

FIVE FACES

This film is held by the BFI (ID: 29662).



SYNOPSIS

The ethnic groups, ceremonies and industries of Malaya.

RI. 1. BBFC certificate (11). Credits and main title "FIVE FACES". "A film of Malaya made with the cooperation of the governments of the federated Malay states and the Straits Settlements." (85). Malayan jungle and mountain scenes with wildlife - an elephant, monkey and tiger (165). Tribesmen - the Sakai - walking through the jungle and demonstrating the use of blow pipes. The blow pipes are shot into a tree - no kill is made (262). The men rafting on a river, while women collect water in hollow bamboo stems (316) A village of houses built on stilts (322). Village scenes, women enter the huts with the collected water; the men return to the village (367). The women cooking rice in hollow bamboo stems (392). Young men practising making fire by friction; a fire is started (454). Pan of the village (464). Map of Malaya (472). Commentary states how the the Malays are a mixture of Sakia, Mongols and Southern Indians from where they dervied their love of ceremonial. Scenes of an investiture held by H.H. The Sultan of Selangor (?); men in procession; the Sultan takes his seat at the ceremony (held indoors). Courtiers and ladies of the court look on. The chiefs pay homage to the Sultan (606). Pan left of coast, fishing boat and fishing village on the Malay coast (647); men mending nets in the village intercut with fishing boat scenes. The commentary outlines the characteristics of the Malaysians (672). Travelling shot of mangrove swamps on the West coast (706). Fishing inland on a river using cast nets (761). Pan right of mangrove swamp to primitive water wheel in operation; water running along troughs to irrigate rice fields (803). Rice harvesting scenes; women collecting the rice heads (859); men collecting and threshing the rice stalks (885); women pounding rice with a foot-generated wooden hammer (982). Commentary begins a history of the colonial development of Malaya illustrated with prints. The Portuguese in Malaya; Malacca (Melaka) and Portuguese history (1064). Ruins of the Catholic church (St. Paul's ?) built by Alfonso d'Albuquerque (1086). The Dutch take over of Malacca - the ruins of the entrance to the Dutch fort (?) (1105-1122). The rise of Singapore, the role of the British, and Sir Stamford Raffles (1185). Travelling shot from a ship steaming through Singapore Strait and into Singapore harbour, passing junks, other merchant ships and into the harbour and waterfront of Singapore (1294). HAS looking down on a bridge with boats sailing underneath and people crossing the bridge (1303). The harbour and waterfront (1314). LS over the city towards Government House (?) (1321). The tin mining industry: Chinese miners at work digging by hand (1411). A crane in operation (1429); dredging for tin (1454); using hydraulic pressure (1500); sluicing for the tin (1554). A rubber plantation; trees tended by Tamils (1599); tapping the trees; sap collected in a cup (1642); the sap collected by a Tamil woman (1654).

RI. 2. The collected sap is carried in buckets to the collection point and poured into large vats. The production of rubber sheets at the rubber plantation; the sap is passed through a washing solution of acid; the sheets are passed through a wringer and made thin; they are then hung out to dry (86). The newly formed Malay Regiment on parade (133). Colonial life: the British in Malaya playing golf (142); a luxury swimming pool complex (152). Street scenes of Malaya (190). Other industries: tea plantations - Tamil women pick tea (222); collecting, sorting and packing into baskets pineapples (243); the collection of coconuts for copra (254); forestry, Malays erect a ladder alongside a large tree; the boughs are cut off (306). A new block of flats - commentary states that the British introduced sanitation (315). LS aeroplane in flight (320). Aerial view of unidentified harbour with many ships (326). A modern water dam, pan left to electricity pylon (337). Malay Sultans and their lifestyle. Pan down Sultan of Perak's Palace; the Sultan leaves his palace under the protection of an umbrella held by a servant (353); CS the Sultan mounting a horse (359). The Sultan of Pahang and an official, both dressed in tennis whites, walk down a

TITLES

FIVE FACES OF MALAYA (Alternative)
 FIVE FACES

TECHNICAL DATA

Year:	1938
Running Time:	36 minutes
Film Gauge (Format):	35mm Film
Colour:	Black/White
Sound:	Sound
Footage:	3250 ft

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Production Countries:	Great Britain
Director	SHAW, Alexander
commentator	MITCHELL, Leslie
Music	CHAGRIN, Francis
Music	Kuala Lumpur Police Band
Photography	CHEATLE, Oliver
Photography	NOBLE, George
Production Company	Strand Film Company
Sound	Imperial Sound Studios

[click to collapse](#)

