

An invasion on the mind?

A study of the Malay subject under the colonial governmentality of British rule

The administration of the colonial census has often been depicted as exercising a panoptical power over the colonial subject in constructing their notions of race. This makes the colonial subject appear passive to power structures that construct their behaviour. In this paper, I seek to show how the Malays engaged and responded to notions of race through the writings of three Malay nationalists: Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad, Abdul Rahim Kajai and Syed Syekh Al-Hadi. While the British colonizers introduced race theory to Malaya, it was not homogenously internalized as shown by the writings of these nationalists. The personal background of the nationalists, their educational experiences, interactions with the colonizers and influences from the Middle East had a part to play in their constructions of race.

By Paula Pannu

Introduction

This article seeks to examine the Malay subject under the colonial governmentality of British rule in during the period 1880- 1941. This will be done through a case study of the implementation of the colonial census in Malaya and the Malays' response to British constructions of race. The notion of colonial governmentality is linked to a Foucauldian view that administrative procedures exert a panoptical power over the subject, thus rationalizing them in the process. This view denies agency to the subject, rather they are seen as passive to the power structures that construct their behaviour. In this article, I make the argument that this perspective does not take into account the ways in which the Malays engaged and responded with Western forms of knowledge, i.e. race in this example. While it acknowledges that an epistemological invasion did occur, the remarkable capacity of the subject to appropriate these forms of knowledge to advance their own interests has rarely been interrogated in colonial scholarship. This article hopes to shed new light on the subject through a reading of Malay nationalist writings in vernacular newspapers during this period.

Approach

In my study about the implementation of the colonial census in Malaya, I will be briefly touching upon Bernard Cohn's concept of 'investigative modalities'. In his book, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, investigative modalities are described as "...a definition of a body of information that is needed,

the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, it's ordering and classification and how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes and encyclopedias." (Cohn: 1996: 5). Cohn makes the argument that these were ways that knowledge was produced by the colonials and allowed them to gain mastery over the vast social world of India. The knowledge was produced in a series of factual statements and was subjected upon the colonized subjects, thus beginning an invasion of their 'epistemological space'. In his work on Malaysia's nationalist movement, A.B. Shamsul employs Cohn's concepts to explain how notions of history, territory and community have been the most pervasive by-product of the colonial legacy. This can be seen in his statement: "...the British interfered with the local thought system and by doing this they increasingly disempowered the natives by limiting their ability to define their world; subsequently the local order of things was replaced by a foreign one, a slow and steady process that has effectively been conducted through a systemic application of a number of so-called 'investigative modalities'." (2001: 357). In this paper, I will be examining the validity of this approach and also demonstrate its close links to Foucauldian notions of power.

This paper will present a case study of Malay writings in vernacular newspapers such as *Warta Negeri*, *Al-Ikhwan*, *Lembaga Melayu*, *Utusan Melayu*, *Majlis* and *Majallah Guru*. It will also include personal biographies of three young Malay nationalists in particular: Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (commonly known as Za'ba), Abdul



Rahim Kajai and Syed Syekh Al-Hadi. Within this study, I will be touching upon the theories proposed by Anthony Milner on the Malay subject under colonial rule through his readings of the vernacular newspaper, *Utusan Melayu*. Milner makes an interesting observation that although the Malays internalized Western racial theory, they appropriated it in a cultural manner in keeping with their 'kerajaan' past. In order to present the validity of his findings, I will be making a short presentation of the Malay world on the eve of colonial rule. I will also be presenting selected newspaper articles written by members of the educated Malay public in an examination of whether similar trends occurred in this other newspaper that existed at the same time as *Utusan Melayu*. Milner's recent work represents a new position in the field of Malayan scholarship and a different perspective from the arguments advanced by A.B. Shamsul. I will be making a comparative study of these two Malayan scholars, including other colonial historians such as Frederick Cooper and Bill Ashcroft so as to present the theme of subjectivity under colonial rule in greater depth.

