

Colonial Knowledge, Invention and Reinvention of Malay Identity in Pre-Independence Malaya: A Retrospect

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how Malay identity in the pre-colonial era was ruler-centred and specific towards kingdoms of Malaccan descent changed to become a 'bangsa Melayu' encompassing all the definitive peoples of Malaya under the name of Malay. The crucial break between an identity which was kerajaan centred and a larger imagined Malay ethnics came with the introduction and expansion of colonial knowledge. Colonial knowledge in essence played a catalytic role in providing new notions of what constituted Malayness and its attributing characteristics. Similarly, the dominant position of colonial knowledge introduced a common history of origin among the Malays, a geographical boundary, the emphasis on Malay special rights and racial politics and the promotion of education and print culture among the Malays. The introduction of these modern gesellschaft features promoted a sense of unity among the Malays and created an imagined larger community which was 'bangsa' orientated. This was further enhanced through the struggle for Malaya's independence.

Key words: ethnics, bangsa, colonial knowledge, identity

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini membincangkan bagaimana identiti Melayu pada zaman pra-kolonial yang berpusatkan raja dan khusus berdasarkan kerajaan keturunan Melaka berubah untuk menjadi bangsa Melayu yang meliputi semua kaum peribumi di Malaya yang memakai nama Melayu. Penyebab utama kepada perubahan ini ialah pengenalan dan perkembangan ilmu kolonial. Ilmu ini mencetuskan idea baru mengenai pengkonsepsian Melayu dengan menekankan sejarah asal-usul kedatangan orang Melayu ke Tanah Melayu, penentuan sempadan geografi, mengutamakan hak istimewa orang Melayu, pengenalan politik perkauman, serta kemudahan pendidikan dan pengenalan media cetak. Ciri-ciri gesellschaft ini memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk perpaduan di kalangan orang Melayu sehingga tercetusnya satu komuniti lebih besar yang diimajinasikan yang berpusatkan bangsa. Rasa kebangsa ini ditingkatkan lagi melalui perjuangan untuk kemerdekaan Malaya.

Kata kunci: ethnics, bangsa, pengetahuan kolonial, identiti

INTRODUCTION

The Malays have been a dominant political force in the Malay Peninsula even before the onset of colonial rule and also after it. They have been the focus of various studies undertaken by the colonials. Yet Malayness or Malay identity remains a thorny issue. Malays are often regarded as a single ethnic group with a common culture and little consideration is paid to the constructed nature or inventedness of Malayness (Shamsul 1996a). The problematic nature of Malay identity needs to be further investigated. Identity here is seen essentially as being the same as oneself and being different from others (Eriksen 1993). Thus, similar characteristics become identified with an *ethnie* and difference with other *ethnie* highlighted with the predominance of the 'we' versus 'them' sentiment. More importantly, identity is referred to a social identity as the identity of the collective gives meaning to the individual. Hence, Malayness is a collective identity shared by a group of people with shared characteristics such as language, culture, history and religion. Malay identity too has gone through various transformations, adaptations and changes – invented and reinvented according to the dominant ideologies of the time, be it the dominance of the *kerajaan*, colonial knowledge and the reconstruction of identity articulated by various Malay nationalist factions. Vickers (1997) argues that the Malay as we know today is an invented tradition – invented through dominance by colonial knowledge, discourse and definitions of the 'Malay' Other. This forms the starting point of this paper.

The paper explores the transformations occurring in the idea of Malayness namely Malay ethnicity and identity from the pre-colonial era to the colonial era. It probes the extent of colonial knowledge and its influence in the construction of the 'Malay' Other. The paper focuses on the competing definitions of what a Malay is as found in early Malay texts and colonial definitions; in short, it deals with the issue of how the 'Malay' is constructed and reconstructed, resulting in changing identities, but not about the epistemological basis of Malayness. Moving on from there, a few basic concepts will be strung together such as what is colonial knowledge and what is the importance of key terms such as identity, ethnicity and nationalism in relation to colonial knowledge. Firstly, the term 'Orang Melayu' (institutionalised in the seventeenth century *Sejarah Melayu*) is loosely accepted to be an *ethnie* (ethnic group) with a foundation based on myth of descent, historical memories, a territorial association and a sense of solidarity. However, the *ethnie* is not a political force until it has revived a sense of distinctiveness and greater solidarity. The crucial move from *ethnie* to nation would encompass three criteria, i.e., from isolation to activism, from quietism to mobilisation, and from culture to politics (Smith 1986). Thus an *ethnie* that aspires for nationhood, must become politicised and stake out claims in the competition for power and influence in the state arena by adapting attributes of *gesellschaft* such as rational political centralisation, mass literacy and social

mobilisation (Smith 1986: 156-57). Yet none of these changes happens merely by chance, as it is influenced by ideas from outside. In this sense, European modernity and English Orientalism acted to unify the Malays into a single ethnic unit both in the official census as well as in the promotion of differential treatment, historical reconstruction and the setting of territorial boundaries. This new dominant knowledge further acted to forge a Malay *ethnie* by reconstructing a common history, to reducing and downplaying the influence of the *kerajaan* and the ruler, to expedite the transition from *ethnie* to nation. Other *gesellschaft* features such as the provision of schools, Malay as a common language, a vernacular press and the promotion of racial politics, played a crucial role in forging Malay identity by creating a feeling of 'same as oneself' in contrast to 'being different' to the migrant races (Soenarno 1960; Roff 1967; Ericksen 1993). In essence, colonial knowledge had a dramatic impact on forging Malay identity. The dominating influence of colonial knowledge on the Other is noted by Inden (1986: 408).

The knowledge of the orientalist is, therefore privileged in relations to that of the orientals and invariably places itself in a relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the easterners. It has appropriated the power to represent the oriental, to translate and to explain his (or her) thoughts and not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the orientals themselves. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enables the orientalist and countrymen to gain concessions, conquer, rule, and punish in the East... In many respects the intellectual activities of the orientalist have even produced...the very orient which it constructed in its discourse.

