I learnt the names of some authors and how to say “How are you?” plus two or three grammatical rules and a lexical grounding of about twenty words.

‘You can’t imagine the struggle I had to try – in vain – to get the four hundred *reais* for my journey to Count Bonfim Street! Learning Javanese is much easier by comparison, believe you me... So I walked there and arrived hot and bothered. But an alley of old mango trees leading up to the Baron’s house welcomed me tenderly, almost maternally – the only time in my whole life I’ve got anywhere near feeling close to nature.

‘It was an enormous, apparently deserted house, run-down, but somehow – I thought – through neglect and world-weariness rather than poverty. It must have been years since it had last seen a coat of paint. The walls were peeling and here and there a tile – those old-fashioned glazed tiles – was missing from the eaves, making them like a set of rotting, untended teeth.

‘I took a quick look at the garden and saw how the flat-sedge and beggar’s-lice had driven out the angel-wings and begonias, although the drab crotons were holding on. I knocked. And waited...

‘Eventually an ancient African appeared. His cottony hair and beard spoke of age, meekness and suffering. The living room was like a portrait gallery: a parade of pompous, big-bearded men in immense, gilded frames; and the sweet profiles of ladies in headbands and holding large fans, who looked as if they wanted to be wafted up to the heavens in their balloon-like dresses. But of all the antiques – which looked even more antique and venerable under the ubiquitous layers of dust –, what I liked most was a fine vase of

Chinese porcelain... or Indian as it's sometimes called... The purity of that porcelain, its fragility, the simplicity of its design, its moonlight glimmer, told me it had been moulded in the hands of a dreaming child, to enchant the weary eyes of the old and disillusioned...

I had to wait a little while for the owner of the house and it was with a feeling of deep respect that I saw him arrive, a little unsteady on his feet, and holding a Portuguese printed handkerchief from which he was taking snuff, like a picture from the olden times. I wanted to run away. Even if it wasn't him who was the student, it would be a crime to bamboozle that old man, whose age brought something sacred, something august, to the surface of my mind. I wavered... but waited.

"I'm the Javanese teacher you said you were looking for, sir."

"Sit down", the old man replied. "Are you from here, from Rio?"

"No, I'm from Canavieiras."

"From where? Speak up a bit – I'm deaf."

"I'm from Canavieiras, in Bahia," I trumpeted.

"Where did you do your studies?"

"In São Salvador."

"And where did you learn Javanese?" he asked, with the doggedness of the elderly.

'Even though I hadn't foreseen that question, I extemporised a lie: I told him my father was Javanese, a merchant sailor who'd ended up in Bahia, settled near Canavieiras as a fisherman, got married, prospered and it was from him that I'd picked up Javanese.'

'And he believed you?! The way you look?!' asked my friend, who'd been listening quietly.

'I don't look that different from a Javanese. Straight hair, long and thick. Dark skin. I could easily pass for a Malayan half-cast. And you don't need me to tell you there are all sorts in Brazil: Indians, Malayans, Tahitians, Malagasies, Guanches, even Goths – a combobulation of racial types to make the rest of the world green with envy.'

'Alright... Carry on.'

'After listening attentively and giving me a good looking-over, it seemed the old man came to the conclusion I really was the son of a Malayan, because he asked me, almost in a whisper:

"So you'd be happy to teach me Javanese?"

The words "Of course I would" left my lips before I'd even had time to think.

"You must be surprised," the Baron continued, "that, at my age, I still want to learn something, but..."

"Not at all! There are many, many admirable examples..."

"You see, what I want, Mr..."

“Castelo.”