The expansion of British bureaucracy in Malaya: the creation of the colonial census

The British expanded their bureaucracy in Malaya around the 1880s although we can find earlier records of their trading activities decades before the formalization of their rule. The Peninsula represented a vast and unfamiliar terrain to the colonizers. The manner in which they sought to establish their control was to categorize this new social world into terms that would allow for the effective establishment of their administration. The British colonial administrators published various historical surveys, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, classification tables, including the colonial census on the Malaysians. These were ways in which knowledge was produced by these administrators and it aided them in managing their settlement. The Malays were subjected to these administrative procedures although it did not fit into their way of life, and in some cases, did not reflect the social reality of their situation. The gradual manner in which the Malays internalized these foreign constructions of them as a people reveals the hegemonic process of colonial rule.

In this section, I will focus specifically on the setting up of the colonial census¹ in British Malaya. The census was used as a tool to organize basic aspects of Malaya's social world into a systematized table. The Malayan

census was an invention of the 19th century and was closely tied to the shift that occurred in European thought about the notion of 'race'. According to a study done by Charles Hirschman, "...the meaning of 'race' began to shift from a relatively general term that distinguished peoples on almost any criteria to a more narrow classification of biologically defined sub-species with specific assumptions about the inheritability of cultural pre-dispositions and the potential for progress." (1986: 340). This shift occurred partly as a result of 'scientific' developments in theories about human diversity and fitted well with the larger body of Social Darwinist thought.

The Malays during this period did not show an understanding of 'race' as conceptualized by the British mind. The people tended more towards ethnocentrism where they believed in the superiority of their people, but it was not marked by racial ideology where they saw inherent differences between themselves. Pre-colonial records show that the Malays made efforts towards inter-ethnic relations such as the royal practice of marriage alliances so as to keep up good relations with each other. They were divided into various Sultanates ('kerajaan') whereby they did not recognize a sovereign ruler dominating the Peninsula, but rather their loyalties rested with the *Raja* who ruled over that region. For example, when a group of Malays were questioned about their identity in 1836 during a British investigation into piracy, they replied "I am from the Raja of Lingga (*Riau Lingga*)." (Milner, 1982: 10). Despite the fact that certain unities of dress and etiquette among the Malays could be detected, different cultural practices marked their distinction. A good example of this can be seen in the varying dialects spoken by the subjects of different Sultanates. These cultural markers were not fixed however. British observers noted that a great deal of ethnic fluidity existed during this period as well. The Malays who lived in the peripheral areas of the Sultanate could easily take on its language and practices. They could also just as easily shed them when they migrated to different regions of the Peninsula.

The first census that appeared in Malaya in 1871 classified the people under the general term 'nationalities'. The category 'race' only replaced 'nationalities' in the 1891 census. The reason for this was given in an appendix by colonial administrator, George Thompson Hare: "It is a wider and more exhaustive expression than 'Nationality' and gives rise to no ambiguous questions in classifying people as that, for example, what nationality, if any Eurasians are to be classified." (General Remarks of the Census, Federated Malay States, 1901). The introduction of the census led to a great deal of confusion amongst the Malays. The

¹ Please note that this research on the colonial census has been presented in an earlier article I published entitled 'The Production and Transmission of Knowledge in Colonial Malaya' in the *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol 37 (2009) pp. 427-451.



British experienced problems implementing it as the concept of 'race' did not fit into their manner of identifying themselves. C.A. Vlieland, author of the 1931 census noted: "The difficulty of achieving anything like a scientific or logically consistent classifications is enhanced by the fact that most Oriental peoples have themselves no clear conception of race and commonly regard religion the most important, if not, the determinant element." (Hirschman, 1987: 564). The enumerators had to rely on their own popular perceptions of the people in order to classify them. In their interpretation of what constituted being 'Malay', simplistic notions that a common language, religion and appearance were markers of 'Malayness'. The Malay reservations Act of 1913 made the first classification of the 'Malay' as: "Any person belonging to the Malayan race, who habitually spoke Malay and any other Malayan language and who professes Islam." There was little attention paid to the fact that various sub-ethnicities existed amongst the Malays and that they had distinct physical differences. A colonial administrator, R.O. Winstedt had made this observation in his anthropological work: "...there is a noticeable physical difference between the tall Kelantan Malay and the smaller Malay of the more southerly states." (Wheeler: 1928, 54). The official census however, states a contradictory description: "The Malay of Kedah or Kelantan in the North does not differ appreciably from the Malay of Johore in the South in appearance, language or customs." (ibid). It was clear that they were simply lumped together under the category of 'Malays' for administrative convenience.