Inden's statement is interesting on two accounts. First, by stating the knowledge of the orientalist as privileged in relation to the oriental; and secondly, how this privileged knowledge acts to subjugate the Other. However, there is another element that should be focussed on in relation to colonial knowledge, that is, colonial knowledge acts to influence and transform the Other – the very native it writes about into accepting, rationalising and utilising the essence of colonial knowledge on them. The colonial dominance goes to the extent of providing and reconstructing the identity of the Other so as the Other acts in line with the construct. Edward Said provided an interesting account on how the West reconstituted the Middle East or the Oriental (Said 1978). Similarly Inden (1986) and Cohn (1996) show on how various aspects of Indian culture was rewritten and acted to describe the proper Indian. The power of the orientalist rightfully transforms the Other into the image they perceive and create and these inventions of identity and culture were later inherited by the subjects of colonialism. The Malays fall within this scope as a new Malay identity emerged in contrast to pre-colonial Malay identity which was a royal scribal invention of the seventeenth century. However, it is the nineteenth century British presence in the Malay Peninsula which saw a reconstitution of the Malay according to their colonial knowledge and it is these definitions that have reconstructed Malayness.

Colonial knowledge is gathered by a set of investigative modalities aimed at gathering the information needed and ordering them into usable forms such as reports, census, histories, encyclopaedia etc. There are six investigative modalities outlined by Cohn, among them, historiographic modality, the travel, the survey, the museological, the enumerative and surveillance modality (Cohn 1996: 5-11). In the context of the Malays, the British used various investigative modalities to gain insight into their objects of study. For instance, by using the historiographic modality, the British proposed a theory of migration from Southern China to explain the arrival of the Malays to the Malay world and by doing so, acted to nullify the mythical origins of the *kerajaan* in the Malay texts. It also acted to create a common history in opposition to traditionalist heroic history. Similarly, the enumerative modality, by clustering the various Malay sub-ethnic groups as a unified people in opposition to economic immigrants acted to forge a Malay unified nation. The definition of Malay accepted in the 1940s meetings of Malays (see Roff 1967) adopted the census definition of who is a Malay. Likewise the survey modality provided the colonial officers rich ethnographic material on the ordering of the Malay society encompassing culture, politics, history, literature and economics. The works on the Malays by prominent colonial writers such as Winstedt (1947, 1966), Wilkinson (1971), Wheeler (1928) and Swettenham (1899, 1948) have played a crucial role in documenting various aspects of Malay social life. The collection of these knowledges on the other hand provided the British with the know-how to better control and subjugate their Malay subjects, promoting change in Malay life and indirectly providing the Malays with a new constructed knowledge base to be utilised in their everyday life. Thus, when the British signed treaties, they effectively introduced a system of fixed boundaries in the Malay world, forever changing the boundary system of the traditional *kerajaan*. Likewise, their propagation of the Malay Land too was later adopted by the Malays as their own geographical boundary. In short, colonial knowledge is all encompassing, initially constructed through the eyes of the colonials, and later applied and used by the Malays in ordering their social life. The far-reaching implications of colonial knowledge is the focus of this paper in relation to inventing 'Malay' identity. 'Inventing' because identities change, and in the case of the Malays, it was due to the strong and dominating influence of colonial knowledge. However, it must be stressed further that Malayness was contested even among the different factions of the Malay intelligentsia in the pre-independence era (e.g. PKMM and UMNO). As such, Malay identity as this paper argues, is a highly fluid concept, constantly changing and redefined by different world views on what Malayness should be. Perhaps a point to remember is that colonial knowledge provided the basis for the transformation of Malayness by introducing *gesellschaft* features into the Malay community, by so doing, challenging the pre-colonial *kerajaan* and reinventing Malay identity.

THE MALAYS IN PRE-COLONIAL MALAY TEXTS

The earliest Malay textual reference for the term Malay is found in *Sulatus Salatin* (*Peraturan Segala Raja-raja*) and later renamed *Sejarah Melayu* (Shellabear 1986) by the English. It refers to the term *Malay* originating from a place called *Sungai Melayu* or Tatang, believed to be in the area of Mt. Siguntang Mahameru. In this text, Mt. Mahameru is the seat for the descendants of Alexander the Great and King Kida Hindi of India to begin their rule. The descendants of Alexander, one Sang Nila Utama, founded Singapore and became king and his descendant, Raja Iskandar, was to discover Malacca. Later in the rule of Sultan Mansur Shah, his forces invaded Pahang which was under Maharaja Dewa Sura, a Hindu King (Wilkinson 1971). Mansur's later marriage to Dewa Sura's daughter produced the future heir to Pahang, as his eldest son Raja Muhammad was made Sultan. Perak too was conquered in the reign of Mansur. After the defeat of Malacca in 1511 to the Portuguese, the Malaccan kingdom retreated to Johor.

The very brief chronology of events is the movement of the Malays from Siguntang (historically the site of Sri Vijaya) down to Singapore to Malacca, than to Perak, Pahang and Johore, thus forming what was to be called the Malay kingdoms of pre-European Malaya. Another important feature is that there was no reference to any of the conquered territories as ever being referred to as Malay. Based on this, it would be fair to conclude that the author of *Sejarah Melayu* in the seventeenth century did not consider the inhabitants of other territories of Pahang, Perak or the northern states as inhabited by Malays (Shellabear 1978; Matheson 1979). Again, this acts to substantiate the 'Malay' as highly specific in reference to person-hood of Siguntang descent. This clearly outlines the Malay political culture of the time which centred around the ruler and his kingdom. The common man in this early political situation was of no importance as he was a subject of a great ruler who legitimated his existence. As far as *Sejarah Melayu* goes, it is quite certain that reference to *Melayu* is to its ruler from Siguntang (Palembang or Sri Vijaya) and the followers acquire the name to be called *Melayu* in line with their king. Perhaps most important is the social contract between Sang Sapurba as king and representative of a royal lineage with Demang Lebar Daun representing the people. Demang Lebar Daun requested Sang Sapurba to be fair to his people and treat them justly. In return Sang Sapurba demanded total loyalty of the *rakyat* for all times regardless if the ruler was cruel or otherwise. It is no wonder that for the Malay, the ruler is absolute righteousness and various proverbs such as "*pantang anak Melayu menderhaka kepada raja*", meaning "taboo is for a Malay to betray his ruler". Winstedt (1947) noted that the Malay king has multiple roles such as shaman or Incarnate of a Hindu God, and a caliph. Each of these roles puts him in a position of power, placing him aloof from the commoners.

