

Moving to a New Past: Unmasking the Mission Civilisatrice

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“No man stands alone directly confronting a world of solid fact...Their images of the world, and of themselves, are given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and never shall meet. Yet for every man these images – provided by strangers and dead men – are the basis of his life as a human being.”

C. Wright Mills, *The Cultural Apparatus*¹

*I*n the attempt to understand the Malay condition today, appeals to the past are among the most common strategies used to interpret the present. Though much scholastic effort on Malay studies has been undertaken along these lines, the dominant paradigm has largely reflected a Western bias, which in its severe form manifests itself in generalizations, oversimplification and caricaturing, as demonstrated in statements such as, “I should say that the Malays of the Peninsula is the most steadfast loafer on the face of the earth...He will work neither for himself, for the Government, nor for private employers...For nine-tenths of his waking hours, year in and year out, he sits on a wooden bench in the shade and watched the Chinaman and the Tamil builds roads and railways, work the mines, cultivate the soil, raise cattle, and pay the taxes”², which were regarded like expressions of wisdom which very few dissected. ‘Apparently’, climate and geography dictated certain character traits in the Malay; he was essentially lazy, just as the British was essentially energetic and resourceful. By and large, disciplines like anthropology, history and sociology regarding the Malays were built out of these dicta. There is an urgent need, therefore, to deconstruct such populist notions regarding the Malays. It should be noted that for a very long time, silence from and about the ‘Other’ was the order of the day. What students of Malay studies should be interested in is to find strategies for breaking this silence.

Scholastic discussions regarding the Malays (and in social sciences dealing with former colonies of Western powers) contain many elements of orientalism, which is defined by Edward Said as “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European western experience...The Orient has helped to define Europe (or

the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality and experience.”³ Orientalism is based on the basic assumption that Europe is more superior because it represents the higher state of progress. Thus, as Europe is ‘essentially’ civilised and rational, the East is ‘essentially’ the binary opposite: despotic, authoritarian, barbaric and irrational.

This mindset has dominated scholarship for the past century or so, and culpability for the paradigm lies with imperialism and colonisation. In order to challenge this mindset, it is imperative to foster a deep understanding of Malay history in order to appreciate the impacts of imperialism and colonialism on Malay thought and scholarship. Imperialism describes “the growth and the use of something intangible, manifested in concrete changes; these practical changes constitute the essence of colonisation, which is facilitated by the political supremacy (whether formally proclaimed or unofficial but nonetheless effective) of the expanding society in areas outside its base territory.” In contrast, colonisation “manifests itself by the changes wrought about by the processes of imperialism. It is the process by which territories and their inhabitants are remolded under the direction of non-indigenous persons.”⁴ Therefore, while colonisation and imperialism are complementary aspects of the same process, they differ in the sense that imperialism is intangible whereas colonisation is tangible. This distinction is crucial, because countries can attain independence after the period of colonisation, but still have not obtained freedom from imperialism. Imperialist continuities until the present day is made possible by the simple fact that it is easier to resist something which can be seen, that is colonisation, rather than something which is intangible. I will return to this point again later.

Imperialism is frequently portrayed as a noble enterprise, based on the fundamental belief of the white man’s superiority, as opposed to the native’s delinquency. This is perhaps exemplified in Rudyard Kipling’s ‘White Man’s Burden’: *“Take up the White Man’s burden // Send forth the best ye breed- // Go, bind your sons to exile // To serve your captives’ need; // To wait, in heavy harness, // On fluttered folk and wild- // Your new caught sullen peoples, // Half devil and half child...”* In reality, however, one of the most crucial reasons for the imperial project of the British, or the north European colonialists in general, has been the transplantation of the seeds of its own dynamic economy into the soil of lands backward in the modern science and technique, which means that it is based on exploitation and not on the nobility of the

imperialist enterprise. Hence, imperialism was in its essences an unequal relationship between unequal interlocutors, for the colonial masters were interested in developing the colonies for their own economic interests, which in this case meant sourcing for raw materials to support the industrialisation in Europe; and not the provision of assistance to guide native lands towards modernisation.

It is in my personal observation that a number of fellow students argued that colonialism brought some benefits to the Malays, for instance the establishment of the civil service and the introduction of democracy. However, the civil service was developed to protect the interests of the colonial masters themselves; for instance, the establishment of the police force, comprised mainly of Malays, was not to create employment opportunities, but to ensure law and order so that the colonial and capitalist machinery could run smoothly. With regards to democracy, it is certain that colonial masters did not practice it in the Malay states; as Edward Said puts it, colonisation provided only two options for the dominated people: serve, or be destroyed. This is certainly not democracy; thus, how can we be grateful to the colonial masters for 'teaching' us this? Also, it would be a gross injustice to the hard work of the Singapore government if one were to attribute our economic success to colonialism. These excuses which defended the colonial system are methods of justification of the colonial ideology – if perpetuated, then it means that we ourselves are justifying colonisation.

