

BOOK REVIEW

Conceptualizing the Malay World: Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity in Malaya by Soda Naoki. Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2020, 206 pp.

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The history of Malay nationalism during British colonialism has been rigorously studied by many scholars from multifaceted aspects; however, it has never reached a plateau or dead end. This topic has always fascinated scholars who are interested to reconstruct the historical experience by using different methods and approaches. The findings seem to be not straightforward but rather, complex and paradoxical. Malay nationalism would never have been achieved without the significant role of education. The British government used vernacular education as a powerful weapon to control the minds of the Malays and thus sustain its colonialism in Malaya. J.S. Furnivall (1948, 393) was undoubtedly right with his analysis: “it is pleasanter and cheaper to mould a literate population by appropriate and intelligent methods of education than to suppress an illiterate mob by machine guns.” However, one can never anticipate the impact of education towards the colonised people, whose minds and hearts were never the same as those of their colonial master.

The concept of nationalism opposed by the Malay radicals mirrored this phenomenon very well. Many Malay students received the same education, particularly from the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC), a teacher training college. They showed their resistance towards the colonial master by reconstructing their own imagined community based on the broad concept of Pan-Malayism, as manifested in the proposals for Melayu Raya or Indonesia Raya. This aim became the ambition of many Malay radicals who had received

their education from SITC, including Ibrahim Haji Yaacob. Meanwhile, the British government made rigorous efforts to improve the Malay educational system, at the same time inculcating in Malays colonial knowledge that suited their ulterior motive. Nevertheless, they could never completely control the outcome of the knowledge that brought paradoxical, contradictory consequences and inevitable opposition from the Malays themselves. Moreover, nationalist sentiment among local students was further intensified by the racism and imperiousness of many Western teachers – attitudes which often provoked spirited resistance from the students (Zinoman 2014, 52).

Having a chance to review a book on my alma mater is truly a wonderful opportunity. Entitled *Conceptualizing the Malay World: Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity*, the book was originally a doctoral thesis. First published in 2020, it is an eye-opener to the role of Malay educational institutions, particularly SITC, in triggering the spirit of Malay nationalism throughout Malaya. Although the discussion is limited to certain aspects and criteria, it undoubtedly provides an engaging and compelling analysis on the impact of colonial education towards the formation of Pan-Malay identity in British Malaya. The analysis is indeed thorough and meticulous while the structure of the ideas is well organised. The painstaking research to collect the primary and secondary data such as the interviews should be given unreserved praise.

The book consists of seven chapters. Every chapter represents the flow of analysis on how colonial knowledge was transmitted and then appropriated by the Malays in their struggle to establish Pan-Malayism, particularly Melayu Raya, as well as to cultivate the identity of Malayness. The limitation of the study is very clear and well explained in the introduction chapter. As expressed in the introduction, the book is not meant to be a comprehensive study on the history of identity politics in Malaya. The author makes himself very clear in the introduction that the significance of his studies differs from previous works on Malay politics in colonial Malaya. Interestingly, the author intelligently incorporates the best aspects from a socio-historical approach into a textual discourse analysis while also considering the consequences of political debate in order to examine the transmission and appropriation of knowledge in the Malay world. The second chapter covers an overview and backdrop of Malay vernacular education in British Malaya. An extensive investigation on the educational practice in SITC is discussed in Chapter 3 including the college's historical background, formal curriculum of the SITC, extracurricular activities, dormitory life at the college, and lastly, the reproduction of ethnic, class and gender relations in SITC's teacher training.

As the heart of the book, Chapter 4 lays out a comprehensive analysis of the transmission of colonial knowledge, particularly in the SITC context based on the history and geography textbooks written by R.J. Wilkinson, R.O. Winstedt and Abdul Hadi Haji Hassan. The change from classical texts to authorised history textbooks as a primary reference of the SITC history curriculum became a purveyor of new interpretations on history as a medium to revive the Malay identity in a rational manner. One interesting point discussed in the book is the importance of interpretation and popularisation of dry data from the census, as successfully shared and popularised by Wilkinson, Winstedt and Abdul Hadi through the concept of “race” in their textbooks. Malays as a mixed race instead of a “pure” breed was significantly foregrounded as an approach to heal historical amnesia amongst the Malays.

Chapter 5 illustrates the influence of colonial knowledge in the formation of Pan-Malayism or Pan-Malay nationalism, both theoretically and practically, through the idea of Melayu Raya or Indonesia Raya as promoted by Ibrahim Haji Yaacob and his allies. To investigate the identity formation comprehensively, the author also uses Ibrahim Haji Yaacob as a case study in order to trace the development and transformation of his worldview based on his educational experience. This is discussed thoroughly in Chapter 5 based on Ibrahim Yaacob’s writing as well as his experience in SITC.

The idea and concept of nationalism is also subject to a diverse interpretation without being limited any longer to certain parties, elite bureaucrats, or the government. The Malays through colonial education were able to reconstruct their own understanding of nationalism by appropriating and mixing the ideas that were in line with their ambition and ideology. Thanks to colonial education, elements of individualism and personhood flourished among Malays. Every Malay thereafter had his or her own free space, unshackled by feudalistic values, to interpret and appropriate the concept of nationalism through his or her individual understanding. In the words of Anthony Milner (2002, 77), “a more developed sense of personhood” that opened a wide room for social and political consciousness had arrived.

Chapter 6 demonstrates the new phase of Malay identity that transpired after Tunku Abdul Rahman announced the “Malaysia proposal” in May 1961. Malayness as established through the Malaysia proposal was never left unchallenged. Many issues arose regarding the status of the Malay, including debates on who is a Malay. Chapter 7 is a brief conclusion of the whole discussion with an observation on the development of Malayness as an identity after a few

decades of Malaysia's independence. Although it includes some developments of identity formation amongst the Malays, it does not provide a compelling analysis especially with regard to the failure of Wawasan 2020 and its impact towards identity formation, particularly "*bangsa* Malaysia." It would have been more interesting if the author had looked beyond the role of authoritative agencies or government-linked organisations, such as the contributions and efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing Malayness as an identity throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.

The book could be further improved by considering some aspects. It makes a better argument if more statistics on Malay education in the early 20th century were provided. This is very important in order to provide a comprehensive overview of Malay educational development during the British colonialism. Although the role and influence of the history and geography textbooks should not be underestimated as a contributor in the formation of Malayness as an identity, it is worthwhile to mention that the majority of Southeast Asians remained untouched by the growth of the colonial-era education. Three-quarters of Malays in British Malaya had received no formal primary schooling by the onset of World War II (Zinoman 2014, 50).

Further analysis is needed on the inter-relations between the colonial knowledge and the existing knowledge of the Malays from various written sources as well as oral traditions. Such cross-cutting relations paved the way for Malay radicals such as Ibrahim Haji Yaacob to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct the Malay identity and Malayism to suit their political ambitions. Moreover, since the study is related to Malays writings, such as the works of Ibrahim Haji Yaacob, the citation and excerpts from the original text should be cited in its source language in order to preserve the original meaning, rather than being put in the endnotes. The translation should be placed after the original text or in the endnotes. For readers of the Malay language, there is some difficulty in enjoying the sense of original ideas presented by the original authors discussed in the book.

These technical criticisms notwithstanding, all in all, the history of Malay nationalism has been enriched through the publication of this book. The strength of this book lies in its meticulous comparative textual analyses of four textbooks as well as the various writings by Ibrahim Haji Yaacob. Every significant key concept from the textbooks was rigorously analysed, thereby qualifying this book as a must-read for every ardent researcher and reader, especially to those specialising in Malay nationalism.

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