The concept of territorial boundaries played a major role in the definition of who could be categorized as Malay. The boundaries were based on the territories colonized by the British. This was highly problematic as their colonial territories did not include some places which had Malay inhabitants and, at the same time, they tried to incorporate other areas where the association to Malay culture was only marginal. This practice of outlining territorial margins was a crucial part of the colonizing mission. The Malays had different practices, to them, control over manpower was deemed more important than control of the land. The people did not owe their allegiance to a territorial state, rather it was the *Raja* who defined them. For example, the Portuguese invasion of 1511 was given scarce attention in the Malay annals. The ruler appeared to have simply moved to a new area to establish yet another kingdom. The ease to which the *Raja* moved his kingdom highlights the lack of importance attached to territorial margins during the pre-colonial era. It had been noted that long drawn-out negotiations occurred between the British and Malay

rulers as a result of British attempts to define clear territorial spaces. The census further advanced these territorial definitions and secured what was now termed as 'British Malaya'.

A closer look at the impact of 'investigative modalities' upon the colonial subject

An investigative modality like the colonial census was based heavily on the perceptions of the colonizers. It operated on the technique of visual observation and created as an effort to gain a sort of mastery over the unfamiliar surroundings of Malaya. The British administration relied on being able to represent Malaya in a series of classifications and categories. This act of representation lends the British a privileged position and establishes a hierarchical relationship between the observer and the observed.

A deeper understanding of the power embodied in visual observation is best expressed by Foucault's image of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1979). The Panopticon was an invention of the 18th century created by Jeremy Bentham to designate a prison. The structure of the Panopticon is such that the cells of an equal size encircle a main tower. This allows for those in the main tower to be able to observe the entire structure from one vantage point. The power held by those in the main tower is based on their privileged position of sight; it is spatial rather than based on coercive strategies.

Similarly, the administrative procedures that rely on visual observation operate on the same principle for its establishment of power. The creators of the census based their authority on being able to map the vast terrains of Malaya in a series of categories. It was not an explicit establishment of power. While these classificatory procedures basically allowed the colonizers a supreme view of the colonized, they set in motion a cultural transformation of the social world of the Malays. The notion that the people were of a common race and composed within a territorial unit was not present in Malay thought during the eve of colonial rule. The introduction of these concepts signalled the beginnings of the invasion of the 'epistemological space' of the Malays. According to A.B. Shamsul, the nationalist movement in Malaysia attests to the degree to which the British succeeded in getting the Malays to fully internalize these foreign concepts. He notes that "...the most powerful and most pervasive by-product of colonial knowledge on the colonized has been the idea that the modern 'nation-state' is the natural embodiment of history, territory and society." (2001: 358). Shamsul bases this analysis based on the fact that notions of ethnicity are closely tied to identity in Malaysia presently and the concept of 'bangsa' (race)



is the platform upon which political and national unity is based on.

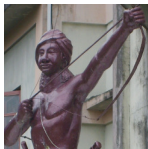
While this appears to represent a far-cry indeed, from the guiding principles of the 'kerajaan' era, Anthony Milner has recently released a study postulating that there were many continuities from this kingship past in Malay articulations of race in the early 20th century. While concepts of race and territory were crucial in the separation of themselves from the ruler and greatly diminished the premises of the 'kerajaan' system, Milner argues that the language of the 'kerajaan' era was not eradicated completely. His postulation is that a code of ethics as defined by the 'adat' (custom) of the 'kerajaan' resonated very strongly in Malay definitions of these transformations. The foundations of the earlier societal structure did not change to suit the individualist principles of a Western society. Milner makes this observation through a reading of 'Utusan Melayu' in the 1920s and 30s, an Arabic newspaper which circulated in Malaya during this period. In one of his case examples, he notes that the writers were "drawing upon the rhetoric of the 'kerajaan' era to inject emotion into the 'bangsa Melayu'- calling for the bangsa to be lifted 'onto a throne' and describing service to the 'bangsa' in a language similar to that once used to describe service to the Raja." (2008: 128).