The centrality of the Malay king in the social-political-religious realm of the Malay world is also noticeable in other texts. For instance, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*

(18th Century text) – a story about the greatness of a Malay warrior – begins with the genealogy of Malaccan kings from Bukit Siguntang. As descendants from heaven, the four princes of Siguntang became ruler of Malacca (the eldest, Sang Maniaka), the raja of India (the second), the third became ruler of Java and the fourth the ruler of Minangkabau. The point is that Hang Tuah's greatness is only second to his service and loyalty to, and greatness of, his king. This greatness is portrayed by various nobles being drawn to the greatness of Malacca. Here the reference of *Melayu* is again referred not to the whole Peninsula but to Malacca, Bentan and Siguntang (Palembang). Here again the use of *Melayu* is limited to places ruled by descendants from Siguntang. In fact, the contract between ruler and *rakyat* discussed earlier is pictured here by the loyal Hang Tuah who kidnaps Tun Teja for his king, kills his friend who challenges his king, and performs great feats in Majapahit, and even assassinates for the glory of his king. In short the *rakyat*, even the great warrior Hang Tuah does everything for the glory of his king (Kassim Ahmad 1975).

Hikayat Aceh (Iskandar 1967) derives the Achenese kingship from Alexander and again focuses on the greatness and glory of Iskandar Muda as Sultan. *Bustanus Salatin* on the other hand is about a guide for kings drawing on materials about the right way of rule according to Islam (Iskandar 1967). In short Malay political culture never knew of a popular movement of the Malay people. The greatness of a state is based on the greatness of his sultan. The common man's only role is to be a humble and obedient servant destined to serve his master. The ruler is the centre of the Malay world and the source of legitimacy. More importantly, to be Malay in these texts is specific in relations to Malay kings of Malaccan descent. The commoner is Malay only in so far as his sovereign is Malay. The Malay identity of pre-European Malaya is derived from his relations to a sovereign. It did not encompass all residents of the Malay peninsula, let alone residents from other parts of the Malay Archipelago residing in Malaya. The Malay world is in every sense embodying a 'heroic history' where the main relationships of society are projected historically and embodied in persons of authority (Sahlins 1983: 523).

Some basic conclusions can be drawn from the above Malay texts. First, the use of the term *Orang Melayu* is central in *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. It is a term used to differentiate from others such as the Bugis or the non-Melayu. However the use of the term *bangsa Melayu* or Malay nation is unknown in these texts. Furthermore, both *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* did not have a fixed territorial boundary called *Tanah Melayu* (Matheson 1979) as known in the colonial era but rather *kerajaan* and its territorial boundary. Here the *negeri* denotes "a fairly large community centred usually on a river estuary, an entrepot for foreign merchants, with some influence over the surrounding territory" (Ariffin 1993: 2) and this territory is headed by a sultan by virtue of his *daulat*. Here, the *kerajaan* is the organising principle of Malay society (Milner 1995). Thus, the idea of a *bangsa Melayu* is non-existent; so also the idea of a

Tanah Melayu encompassing Malaya never existed in the psyche of the Malays of the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Melayu*, rightly is a term to differentiate one group of people whose origin is from *Sungai Melayu* in Palembang who came to Malacca following a ruler, and later through conquest, the *Melayu* expanded to other territories under the influence of the Malaccan empire. In short, the identity of the newly conquered territories ascribes to the identity of their new ruler – the Raja Melayu.

In this period of pre-colonial Malaya, a Malay *ethnie* is limited to a particular *kerajaan* of Malaccan royal descent. The Malay *ethnie* is not to include the inhabitants of the other kingdoms of the Malay world. Based on *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, there is inter-*kerajaan* opposition with Malacca pitted against other kingdoms with distinct ‘we’ versus ‘them’ sentiment. Furthermore, the notion of an imagined *bangsa Melayu* for the Malay Archipelago was non-existent. Likewise, a history of the commoners or *rakyat* is unknown in the court texts (written texts). There is just the history of the ruler.

THE MALAYS IN BRITISH CONSTRUCTS

British intervention in Malaya in the nineteenth century had been influenced by a number of prominent British administrators who played a crucial role in the construction of Malay identity in the colonial era. The most prominent and influential must surely be Sir Stamford Raffles, whose writings on the Malays shaped British colonial policy of the nineteenth and twentieth century in Malaya. Raffles’ writings on the Malays were based on his readings of *Sejarah Melayu* which personified the glorious days of the Malaccan empire. Using this standard, to Raffles, the Malays of his time did not show anything to suggest their previous glory. In fact in line with his Victorian ethics, he alleged that they were suffering from moral decadence for their acts of slavery and piracy. To Raffles, the Malays were in a deplorable state and needed the guiding hand of the civilising English. Not that he thought that the Malays were uncivilised but rather they needed to be taught better self-management and proper ethics. Thus, British intervention was pivotal in the process of civilising (from the standpoint of the British) the Malay native. However, Raffles had a more important agenda in mind. He articulated a British expansionist policy in the Malay World with the need for territorial expansion for the glory of the British empire. His views on the Malays disguised a more sinister plan of colonialism and the expansion of the British empire in place of other European colonialists (Wright 1970). More importantly, his ideas were influenced by the growing dominance of racial theory in post-enlightenment Europe and the eventual categorisation of peoples into different stages of civility, where the Europeans occupied the most civilised stage and the non-European Other always the more backward and needing to be

civilised, thus providing a moral justification for colonialism (Said 1993). Hence, Raffles' views on the Malays and the justification of British rule are as follows:

1. The lack of rule of law coupled with acts of piracy, slavery and internal feuds – signs of social and moral decadence.
2. The need to re-establish law and proper government among the Malay kingdoms to be achieved by intervention in the Malay states. Essentially the introduction of various symbols of colonial sense of modernity such as establishing proper means of taxation and establishing free markets (Raffles 1830: 45-46, 77).