A short discussion on the vernacular education system established by the British will serve to illustrate my point. As generally misconstrued by many, the vernacular education system did little to stimulate any intellectual development or improve the lives of the Malays. The schooling system consisted of basic skills: reading, writing and arithmetic, meant not to enable Malays to climb the social ladder, but to “educate the rural population in a suitable rural manner and equip them to continue to live a useful, happy rural life.”⁵ Thus, the objective of the vernacular system correlates with the aims of indirect rule, which is to preserve the traditional society as much as possible. It should be noted that only a small proportion of state budgets were allocated to educational ends, and there was also a severe shortage of pedagogical materials, coupled with neglect and incompetence among teachers. With such poor educational facilities, there is little surprise when Roff reported that of the

2900 boys who left the state vernacular schools in 1903, only one found employment as a clerk.⁶ Roff also quotes the condescending remarks of the Resident, E.W. Birch, who advocated the low educational level of the Malay vernacular school system, as such: “It is very satisfactory to know that this system does not overeducate the boys...[who] almost all followed the avocations of their parents or their relations, chiefly in agricultural pursuits.”⁷ Essentially, in not ‘overeducating’ the Malays, the colonial administrators wanted to prevent the creation of an educated class of malcontents who might challenge colonial authority. Thus, the combined effects of feudalism and indirect colonial rule effectively repressed the Malays and crushed the possibilities of them joining the march towards progress.

Therefore, despite the self-righteous, ‘benevolent’ ethos of the imperialist ideology of civilising the natives, we can see that it has not been realised in the case of the Malays. For those who view colonialism as ‘altruistic’, Fanon’s penetrating remark makes an excellent counter-argument: “The settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey. He is the absolute beginning, ‘This land was created by us’; he is the unceasing cause: ‘If we leave all is lost, and the country will go back to the Middle Ages.’ Over and against him, torpid creatures wasted by fevers, obsessed by ancestral customs, form an almost inorganic background for the innovating dynamism of colonial mercantilism.”⁸ This requires little elaboration; suffice to reiterate that colonisation was based essentially on exploitation, not charity. Furthermore, the official British colonial report is based on the tacit assumption that the growing revenues and exports are certain indices of the well-being of colonial society and the colonial government, complacently ignoring such matters as standards of living and the crushing out of the right of men to rise up to place and power in their own society. Therefore, when we refer back to Kipling’s notion of imperialism as a noble enterprise, we find that it is not so: imperialism is basically a hypocrisy that is veiled under morality and a shroud of lofty ideals.

A better understanding of Malay history necessarily entails the realisation that the ‘facts’ and ‘anecdotes’ that have been accepted as popular belief are usually adumbrated. A prime example of the stereotypical image of the indolent Malay (prevalent in popular thinking and some Malay scholarship) is the product of colonial domination generally in the 19th century when the domination of the colonies reached a high peak and when colonial

capitalist exploitation necessitated extensive control of the area. From the accounts of colonial observers of the Malays, the image of the Malay as being indolent was because he preferred to be an independent farmer rather than become a tool in the production system of colonial capitalism, performing slave-like duties in plantations and tin mines.⁹ It is important to note that indolence is characterised by an evasive response to circumstances which require toil and effort. Thus, an able man who has a family to support but does not work can be considered indolent; however, the Malay farmer who works on his rice fields so that he can feed his family is not indolent. Furthermore, the Malays being rural people, did not come into close contact with the British, who were mostly concentrated in cities and towns. The British preferred the labour of the immigrants, especially the Chinese, who were described as “the mule among the nations” and could be made to realise “that he is not on an equality with Europeans.”

However, there are many obvious criticisms that can be made about the stereotypical images of the Malays. Alatas has exposed the falsity of such generalisations, asserting that the Malays would not have survived as human beings if they detested routine work and were indolent.¹⁰ Furthermore, it would be absurd to observe the traits of some people in the community and generalise those traits to be the psychological make-up of the whole ethnic group. For example, it would be a gross generalisation to say that *all* Malays are drug-takers because *some* are; *all* Malays are murderers because *some* are; and *all* Malays are lazy because *some* are. Another perception regarding the Malays is that they do not make proficient capitalists, unlike the Chinese. Tania Li has pointed out that this is a myth and not a fact, because the success of the Chinese in business is due to the existence of kongsis or clan associations which enabled Chinese immigrants to set up business in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the Chinese developed the ‘immigrant mentality’, which meant that they had to succeed so that they do not have to return to the life they escaped from in China.

The Malays, constrained by indirect rule and essentially remaining under the system of feudalism, developed no such psychology. It is important to note that stereotypical images of the Chinese created by the British has had very different impacts on them compared to the impact of the ‘indolent’ image of the Malays. The stereotypical image of the Chinese as ‘industrious’ and ‘good businessmen’ – due to their participation in the colonialist’s capitalist

system – had benefited them tremendously, because when they internalised those perceptions of themselves, they would be motivated to work even harder. Certainly, the image of the Chinese as proficient capitalists is as much a myth as Malays are indolent, because that image would be considered unacceptable for the Chinese in China – a country which, until recently, has constantly resisted the capitalist system. Therefore, the image of the whole Chinese community being industrious as opposed to the whole Malay community being indolent is merely the creation of the colonial capitalist class.