The analysis offered by Milner runs in contrary to the assumptions implicit in the work of Bernard Cohn and A.B. Shamsul that the colonial subject was a passive recipient of British forms of knowledge. The notion that that an 'epistemological space' has been invaded denotes that the colonial administration exercised a kind of authority in defining the contours of Malay thought. Milner's work however, lends the idea that the Malays exercised some form of agency in consuming Western forms of thinking and that they had a specifically cultural response in appropriating these forms of knowledge. This new vein of scholarship is also reflected in recent works produced by Frederick Cooper (2005) and Bill Ashcroft (2001). Taking their departure from the field of recent globalization narratives, these two scholars have advanced the argument that the successful appropriation of knowledge by post-colonial societies transforms power structures between the colonizer and the colonized. Bill Ashcroft's research is based on the post-colonial experiences in India, Africa and Southeast-Asia. His contention is that power is accorded to post-colonial societies when they are able to appropriate Western modes of thought to produce their own forms of knowledge. Ashcroft acknowledges the validity of narratives that posit that these societies could have developed in other ways, had the colonizers not interfered with their indigenous systems. Ashcroft's

issue with this argument however, is that it ignores the fact that these societies were stimulated by the colonial experience to grow and transform. In his observation, "the striking thing about colonial experience is that after colonization, post-colonial societies *did* (author's emphasis) very often develop in ways which sometimes revealed a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation." (2001: 2).

Frederick Cooper's work follows along the same lines of argument as Ashcroft. In his book, 'Colonialism in Question', he calls for a re-evaluation of post-colonial concepts in the global era. The present globalization narratives are beginning to uncover a more complex web of networks between various nations; which leads Cooper to urge historians to refine their analysis to take these present trends into consideration. He notes that there has been a lack of depth in history that doesn't take into account the dynamic engagement of subjects with colonial forms of knowledge. The reduction of colonial history to a grand narrative of European imperialism according to Cooper masks the ways in which post-colonial societies have actively appropriated knowledge thereby transforming established categories that defined them.

The earlier theories advanced by Bernard Cohn and the colonial scholarship that have been inspired by the theories postulated by Foucault does demonstrate some validity however. As we have seen in the earlier section, the colonial census did set in motion major transformations in the social world of the Malays. The people who saw themselves as separate members of Sultanates slowly began to identify with each other as Malays, territorially defined within the boundaries of British Malaya. It can be acknowledged that an 'epistemological invasion' did occur, but the extent to which the colonial subject was passive throughout this whole process is debatable. In the next section, I will be presenting my case study on Malay articulations of race as depicted by newspaper articles written by members of the educated Malay public and young Malay nationalists. Firstly I will be examining the validity of Milner's argument that there has been a specific cultural appropriation of race through a short presentation of articles. I will then go on to present a larger set of sources from other vernacular newspapers through the personal writings of young nationalists to shed further light on the theme of subjectivity under colonial rule. I hope to bring to light through this case study, the agency of the Malay subject in appropriating Western forms of knowledge, a theme that has not been adequately analyzed in established colonial scholarship on Malaya.



The 'kerajaan' era and its implications on articulations of race in Malaya

As introduced in the first section, the political structure of Malaya was divided into various Sultanates during the pre-colonial era. The nature of the system has been termed 'kerajaan' which literally means 'being in the condition of having a Raja'. This was a communitarian system whereby loyalty to the Raja prevailed over individuality and personal welfare. The 'adat' (customs) that informed the social behaviour of the Malays can be found in royal texts during this period. The notion of 'nama' (name) was paramount to a Malay's sense of self and the manner in which it could be fostered was to express full support towards the Raja. The analysis offered by Anthony Milner is worth quoting at length:

"Malays believed service to the ruler offered the opportunity for social and spiritual advancement. They understood their position in this life and the next depended on the Raja; he was the bond holding the men together, and the idiom through which the community experienced the world. Men were not so much subjects as extensions of the Raja; they were indeed a measure of his nama." (1982: 2).