Raffles pioneered British intervention from indirect rule such as in the 1824 Anglo-Dutch Treaty to the direct intervention of the 1874 Anglo-Malay Pangkor Treaty. Perhaps the most important point in his writings is that he drew a dichotomy between Malay glory (Malacca 1403-1511) in contrast to the decaying state of nineteenth century Malay kingdoms. Swettenham, another colonial officer, never doubted the civilising influence on under-developed countries. He viewed progress mainly in how much revenue was collected and how the British control as bringing civilisation to the Malays states by providing hospitals and schools and thus regenerating the state of Malaya and her people (Swettenham 1899). Swettenham did eventually centralise the power for the British in forming the Federated Malay States in 1896 and further bringing the Malay states under the dominance of the British (Ryan 1963). Allen (1964) concluded that Swettenham liked the Malays but never thought them capable of self-rule and able to administer British political institutions.

In another light, the imposition of colonial rule was the beginning of the introduction of the colonial sense of modernity, one which is based on the colonial versions of statehood, territoriality, ethnicity, history and culture – built on the presuppositions of the European experience. Colonial rule brought about changing perceptions in major areas of native life. Among these changes are:

First, the rewriting a Malay common history. In rewriting Malay history of origin, colonial writers have tended to downplay the importance of ruler-centred Malay historiography for the inaccuracy, fabrication and the fact that certain parts of the writings could not be taken seriously (Wilkinson 1971). A search for a positivist explanation of the Malay past was also necessary to the colonials to move away from making sense of the symbolism, myth centred and irrationality evident in Malay texts which were contrary to the European Enlightenment. Wilkinson and Winstedt acted to use a positivist approach in the construction of a Malay past (Vickers 1997). The Malay history of origin was one of common history, on the migration of Malays to Malaya in two waves, the first being the proto-Malays (i.e. those we call the *Orang Asli* or aborigines) and the second, the deutro-Malays, the present Malay (Wilkinson 1971). The importance of a common history as the British wrote clearly became central towards later Malay

understanding of the civilisation in the region. They drew up a genealogy of all kingdoms in Sumatera, Java and Malaya as descendants of the early deutro-Malays, down-playing the fact that these kingdoms were established by Indian princes of Sailendran descent, and more importantly denying the importance of India in the establishment of Malay kingdoms (Devahuti 1962). The central nature of a common history is further substantiated by colonial definitions of a united Malay race. Raffles (1830:15) concluded:

I cannot but consider a Malay nation as one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs.

By virtue of a privileged position of the colonial in relation to the conquered Other, the British redefined their identity as encompassing all the peoples of the Malay Archipelago. For instance, the 1911 census of Malaya clustered the Malays as not only including local Malays but also Bugis, Achehnese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Mendailing, Orang Laut etc as Malays (Gullick 1988). This is in contrast to Malaysian historiography such as *Sejarah Melayu* or *Hikayat Hang Tuah* which viewed the Malays in political and cultural opposition to those of Java and Sumatera. Colonial constructions based on the assumptions of cultural and linguistic homogeneity where this imagined Malay *ethnie* was used to distinguish them from non-Malays, mainly Chinese and Indians who were also clustered without regard to linguistic and cultural differences within the various ethnic groups from India and China. Thus in its simplest form, a census acted to unify the 'Malays' and at the same time, created racial categories and inter-racial antagonism.

British constructions of the history of Malay origin, did in fact stress a history of the *rakyat* (people history), denying the exclusivity of heroic history as found in pre-colonial Malay historiography. More importantly, it did provide one of the major elements for Malay nationalism such as common privileged rights to Malays and a position of superiority over immigrant races by virtue of being the definitive people of Malaya.

Second, the making of Tanah Melayu. It was the British too who gave geopolitical connotations to Malaya by calling it Malay land i.e., *Tanah Melayu* (Winstedt 1966), a term adopted by the Malays later. The term *Tanah Melayu* to mean land belonging to the Malays, was not a native construct. Early Malay texts had no such conception of statehood to encompass Malaya (Matheson 1979). Eredia (the Portuguese explorer and historian) noted that the Malay Peninsula of the seventeenth century was known as *Ujong Tana* and its inhabitants as *Malayo* (Malays) (Mill 1930). The sparsely populated Malaya of the nineteenth century, could also be taken to mean that a similar situation probably existed in sixteenth century Malaya with the population spread around the kingdoms of Perak, Pahang, Johor and Malacca (Maxwell 1943). This would paint a picture that the population of *Ujong Tana* (or Malaya) as Malays. Similarly Sumatera was known as *Pulau Percha* (the torn island) or *Tanah Sabrang*

(Swettenham 1948). It would seem to me that prior to European colonialism, these places were geographic rather than geo-political entities.

British policies and treaties further acted towards achieving a geo-political Malay Land (Malaya). These began with the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, where Sumatera and the South of Singapore (the Riau Islands) were to be under the dominance of the Dutch and the Malay Peninsula was to be left to the English (Ryan 1963). By this treaty, both the English and the Dutch had carved out their respective territories in Southeast Asia.

In this period, the British established the Straits Settlements comprising Singapore, Malacca and Penang. With the signing of the Pangkor Treaty in 1874, it paved the way for the introduction of Residents or Advisers to the Sultans of Perak, Selangor, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan (Andaya and Andaya 1982). The excuse for British intervention was to stabilise the highly turbulent Malay states plagued by civil war and unrest (Ryan 1963). The British continued to strengthen their hold on these four states by forming the Federated Malay States (FMS) in 1896 which was the foundation of the Federation of Malaya (the independent Malaya). More importantly it was the first step towards promoting a sense of unity among the central states (Ryan 1963 : 132). Thus in every sense, the initial control of the British in Malaya had extended from the Straits Settlement colonies to the Federated Malay States. What began in 1874 as an advisory role of the British in the states had resulted in them running these states (FMS) with the use of the Malayan Civil Service (Roff 1967).