“My dear Mr Castelo, what I want is to honour a promise – a family promise. I don’t know if you know... I’m the grandson of Counsellor Albernaz, the one who was with Pedro the First when he abdicated. He once came back from London with a book in a strange language – a book which fascinated him. It was a gift from an Indian or Siamese in London as a thank-you for some favour or other. When my grandfather was on his deathbed, he called my father and said: ‘My boy, I’ve got a book here that’s written in Javanese. The man who gave it me said it wards off harm and brings happiness to whoever owns and understands it. I’m not so sure about that... But, in any case, look after it and, if you want the prophecy of that wise old oriental to come true, make sure your son understands it, so that happiness may pass from generation to generation of our family.’ My father wasn’t inclined to believe the story, but he kept the book. When he, in turn, was nearing death’s door, he gave it to me and told me what he’d promised my grandfather. At first I didn’t give it much thought. I put it away and got on with my life. I ended up forgetting all about it, but recently I’ve had so many things go wrong, so much misfortune in my old age, that I remembered the family talisman. I need to read it, to understand it, and I don’t want to pass bad luck to my descendants. But in order to read it I need – of course – to understand it. And there you have it!”

‘He fell silent and I noticed there were tears in his eyes. He dried them quickly and asked me if I’d like to see the book. I said yes. He called his man-servant, gave him instructions and explained to me that he’d lost all his sons, his nephews and nieces, that all he had left was a married daughter who only had one son – an invalid, whose health was precarious.

‘The book arrived. It was an antique, quarto-sized tome, leather-bound, printed in large type on coarse, yellowing paper. The frontispiece was missing, so there was no date of publication. But it did have a few pages in English, by way of preface, where I read that it had to do with stories by Prince Kulanga, an outstanding Javanese writer.

‘I immediately informed the old Baron, who – unaware I’d arrived at this knowledge via English – was greatly impressed by my knowledge of Malayan. I carried on leafing through the great volume, like a certified expert in that sort of gobbledegook, and before long we’d agreed the conditions: my fee and the hours. I undertook to make sure he could read the old tome within a year.

‘Soon I was giving my first lesson, but the old man was not as diligent as me. He couldn’t learn to read and write even four letters. It took us a month to get halfway through the alphabet and you

couldn't say Baron Jacuecanga was much the wiser for his trouble. He kept forgetting what he'd just learnt.

His daughter and son-in-law, who I don't think were privy to the story of the book, found out about his studies, but they didn't object. They thought it was rather sweet – a good way to keep him occupied.

But wait till you hear, Castro, how the son-in-law admired the Javanese teacher! "What an extraordinary thing!" he kept saying. "It's amazing! Such a young man! If I'd been able to speak Javanese, just think where I might be now!"

Mrs Maria da Glória's husband – Mrs Maria was the Baron's daughter – was a judge, well-connected and powerful; but that didn't stop him praising my Javanese in front of everyone. And the Baron, for his part, was as happy as could be. After two months he gave up his studies and asked me to translate a passage from the enchanted book every other day. He said just understanding it would do; there was no reason why he couldn't just listen while someone else translated. In that way he'd fulfil his duty whilst avoiding the tedium of study.

You won't be surprised to know I can't speak Javanese even now, but I made up some daft stories and palmed them off on the old man as if they were sacred scripture. The way he listened to that rubbish! He was ecstatic; you'd have thought he was listening to the words of an angel. And I rose even higher in his estimation! He insisted I live in his house, showered me with presents, increased my pay. To put it simply... I was having a rare old time.

It helped greatly that he came into an inheritance from some forgotten relative of his in Portugal. The dear old man attributed his good fortune to my Javanese; and I was almost ready to believe it myself.

Although my guilt feelings were rapidly diminishing, I was still worried I'd bump into someone who really could speak that Malayan jabberjabber. And I was horrified when the kind-hearted old Baron sent me to Viscount Caruru with a letter recommending I be admitted to the diplomatic service. I did my darndest to dissuade him: I wasn't good-looking enough, wasn't elegant enough, looked like a Philippino. "Nonsense!" he replied. "Off you go, my boy! You speak Javanese!" So I went. The Viscount, in turn, sent me – heaped with recommendations – to the secretariat for foreigners. I'd been accepted.

The director summoned the section heads: "Gentlemen, before you stands a man who speaks Javanese. What do you think about that?!"

The section heads took me to meet the officials and the clerks, one of whom looked at me with hostility rather than envy or admiration.

Meanwhile, all the others were asking me, “So, you speak Javanese? Is it difficult? There’s no one else who speaks it here.”