COUNTRIES

Malaya

THEMES

Empire and Administration

GENRES

Non-fiction

path (371). Malayan children seen going to school - they walk along a country road (379). The Malaya police force, recruited from Malays, drilling at the central depot in Kuala Lumpur (423). The ruler of Negri Sembilan walks in state under the royal umbrella (445). Muslims going to, entering and praying in mosque (482). Malay villages and scenes of everyday, traditional rural life (526). A Malay marriage ceremony. The first part of the ceremony - only men attend - ritualised greeting and face washing under a tree (549). The groom and entourage go to collect the bride. The bride and groom sit under an awning and are helped ritually to feed each other with yellow rice signifying faithfulness (654). Pastimes of the Malays; rock sliding at a waterfall (700); sepringer (?) a game in which a wicker ball is kicked into the air, the aim of the game is not to let the ball hit the ground and to use only feet. The game is very similar to sepak takraw but there is no net (757); basilat (?) a kind of boxing using feet and hands, the object of the game is to hit your opponent's body while defending yourself from being hit (803); Rongin (?) a form of dancing developed from the Sakia and Hindus (975). Jungle scenes (997). Tamils, commentary discusses their spread into the jungle with their rubber plantations (1014); the Chinese and their tin mining (1014); the British providing the administration over image of man playing golf (1033); the Sakai who move further into the jungle (1042). Men with elephants (1073). Malay regiment (or police in ceremonial uniform drill) then march to camera (1110). The End (1117). (2771ft).

Note: The Kinematograph Weekly reference mentions the development of Singapore as a naval base for Britain. This is not present in the above catalogued film and may explain why the film is 4 minutes shorter than its original release length. The film may also have been released as a shorter (20 minute) version under the title *The FIVE FACES OF MALAYA*.

Note: The Archive holds a shorter version of this film (1588ft). The film contains much of the above material but is lacking the development of Singapore during the Dutch and Portuguese occupations; colonial life scenes; the production of rubber sheets; tea plantations; the Malay Regiment and the Malayan police force. There is no Malayan music. The title reads *FIVE FACES* and the credits are listed only for director, photography, music and commentator.

[click to collapse](#)

CONTEXT

An article in the *Straits Times* in January 1937 reported that a team of three (Ralph Keene and Alexander Shaw, both well known filmmakers from the documentary film industry, and cameraman George Noble) had recently arrived in Singapore to begin production on a film showing the 'life and industry of Malaya'. 'Because the existing publicity films on Malaya are so old that no theatre bookings can be obtained for them overseas', the report began, 'the F.M.S. and Colony Governments decided to have a new one made. They saw the opportunity when Imperial Airways arranged to make a film of Empire Air Routes' (*Straits Times*, 28 January 1937, 12).

In 1936 Imperial Airways had commissioned Strand Films to make a series of documentaries, including *The Future's in the Air* and *Air Outpost*, which sought to bind the Empire together and served as 'hi-tech Empire travelogues' (Anthony, 2010). During their travels, the Strand filmmakers secured further commissions from trade and State, producing *Dawn Over Iran* for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and *Five Faces* for the Malayan Government on their journey home from Australia. Produced at a cost of \$11,500, *Five Faces* was shot in three weeks as Alexander Shaw travelled quickly across the country capturing 8000 feet of film (*Straits Times*, 27 February 1939, 13; *World Film News*, May/June 1938, 54). The Malayan Government had commissioned the London-based Greville Brothers to produce one-reel films on Malayan life and industries in 1927, but now sought a two-reel, sound production, primarily intended to present Malaya to British and international audiences.

By May 1937, a rough version of the film was presented in London to a private audience including the Sultan of Penang, the Sultan of Trengganu and the Yam Tuan of Negri Sembilan, who were in Britain for the Coronation (*The Times*, 22 May 1937, 10). The film played regularly at the Imperial Institute cinema during 1939 and 1940 and featured at the Tatler Cinema in London as part of Empire Week in May 1940, where it played alongside *Men of Africa* and *Wings over Empire* in a programme of films that 'quietly and undemonstratively do something to explain the responsibilities of Empire' (*The Times*, 21 May 1940, 4). The film was also widely advertised for non-theatrical hire, particularly to schools, in Britain and America. It was not widely shown in Malaya, although when it was screened for the first time in Kuala Lumpur in August 1939 at the cinema hall of the Malayan Agri-

Horticultural Association's exhibition, *The Straits Times* argued that it 'should be shown in every cinema throughout the country' (*Straits Times*, 8 August 1939, 14).