It was not until 1909, after the conclusion of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty that the British formerly took over from Siam whatever rights she had over the states of Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu. It was the treaty that permanently drew the present border between Thailand and Malaya (Ryan 1963) as the 1824 Treaty had demarcated the boundaries between Malaya and Dutch Indonesia. The Anglo-Siamese treaty meant that the British had extended their protection to the northern states of Malaya. More importantly, it marked the boundary of what was to be called modern Malaya. It cannot be denied that it was the British that came up with the term Malay Land or *Tanah Melayu* (Winstedt 1966) and it was their treaties of 1824 and 1909 that clearly defined what the boundaries of Malaya were to be. It was the first time in Malayan history that the whole peninsula was brought under the control of a central power and in this case, the British.

Third, the promotion of education and print capitalism. The British wanting more Malays in administration of the states had to set-up more schools and training college. The setting-up of Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) and Sultan Idris Teachers College (SITC) was important – the former was most successful in producing a Malay elite and the latter in the training of teachers (Soenarno 1960).

More importantly, with the setting up of SITC, vernacular education grew tremendously. SITC trained many Malays and created the environment for fur-

ther discussions, by the Malays on their problems, plights and their common identity in the midst of a changing Malaya. The increasing number of educated Malays and the promotion of Malay language acted to unify them. After all they had a territorial boundary called Tanah Melayu and they were the definitive people of Malaya in contrast to the non-Malays, who were perceived as immigrants and visitors from China and India. In short, the seeds of Malay nationalism began with the establishment of these centres of education for the Malays. In the next twenty odd years, the British had through their policies successfully trained a capable group of Malays for government who eventually plunged into the struggle for independence.

At the same time, increasing education among the Malays saw the rising influence of print capitalism with the proliferation of Malay newspapers. These newspapers were not only written in Malay but also highlighted Malay problems and displacement in a colonial economic system. It also emphasised the racial divide of Malaya and the need for the Malays as a *bangsa* to unite to protect their interests. In this instance, Malay newspapers provided the crucial ingredient in forging a Malay imagined community transcending traditional *kerajaan* boundaries. It also introduced colonial notions of modernity, stressed individual liberty, the needs of the Malay *bangsa*, stressing education for social mobility and the limitations of the traditional *kerajaan*. In short, the papers functioned not only to promote a "new Malay identity" but also acted to erode the *kerajaan* dominance among the Malays.

Fourth, the foundation of Malay intelligentsia (The Malay Civil Service). The introduction of formal education for the Malays in the Straits Settlements (Milner 1995) and the founding of MCKK and SITC played a crucial role in increasing their influence in the civil service (Roff 1967). This was in line with the proposal of the Resident General of the FMS that the dormant energies of the Malays be used via training and education. The need for Malays in the civil service arose from their lack of participation in much of the early part of direct intervention in the Malay States, where only a few Malays were in the service of the FMS. In 1919, the British realised that it would be more cost-effective, if the administration was to use more Malays in the administrative and commercial life in the Malay States (Roff 1967) to replace the many key positions in the railways, postal and medical fields still dependent on foreigners from Sri Lanka and India (Roff 1967). The British began taking educated Malays from MCKK and SITC to fill positions in government through the Malay Administrative Service and later they be brought into the Malayan Civil service with the hope that the Malays might acquire modern administrative skills for the modern world (Roff 1967). By the 1920s, Malaya saw the introduction of a pro-Malay preferential policy to recruit Malays into the administrative services replacing overseas staff. In short, the Malays were increasingly brought into the forefront of the FMS administration as were their counterparts in the non-FMS who proved themselves quite capable of self-rule (Andaya and Andaya 1982). In contrast, the discriminatory

policy of the British towards the Chinese and Indians who were regarded as transient labour further created a racial divide in Malaya among the Malay and non-Malay populace.

The significance of promoting Malays in the civil service prepared the Malays for government by having the appropriate skills for the future running of independent Malaya. The MCKK-trained Malay civil servants who formed the core of Malay administrative elite did eventually provide a group of British-trained and colonial-friendly Malay intelligentsia.

The profound influence of colonial knowledge on the Malay psyche can be observed in the colonial era Malay writings which embraced their sense of modernity. Modernity here is meant to be in line with the developments in the Straits Settlements, accepting and adopting ideas of individualism, race and nation-states. Among these texts, one finds *Hikayat Abdullah*, an autobiography of a Malay intellectual living in a British colony, writing about his experiences with the Malays and the English he encountered, the state of affairs of the various Malay states and a comparison between the territories under British rule and those under the Malay rulers (Hill 1955). More importantly, this text reflects the influence of British Orientalism on the Malays and their world. Abdullah's views can be framed in two accounts, the first being the Malays in a state of decadence in every aspect of their social life and he attributes this to the uncaring and greedy Malay rulers. By doing so he advocates that the Malays should be free from the dominance of the *kerajaan*. Secondly, his advocacy and support of British rule, their superior administration and their capable administrators in the likes of Raffles. More importantly, *Hikayat Abdullah* acts to describe the Malays and their social setting clouded by the colonial presuppositions of modernity and traditionality.

Other texts such as *Hikayat Dunia* which provides a historical account of European civilisation and its arrival in the Malay world also includes geographical, historical and sociological information regarding the region. The text is also critical of the Malay traditional *hikayat* as having little historical value, and praises the greatness of Raffles and his role in the improvement of the states (Milner 1995). Milner is right on the nature of *Hikayat Dunia* as a propaganda text for the British. However, on a higher note, it reflected the continued dominance of the knowledge of the Occident on the Malay Other – to an extent British orientalism was shaping the Malay psyche in the various schools in the Straits Settlements.