‘Eventually the hostile-looking clerk piped up: “That’s true, but I speak Kanak... Can you speak Kanak? I said “No” and went off to be introduced to the minister.

‘His Eminence rose from his chair, stood arms akimbo for a moment, adjusted his pince-nez, and finally asked, “So, you speak Javanese?” I said “Yes” and, in answer to his question about where I learnt it, I wheeled out the story about my Javanese father again. “Right...” said the minister. “Nevertheless, your physical appearance is not ambassadorial. The best thing would be a consulate in Asia or Oceania. There are no vacancies at present, but I shall find you a place after the forthcoming re-organisation. Until then you will be an attaché at the ministry here and next year you will go to Basel, where you will represent Brazil at the Linguistics Congress. In the meantime, study! Read Hove-Iacque, Max Müller etc.!”

‘So there I was, knowing next to no Javanese, but employed by the foreign office, and about to represent Brazil at a learned congress!

‘Before long the old Baron died, leaving the book to his son-in-law until his grandson came of age, and leaving me a little something in his will.

‘I launched myself enthusiastically into the study of the Malayo-Polynesian languages, but it was no good! I was now well-fed, well-dressed and enjoying my sleep; I simply didn’t have the energy to force all that weird stuff into my head. I bought books and subscribed to journals: *The Revue Anthropologique et Linguistique*, the Proceedings of the Anglo-Oceanic Association, the *Archivo Glottologico Italiano*, you name it! All to no avail. But that didn’t stop my fame growing. People would point me out in the street and proclaim: “That’s the man who speaks Javanese!” Grammarians approached me in bookshops to ask me about the collocation of pronouns in that Sunda Islands lingo. I started receiving letters from learned people in the interior of Brazil, the papers used to cite me as an authority, and I turned down a request from a group of students who were anxious to understand the language. At the invitation of the editor of the *Comércio* I wrote a full-page article about ancient and modern Javanese literature...’

‘How?!.. seeing you knew nothing about it,’ interrupted Castro, who’d been following every word.

‘Piece of cake! First I described the island of Java with the help of dictionaries and a few geography books and I padded out the rest with quotations.’

‘And they never suspected?!’ asked my friend.

‘Never. That’s to say, apart from one time when I almost came a cropper. The police arrested a bloke, a dark-skinned sailor who spoke

a strange language no one could understand. They summoned various interpreters, but none of them could understand him. And they approached me, with all due respect – of course – for my erudition. I was in two minds whether to go, but in the end... I went. Fortunately he'd already been released, thanks to the intervention of the Dutch consul, to whom he'd managed to say a few words in Dutch. And yes: he was Javanese!.. Phew!

'Finally it was time for the congress, so off I went to Europe... where I had a ball! After the inauguration and the preliminary sessions, they registered me for the Tupi-Guarani Section, which was in Paris. But before I went, I got my picture published in the *Basler Zeitung*, together with my biographical and bibliographical details. When I got back, the president of the congress couldn't apologise enough for having registered me for that section: he hadn't been familiar with my work and had assumed that, because I was Brazilian, the Tupi-Guarani section would be just the thing. I accepted his apologies and promised to send him some of my works on Javanese; but I never did – never had the time.

'When the congress was over, I published extracts of my article in the *Basler Zeitung* in Berlin, Turin and Paris, where the readers of my works invited me to a banquet hosted by Senator Gorot. All this ballyhoo, including the banquet, cost me about ten thousand francs, almost all my bequest from dear old credulous Baron Jacuecanga.

'But neither my time nor my money had been wasted. I'd become a national treasure: when I disembarked at Pharoux I received an ovation from rich and poor alike and, just a few days later, the President of the Republic invited me for lunch.

'Before six months had passed, I was despatched to Havana as consul. I stayed there six years. And I'll go back to perfect my knowledge of the Malayan, Melanesian and Polynesian languages.'

'Amazing!' said Castro, clasping his empty beer glass in both hands.

'Guess what I really wanted to be, apart from being happy.'

'What?'

'An eminent bacteriologist... Ready?'

'Ready.'