Film historian Scott Anthony argues that *Five Faces* exemplifies a 'certain strand of inter-war liberalism', showing five nations, each defined by a different way of life (or product), working together as one (Anthony, 2010). This formal structure, followed in subsequent documentaries such as *Voices of Malaya* (1948), endorses an established British policy, which sought to maintain ethnic boundaries within Malaya and build up a Malay elite. At a moment when the Japanese threat was growing ever stronger, the notion of Malaya, with its disparate cultures, united within the Empire, became all the more pertinent. Malaya, to an extent, serves as a microcosm of the Empire at large here, as Shaw recognised in his correspondence with Paul Rotha. 'After all the nonsense one has heard about the British Empire', he wrote, 'at least one can say that if there are going to be Empires, Malaya would serve as a pretty good model for how they should be run'. While it is easy to dismiss the idealism of the film (the final lines talk of the five races 'living in harmony' and respecting one another's beliefs and customs), particularly in light of the post-war Malayan Emergency, Shaw's correspondence shows his own belief in such a vision. 'Five races, five creeds – and oddly enough they all get on fairly well', he wrote (cited in Anthony, 2010).

It is worth noting that the three filmmakers involved on this project would all work on other colonial projects over the next two decades. After producing *Men of Africa* for the Colonial Office, Alexander Shaw went to India in 1940 to oversee the productions of the Film Advisory Board. Ralph Keene made *Cyprus is an Island* (1945), then filmed in India in 1947 (producing *A String of Beads*) and in Malaya during the 1950s, while from 1949, George Noble would serve as chief cameraman and right-hand man to Sean Graham on the Gold Coast Film Unit.

[click to collapse](#)

ANALYSIS

In introducing each 'face' in turn, *Five Faces* emphasises the clearly delineated racial groups within Malaya. It notes that the Sakai tribes 'still pursue their primitive way of living', while the Malay 'are satisfied with a carefree life in the sun ... gossiping and mending their nets'. This structure was similarly adopted in press reports, which discussed each racial group in turn while attributing defining characteristics to the groups ('the Chinese work hard at everything') (*World Film News*, May/June 1938, 55). While offering often-beautiful photography of the Malay people, *Five Faces* appears to perpetuate existing stereotypes of the different races in Malaya. The film opens with shots of the jungle, 'which for thousands of years have resisted the advances of civilisation' and throughout shows continuing traditions ('old ways of living continue', 'primitive ways of agriculture') often relying on familiar iconography. On first glance then, it may appear that *Five Faces* is a further endorsement of British development within previously 'primitive' lands and cultures. However, the film's representation of the British is more complicated than this, as the British are equally susceptible to Shaw's visual stereotyping, defined as they are entirely by leisure activities, and are not afforded a position of prominence within the film.

The commentary notes that the British brought 'peace and prosperity' to the country, but for the most part the British appear as just another 'face', and the least interesting one at that. As a review in the *Straits Times* commented, 'the European, important for Malaya though he considers himself, is not given much prominence in this film' (*Straits Times*, 8 August 1939, 14). Shaw presents anthropological shots of the rarely seen Sakai tribe, and through the camera movement, close-ups and point-of-view shots places the viewers amongst the Sakai within the jungle. In contrast the British are afforded little screen time, shown briefly and from a distance, and defined entirely by their modes of leisure. When showing the influence of the British on local life, the film depicts the 'Oxford-educated' Sultan, who is shown playing tennis. As the commentary talks of the 'developments' introduced by the British, it shows Major W.H. Elkins wandering around a golf course. The disparity between the image (playing golf and drinking tea) and the commentary (which talks of development) may invite the viewer to question this British contribution. The British appear as just another largely self-contained group co-existing within Malaya ('side by side with the golf clubs and the swimming pools are the streets of the Chinese people'). This slightly dismissive representation of British authority was picked up on in a report on the film in *World Film News*, a journal closely associated with the British documentary movement. 'They [the British] leave no mark on the country', the report concluded, 'except Golf Courses, Race Tracks and Big Hotels – just like London –

and all waiting for the day to retire with £600 a year to Tonbridge, Bexhill, Bognor' (*World Film News*, May/June 1938, 55).

Tom Rice (July 2010)

[click to collapse](#)

WORKS CITED

Anthony, Scott, 'Five Faces of Malaya: Strand Films, Imperial Airways and new anthropological visions of Empire', conference paper delivered at 'Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire', London Conference, 8 July 2010.

'Talkie Films of Malayan Life for World's Screens', *Straits Times*, 28 January 1937, 12.

'Five Faces of Malaya', *Straits Times*, 27 February 1939, 13.

'Film that should be shown throughout Malaya', *Straits Times*, 8 August 1939, 14.

'A Film of the Malay States', *The Times*, 22 May 1937, 10.

'Empire Week at the Tatler Cinema: Problems of Colonial Administration', *The Times*, 21 May 1940, 4.

'Five Faces', *World Film News*, May/June 1938, Volume 3 No 2, 54-55.

[click to collapse](#)

[A-Z Films](#) | [Contact Us](#)

The Colonial Film website is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and features films from the British Film Institute, the Imperial War Museum, and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum.

© 2010 All rights reserved