Likewise, *Hikayat Johor*, a court text described the greatness and accomplishments of Sultan Abu Bakar in modernising Johore and turning it into a modern state. Emphasis on a mushrooming economy, modern education, infrastructure development, hospitals, a modern administration and his conferment of knighthood by the British empire were the main focus of the text. Likewise, the conditions of Johore were likened to the achievements of the Straits Settlements (Milner 1995). This text too is strongly influenced by Orientalism to the level that

the author intended to free the text from merely documenting the greatness of the ruler based on *daulat* as done in traditional texts towards greatness of ruler based on achievements in modernising the state. The achievements here are taken to mean aspects such as a booming economy, modern hospitals and schools, an efficient state bureaucracy, and infrastructure development in line with the developments in the Straits Settlements. British rule had changed Malay perceptions on proper government, the emphasis on the welfare of the subjects, a move from ruler centred towards *rakyat* centred, from monarchy towards democracy and from ceremonial emphasis to modern developments in various aspects of Malay social life. As these changes were flooding the Malay way of life, some crucial terminologies such as race, identity, racial politics, nationalism and statehood became central.

The role of colonialism can be seen on a few fronts. First, it was necessary to break the dominance of the *kerajaan* in various facets of Malay life. This was done by the promotion of 'modern' or *gesellschaft* features such education and the promotion of economic success, ideals of civil liberty, and values such egalitarianism and individualism. This coupled with colonial definitions of the Malays and their world by such actions as proving a common history, and a larger imagined territorial boundary continued to create opposition to the *kerajaan*. Furthermore, the British constructs of the poor state of the Malays being attributed to the *kerajaan*, created a dichotomy between the 'modern' British and the backward/traditional *kerajaan*. The transformation in writing genre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked an acceptance that the British system of government was superior to that of the Malay *kerajaan* of the time. Furthermore, Malay identity was seen as changing, embracing a sense of unified *ethnie* for Malaya, with visions of *bangsa Melayu* in a changing Malay polity. The concept of race in Abdullah's writing was highlighted in line with the emergence of a plural society in the mid nineteenth century where he saw the *bangsa Melayu* in contrast to *bangsa* English and the other *bangsa's* in the Malay Peninsular (Hill 1955, Matheson 1979), and difference here again becomes a dominant feature in forging a *bangsa Melayu*. As such, 'Malayness' was only meaningful and becoming an intense ideological concern with the presence of the Other in the likes of the Chinese, Indian, European and others (Shamsul 1996).

COMPETING CONSTRUCTS OF MALAYNESS BY VARIOUS MALAY FACTIONS IN THE PRE-INDEPENDENCE ERA

The Malays as other peoples of the colonised world were influenced by high colonialism which created and played a catalytic role in the spread of new ideas and information. These ideas and information came in the form of orientalism or colonial knowledge about the peoples they encountered. The all-encompassing

knowledge of the colonial was also being challenged by the emergence of Islamic modernity originating from Egypt – each with an agenda of changing the Malays from a traditionalist ruler-centred society towards a liberal, democratic and free society. Malay traditionality as found in the early *kerajaan* was under pressure from the changing world outside Malaya to conform to the tenets of modernity. The 1900s was an interesting period because of the extent of Malay public advocacy for change.

The Islamic reformation was brought about by the Malays studying in Cairo, Beirut and Mecca who were themselves stimulated by the movements in the Middle East. Influenced by people like Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, they wanted the cleansing of all un-Islamic elements in society (Mazlan Abdullah 1973). The reformists stressed that the present state of the Malays and their non-progressiveness were attributed to their lack of understanding and comprehension of the tenets of Islam. For them, the way forward for the Malays towards a new, progressive and dynamic life was to be found in Islam (Soenarno 1960). Importantly, these reformists – *Kaum Muda* or the modernists – also stressed that the Malays should seek education, even English education as it provided the means to modernise themselves (Roff 1967). The political affiliations of the two schools of Islam at the time were the *Kaum Tua*, on the Orthodox religionists, who wanted to return to the bygone era and urged a revival of the aristocracy. The *Kaum Muda*, on the other hand, were looking ahead and advocated democratic rule along western lines (Soenarno 1960, Roff 1967). It is little wonder that Soenarno (1960) attributed to the Islamic reformists for awakening the Malays towards political consciousness. However, the *Al-Imam* – another reformist Islamic paper – strongly advocated the promotion of Islam, the larger *ummah* and avoided a racial undertone by framing the Malay Muslims within a larger Muslim world. This newspaper which stressed the need for a more enlightened, better educated and economically inclined Malay, eventually lost out in influence to another Malay newspaper of the time, *Utusan Melayu* (1907-1909). Mohd. Eunus Abdullah, the editor of the paper, made special emphasis on *bangsa Melayu* and their rights in the midst of an onslaught of immigrants from China and India. It also focussed on the need of the Malays to gain economic strength and remained in favour with the colonial government for its support of the British (Milner 1995). The promotion of *bangsa Melayu* was in fact new, but it gained popularity with the continued changing demographics of Malaya. It provided the Malays a need to unite and the basis for an imagined unity. The use of print culture as a stimulant for nationalism is evident among the reformist newspapers. Various papers such as *Warta Malaya*, *Al-Ikhwan* and *Saudara* dealt with various Malay issues and self-analysis of Malay backwardness. These papers advocated the centrality of education in Islam even if it is in English. The importance was noted by Winstedt who said, “it was evident in 1920, that it was a daily topic in the press and between 1920 and 1930 the number of Malay boys at English (secondary) schools doubled” (Soenarno 1960: 8).

The promotion of vernacular education in the 1920s brought about greater Malay unity and prestige. According to Landon (1943: 146), “Malayanization was expressed by new emphasis on education in Malay language and culture” and this was in line with the setting-up of the Sultan Idris Training Centre (SITC) in 1922. SITC contributed greatly in the rise of Malay nationalism for a number of reasons. For one, it brought together students from every part of Malaya and subjected them to a common and unifying experience which acted to promote a new consciousness of a wider unity in the Malay world. It provided them a chance to share experiences and come to understand the plight of the Malays at a national level (Roff 1967). SITC students too were becoming more aware of the socio-economic and political problems facing the Malays and how the Malays were being denied the means to fully participate in the foreign dominated society of Malaya. Graduates from SITC began to show their influence through Malayan vernacular press by highlighting the plight of the Malays. For instance *Majallah Guru* published at SITC expressed the need for Malay emotional and spiritual unity as a prelude to social and economic progress (Roff 1967).