Milner makes this analysis through a study of court documents and texts written at the time. This code of ethics is also outlined clearly in popular folk tales written during this period (such as the 'Hikayat Hang Tuah'). Another way that we can analyze the validity of Milner's analysis of the Raja-centered system is to look at the language during this period. Language represents the beliefs and world view of a particular culture and shows expression of their thoughts and feelings regarding the world around them. The Malay language in the pre-colonial era shows us clearly the role that the Raja played in the consciousness of the people. As language reveals the cognitive workings of the people, we get an insight into the basic premises that informed the behaviour of the Malays under the leadership of the king. The 'adat' of the Malays in showing full allegiance towards their kings is not just reflected in royal texts and folk tales but also in their proverbs and sayings. As noted by William Roff:

"there can be no question that the determining characteristic of the relationship between the ra'ayat (people- my translation) and the ruling class is submission. The importance of this as an institutionalized value is expressed in a custom and ritual (and indeed as practical common sense) is shown in a host of Malay customary sayings, rueful and realistic: "Whoever becomes Raja, I will touch my forehead"; "When the elephant fights the elephant, the mouse deer is caught in between"; "to try and help someone who has incurred the wrath of the Raja is "like helping a cow catch a tiger" and a commoner standing

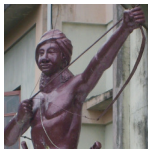
up against his betters is "like a soft cucumber fighting a prickly durian fruit." (1994: 9).

The main premise of a Raja-centered society is that people have very little understanding of individuality and operate on a communitarian basis. This is reflected by their discomfort by the use of the personal pronoun in their writings. Through a study of pre-colonial letter writing, Annabel Teh Gallop found that there was a strict code governing the use of the word 'aku' (I) in the writing of letters. It was only those who held a higher status in Malay society who could fashion themselves in the personal pronoun to those below them. This is seen in the advice given by an official to a young man writing his first letter:

"remember this well, do not forget: each time you send a letter, you must never refer to yourself as 'sahaya', you must always use 'kita'. If you use 'sahaya', you will certainly bring shame upon yourself. The term 'sahaya' can only be used by the penghulu, datuk, temenggong, raja, menteri or Sultan and then only when corresponding with an equal. If the sender is of lesser rank, then 'sahaya' may not be used in the letter." (translation done by author) (1994: 7).

The introduction of the personal pronoun is closely tied up with the intensification of British rule in Malaya that began around 1870. The earlier hierarchical relationship between Raja and subject was replaced by more horizontal relations between the people who made up the society. The provincial affiliations of the people were being increasingly dismantled during colonial rule as the Malays came under the administrative procedures of the British. The colonizers introduced a new form of politics through implementation of investigative modalities such as the colonial census: from being loyal subjects of a particular Sultanate, the people were administered to see themselves as part of a larger community within the territorial confines of British Malaya. The classification of the vast social world of Malaya through administrative surveys, the census and published reports introduced the people to notions of race and territoriality.

According to Milner, while these concepts were crucial of themselves as separate from the ruler, the language of the 'kerajaan' was not eradicated completely. A code of ethics defined by the 'adat' (customs) of the kerajaan system resonated very strongly in Malay definitions of these transformations. In his argument, the foundations of the earlier societal structure did not change to suit the individualist principles of a Western society. With the erosion of 'kerajaan' system, the allegiance once shown towards the king was now focused on the notion of the Malays as a race (bangsa) which formed their basis as a society (masyarakat). These new politics continued to be characterized as 'adat' with a code of



behaviour that Malays learned to observe with respect, similar to the rituals practiced in the 'kerajaan' system. In my readings of articles from Malay vernacular newspapers, I found a similar trend in Malay writings about the changes occurring around them. They made passionate appeals that promoted solidarity for their people and race. The emphasis placed on personal relationships based on service to one another is reminiscent of the 'adat' (custom) that the highest expression of one's being was to be of service to someone else. In an article written in 1924 by a young teacher, Muhammad Yunus bin Ahmad, we see this proclamation:

"Oh my community, and the people of my race whom I love with my heart! Find the knowledge in our midst and let us work together with diligence and effort." (Majallah Guru, 1 Nov 1924).