The Malays' refusal to be enslaved by the British was in fact one of the earliest forms of resistance to the European incursion. Why should the Malays work in plantations for meagre salaries only for the benefit of someone else? Out of this welter emerges the mythical figure of the lazy Malay; based on the false consciousness of colonialists unwilling to accept that the Malays' refusal to work was that they detested the exploitation. Eventually however, this stereotyped image steadily acquired consistency, authority and the irrefutable immediacy of objective reality. Colonial officials then constructed a rationale in furthering subjugating and punishing the Malays, since the decline of their national character had already occurred, as these officials saw it, and was irreversible. The image of the lazy Malay eventually influenced the thinking of many who existed within the economic, political and social spheres of the colonialists; including authors, journalists, businessmen, and visitors. More profoundly, the Malays were forced to accept the stereotype of them being indolent, because they were powerless to resist against it. Once this stereotype was disseminated, its historical root was soon forgotten; it became a dominant theory, and eventually, became accepted as the 'truth' itself. The point here is, simply, that dominant thinking possesses a fortified bulwark – which includes, among others, self-legitimization and a self-perpetuating mechanism – such that it becomes difficult to challenge.

A difficult task does not mean it is impossible to achieve. What I am calling for, essentially, is a paradigm shift from dominant thinking which has resulted from imperialism and colonisation. This brings me to the point which I made earlier in this essay, when I distinguished between colonisation and imperialism. A society can attain political independence (when colonisation ceases) but can still remain a cultural colony, in which the society is still enslaved by dominant imperialist thought and ideology. This happens when

there has not been a break in the form of thinking at the deeper psychological level, even after independence.

This paradigm shift requires that a scholar be sensitive enough to identify elements of both Orientalism and Occidentalism, and subsequently eliminate these elements when making a constructive criticism of the Malays with the intention of helping the Malays. To put it succinctly, one should be aware of the distortive effects of two types of mentalities, utopia and ideology, as postulated by Mannheim. He defines utopia as such: “A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs...Only those orientations transcending the reality will be referred to by us as utopian which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at that time.”¹¹

Thus, utopia refers to ideas which seek to deny or change the status quo or order. In contrast, ideology means that “opinions, statements, propositions, and systems of ideas are not taken at face value but are interpreted in the light of the life-situation of the one who expresses them. It signifies further that the specific character and life-situation of the subject influence his opinions, perceptions, and interpretations.”¹² Thus, ideology refers to ideas which seek to justify the existing conditions, status quo or establishment. Writers like Mahathir (*The Malay Dilemma*), Za’ba (*Perangai Bergantung Pada Diri Sendiri*) and Senu Abdul Rahman (*Revolusi Mental*) has adopted the position of ideology in their writings. No doubt these writers are sympathetic towards the Malays but their writings which are condescending in nature further repress the Malays rather than liberating them. Future scholars, thus, should attempt to overcome ideology and utopia by taking a relativist position; and contribute significantly to Malay society.

A relativist position does not mean non-partisan; it simply entails the weighing of various available perspectives before a stand is taken. This methodology is effective in preventing xenophobia, or being apologetic for the Malays. It also enables us to challenge the dominant ideology, because its dominance does not necessarily attest to its ‘infallible truth’. In short, it enables the Malays to reject imperialism. It should be made explicit that rejecting imperialism is not the same as rejecting western ideas and culture; because “the

history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable, just as Western science borrowed from Arabs, they borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriation, common experiences and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm. Who has yet determined how much the domination of others contributed to the enormous wealth of the English and French states?"¹³ Hence, for the Malays to move forward, they can adopt Western ideas, involve themselves in capitalism, pursue studies in the West and so on, but they must reject imperialist notions of them being inferior or incapable.

In conclusion, our paradigm shift necessitates a mental de-colonisation, to expel colonial hangover attitudes, perceptions and stereotypical images, on the part of both the Malay layman and scholars dealing with Malay studies. If our forefathers can exhibit some forms of resistance to colonialism by refusing to be enslaved by the system, is it not possible for us to show the same resilience? Having said that, I feel much more contributions are needed in studies concerning the Malays without exhibiting Orientalist or Occidentalist notions. I feel that such studies are meaningful as they can contribute to the continuing discussion on Malay development and perhaps help the Malays in taking progressive and confident steps forward.

"My final prayer :

O my body, make me always a man who questions!"

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

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End Notes

¹ C. Wright Mills, *The Cultural Apparatus*. pp. 405-6.

² This description regarding the Malays is taken from S.H. Alatas' book, *Myth of the Lazy Native*. p. 214. Alatas quotes a foreign scholar at the turn of the century regarding his thoughts about the Malays.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. pp. 1-2.

⁴ I thank Dr. Srilata Ravi from the European Studies Programme, NUS, for the definitions of imperialism and colonialism. These definitions are from Alex G. Hargreave, *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction*.

⁵ W. R. Roff, *Origins of Malay Nationalism*. p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 25.

⁷ *Op. cit.*

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

⁹ S. H. Alatas, *Myth of the Lazy Native*. pp. 204-5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 79.

¹¹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. p. 173.

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 49-50.

¹³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. pp. 261-2.

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