The role of print capitalism in constructing a shared Malay consciousness and the promotion of the idea of *bangsa* through the various newspapers is very critical. For instance, *Warta Malaya* edited by Onn Jaafar centred around the question of decentralisation question, Malay political rights and the protection of Malay interests in a Malayan plural society and campaigned for a larger share for Malays in government (Roff 1967). *Majlis* was another national newspaper weekly strove for unity among the Malays. It also advocated that the British had a moral obligation to put Malay interests first. The newspapers were also extremely influential in noting the disadvantages of the Malayan Union to the Malay masses which brought about mass demonstrations in 1946 (Ishak 1960).

The most significant move towards the Malay realisation of nationhood, took form in the formation of Malay associations which provided avenues to fight for Malay civil and political rights. By 1940, the Malays had conceptualised themselves as a *bangsa*. One of the most important of these associations to come into existence was the *Sahabat Pena* (Brotherhood of Pen Friends) in 1937 and became the forerunner of Malay political parties (Soenarno 1960). The initial aim of *Sahabat Pena* was for “co-operation, unity of thought, economic improvement...and directed towards the progress of the Malay people” (Roff 1967: 214). However its political nature was expressed by its slogan “*Hidup Bahasa, Hidup Bangsa*” (Long live the language, Long live the nation), a key factor which was to dominate post-war Malay politics. *Sahabat Pena* was national in character with membership from all over Malaya. It gave the Malays a chance to know other Malays and by corresponding in Malay, it served as an important vehicle to reiterate Malay unity via the common language they shared. In 1938, Malay associations sprang up in Malaya such as the Persatuan Melayu Singapura (Malay Association of Singapore), Persatuan Melayu Pahang (Malay Association of Pahang), Persatuan Melayu Selangor (Malay Association of

Selangor) and others (Roff 1967). They served as a collective aimed at promoting the interest of Malays in all branches of life, to strive for the welfare of the Malays, to represent the views and aims of the Malay in the respective councils, to encourage Malays to study harder and to improve their status, to guard Malay morals, manners etc. and to promote unity and loyalty to ideals (Soenarno 1960: 15).

These Malay associations had objectives that touched on the socio-economic and political aspects of Malay life. After 1938, it was geared up along political lines. This was outlined by the Free Press editorial of 1938:

The Malays have awakened to the problem of Western civilisation which they have to face. Already there is a realisation that, if they are to succeed against the encroachment of other races in Malaya, they must combine for their own and the welfare of succeeding generations. (Soenarno 1960: 15)

In contrast to Malay associations which were led by English-trained civil servants of noble birth who had a soft spot for the colonials, the emergence of the radical Malay political organisation, *Kesatuan Melayu Muda* (Union of Malay Youth) was more radical and advocated independence. Led by Ibrahim Yaacob, KMM wanted to overthrow the British and bring about a political union between Malaya and Dutch colonial territories under an Indonesia Raya or a *Melayu Raya* (Indonesia-Malaya as a state) (Ariffin 1993). KMM was also the first Malay political party to advocate independence. Ibrahim Yaacob also advocated a *bangsa Melayu* that included the Malays of Indonesia and Malaya as he rightly pointed out that these various peoples were one *bangsa*, artificially divided by colonialism. To some extent, the earlier definition of Malay by Raffles (quoted in this paper) seemed to be adopted by Ibrahim Yaacob with a nationalist twist. Unlike the Malay associations set-up by former students of MCKK, KMM was led by commoners and because of its radicalism, it did not receive the support from the British, and finally failed to achieve its goals (Roff 1967).

The period up to 1940 saw the rise in the provision of education among the Malays, and with the aid of print media, it helped forge an imagined Malay *bangsa*. The emphasis on Malay language at SITC and the print media too played a crucial role in uniting the Malays. Likewise, the presence of immigrant races further enhanced the difference of being Malay. As to be expected, the emerging *bangsa Melayu* of this era was a contested one, mainly between the MCKK elitist trained Malays versus the commoners of SITC who more readily adhered to nationalism, independence and the potential unification of the Malay world under the name of Melayu Raya. The issue of Malay identity was to remain contested and to re-emerge after World War II.

The Japanese occupation too played a crucial role in the emergence of Malay nationalism. It enhanced the spirit of Malay nationalism on four accounts. First, the British colonialists were found to be paper tigers, as they were easily defeated by the Japanese. It shattered the image of the superior White men.

Second, Malaya and Sumatera were united administratively, as a single entity. This was regarded by the nationalists as the first step towards the return of power to Nusantara. Third, there was a territory called Malaya, a fixed geo-political entity. Fourth, there were many personal contacts between the nationalists from Malaya, Singapore, Java, Celebes, Kalimantan and the British Borneo territories. There were also nationalistic movies from Malaya being shown in local theatres. This was a crucial factor in creating a shared vision of the Malays of the Malay world and the need for unity to realise their freedom from oppressive colonial rule (Ghazali 1998).

The Japanese occupation further highlighted the racial divide among the Malayan populace with the Chinese and Indians showing support for the independence of their respective countries. This reiterated a common belief among the Malays at the time that the immigrants had no loyalty towards Malaya. Similarly, the occupation also strained Malay-Chinese relations, as the Malays were recruited by the Japanese and supported them, while the Chinese were fighting the Japanese and found themselves on the opposite side of the battle field. Inter-racial armed conflict between the Malays and the Chinese, further created civil unrest and fear among the Malays of the eventual threat to their country, culture, identity and way of life (Ariffin 1993). This coupled with the Japanese preferential treatment of the Malays and their treatment of Chinese and Indians as citizens of their respective motherlands re-emphasised the racial politics of Malaya and the belief among Malays that Malaya was their homeland. The Malays who were given some control of major administrative positions in government had their confidence on the capability of self rule further boosted (Zainal Abidin 1970a; Silcock and Aziz 1953).

The Japanese occupation enhanced the belief among the Malays that Malaya belonged to them and sowed the seeds for a Malay nation of intent. The racial tensions after the war between the Chinese and Malays highlighted the fragility of race relations in Malaya and the underlying need for the Malays as a *bangsa* to protect their rights. It is little wonder then, that the Malay response to the Malayan Union was in reality a Malay nation bursting to be free based on a shared common interest, common goals and the desire to protect their interest and privileges.

Upon the return of the British to Malaya after the war, they were faced with a moral dilemma in regard to the Malays and non-Malays. It was the non Malays that rallied to support their fight against the Japanese whereas the Malays supported the invaders. The British in a false sense of fairness instituted the Malayan Union on the April 1, 1946. It had effectively turned Malaya from a protectorate to a colony by forcing the Malay rulers to turn over power to the British government. The Malay states were to be headed by a British governor. With the principle of *jus soli* after the establishment of the Malayan Union, application for citizenship was open to anyone residing in Malaya (Zainal Abidin 1970b).

The first thing that sparked Malay protest against the Malayan Union was the giving of rights to non-Malays equal to those of the Malays, resulting in the latter losing their special position and privileges. There was also a feeling among the Malays that they were losing their country to the foreigners (Ishak 1960). As early as 1945, the Malays began their protest against the Malayan Union. The protest, however, remained small scale as it lacked co-ordination and voicing of grievances were sporadic (Ishak 1960). On March 1, 1946, 41 Malay associations from all parts of Malaya and Singapore came together to form a national Malay party – the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO). The word ‘national’ was to connote that the Malays were not a race but a nation. The Malay congress concluded that the Malayan Union acted to rob Malaya from the Malays. The imagined Malay nation now worked as a collective to contest the Malayan Union.

Looking at the protest against the Malayan Union, a few issues need to be highlighted. First, the British for the first time since 1874, changed their policy from being advisers and offering administrative assistance to the Malay states had moved towards making these states a British colony (Zainal Abidin 1970b). Second, the change of heart by the British to treat the non-Malays the same as the Malays meant that the Malays were to lose their special rights in Malaya, thus resulting in strong Malay protest. Third, the feeling of Malayness had reached its height during the Japanese occupation and the Malays felt they were the true owners of Malaya and were capable of self-rule. This was further supported by the fact that Chinese and Indian nationalism was in support of China and India, thus showing their lack of rootedness to Malaya. Most important is that the Malays now had the leadership, the organisation for a national protest, the means to promote nationalism via print culture (vernacular and English newspapers) and an accepted cultural and language homogeneity – thus making the Malay *bangsa* a realised political entity.

However, the issue of what constituted Malayness or Malay identity remained a contested one in the aftermath of the Malayan Union. The two Malay camps, UMNO and PKMM, had advocated different notion of Malayness. Burhanuddin Helmi defined the *bangsa Melayu* in the broadest possible way to encompass Javanese, Taiwanese and Madagascans and those in the Malay states, while the term *Melayu* referred to the broad Malayo-Polynesian ethno-linguistic group (Ariffin 1993). He further suggested that non-Malays can become part of the *kebangsaan Melayu* if they sever ties with their original *kebangsaan* and adopt *kebangsaan Melayu*. For PKMM, the adoption of certain Malay characteristics such as custom, language, and political and social values and by accepting *kebangsaan Melayu*, they could become Malay non-ascriptively. UMNO rejected the PKMM basis of *kebangsaan Melayu* as a destruction of the *bangsa Melayu*. UMNO, adopting a parochial definition of *bangsa Melayu* concluded that *bangsa Melayu* referred exclusively to a community residing in the Malay Peninsula or *Tanah Melayu*, speak the Malay

language, subscribe to the Islamic faith, profess loyalty to the raja and have an Islamic-based culture and world view (Shamsul 1998: 139-140). As such, the characteristics of a *bangsa Melayu* were outlined in opposition to the *bangsa dagang* (foreigners) who were the transient peoples of Malaya. Interestingly, the competing definers of Malayness, i.e., the *kerajaan*, *ummah* and *bangsa* mindedness noted by Milner (1995) became amalgamated under UMNO to constitute Malayness. In this sense, Malayness or Malay identity did extend beyond the colonial definition of Malayness. It was being refined to suit the political scenario of Malaya with the Malays at the helm of political power.

CONCLUSION

Identities change and Malay identity went through some dramatic changes in a short span of time from the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century. The dominance of British orientalism cannot be denied as it played a crucial role in changing Malay perceptions of themselves by various actions. They created an imagined united Malay *ethnie* where there existed one such concept before the colonials provided the *gesellschaft* features related to modernity and effectively transforming the Malays from *Orang Melayu* – a simple river-based identity towards a *bangsa Melayu*, an imagined Malay nation with tremendous political clout. The Malays, with the availability of colonial knowledge, were able to break free from the domineering effect of the traditional *kerajaan* and the influence of the ruler towards individual liberty with the *rakyat* being the basis for political power as was the case in the fight against the Malayan Union. Territorial boundaries also changed with fixed boundaries becoming a feature of colonial Malaya and the self interest of separate *negeri* giving way to the interest of Malaya. For the Malays, their rights extended from the limited confines of their respective *kerajaan* to include all of Malaya and the Malays demanded for their rights as ‘sons of the soil’. However, British orientalism and the provision of new ideas of nation, ethnicity, racial politics, nation states and modernity provided the Malays with an alternative, an addition to their knowledge base that eventually transformed them. Likewise, Islamic modernist teachings provided a different type of knowledge for the Malays. The Malays actively embraced these knowledges, adopted them when necessary and utilised them as they saw fit. In this context, the ‘Malays’ transformed not in a predictable manner but in a manner they felt desirable and necessary for their survival. Had Hang Tuah been privileged to visit the twentieth century, the state of the Malays would have been one he could never have conceived of and he would likely be an alien among the Malays – simply because the notion of ‘Malay’ had changed forever and in drastic proportions.

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