In this article, the writer urges his community to learn from other races to progress themselves as a people (the reference to 'knowledge in our midst' refers to the presence of other peoples in Malaya). In this excerpt, there is emphasis placed on the notion of 'working together'- and this will set the Malays apart from other races. This notion is encapsulated in the Malay saying 'bergotong-royong' (to co-operate) which emphasizes the communitarian premises of their previous social system.

The Malay people, while showing an interest in appropriating the concept of 'race' were at the same time, concerned about mimicking other cultures wholesale, particularly the British culture. This was rife in Malay writings about a societal transformation based on concepts imported from the colonizers. In the following article, we see this written in 1929 by a member of public who called himself 'Amin' entitled 'About progress: the sorrows of freedom':

"In reality freedom is one of the features of the modern period and therefore it is a sign that we have reached its time...in much of the good, there is also the bad: and what should we be aware of so that we do not regret it afterwards? ...To study as most of our young Malays are doing today?...The mistake with this is that although education never ends but you think: "I am smart, look at the style at which I speak English." Actually what looks good on the outside is not always so inside. Follow what else, to follow the Western practice which leads to where?... Shouldnt the West be left to the West and the East be left to the East? Why not be an example to the other races and not just follow them blindly..." (Warta Negri, 4-11-1929).

In this piece, the writer broaches upon the 'adat' (custom) of the importance of playing down one's individuality ('Jangan membesarkan diri' (don't make yourself big)- being touched upon). The writer warns

against self-indulgence and vanity and to recognize that the Western ways may not be suited to the Malay's social disposition. This is outlined more clearly in the following article written in the same newspaper in 1930 by a member of public, Z.B. Husain:

"We Malays do not like to see people within our race who receive status of privileges above the rest; as it may spoil the person (not like the foreign races; if someone gets a name or a privilege, all the more they flaunt it as a sign of their achievement.) But people at the top should not show their pride and difference themselves from others- they should always look to the bottom with a feeling of empathy and have a wish to help so that others can also be like them. (not when reaching the top, you don't want to look at the bottom again). (Warta Negri, 20-1-1930).

The most persistent theme that ran through a majority of the articles in Malay vernacular newspapers (we will see more examples in the articles of the following section) was an emphasis on 'love for the race'. The emotive power of these articles harks back to the pre-colonial past whereby loyalties to the king were marked by deep feeling. It appeared through these articles that the people's former beliefs and loyalties had become re-constituted as the notion of 'race' (bangsa) replaced that of Raja. The allegiance may have shifted towards the 'people' but it contains the same devotional principles of the 'kerajaan'. As early as 1908, the phrase for republic: 'kerajaan ramai' (the kingship of the people) was introduced into the Malay public sphere. In this new conceptualization, it was the people who took centre stage as opposed to the Raja.

In the articles above, we see comparisons being made to other races progressing on a faster scale than the Malays. This had a connection to the fact that the British brought in a large number of Indians and Chinese to work in the new economic set-up in Malaya. The Malays were relegated to the labour intensive work of the British plantations. This was done under a veil of paternalism when in reality; it was designed to keep the Malays from gaining economic power and overthrowing their colonizers. The Malays were frustrated by the lack of opportunities given to them and felt that their country was being over-run by these new wave of immigrants. This sharpened their need to band together as a race in a show of solidarity against these impending challenges. In the next section about the emergence of young nationalists, I will outline this anti-Indian and anti-Chinese sentiment more clearly and show how it played a role in intensifying Malay articulations of race in colonial Malaya.



A growing sense of nationalism in Malaya

A young breed of nationalists began to emerge in Malaya around 1910- 1930. These young nationalists contributed extensively to the Malay vernacular newspapers and in fact, were the driving force behind the creation of these newspapers. In this section, I will go into more detail into the background of Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za'ba) (1895-1973), Abdul Rahim Kajai (1894-1943) and Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi (1867- 1934). Za'ba worked for the British administration to develop the Malay language and edited school textbooks for the colonial vernacular education system. In his spare time, he contributed various articles to newspapers such as 'Surat Kiriman', 'Utusan Melayu' and 'Lembaga Melayu'. He was deeply committed towards advancing the progress of the Malay race, especially in light of British achievements in Malaya. His exposure to the colonial administration made him ponder deeply about why the Malays were left behind in a race for resources. This is seen in a poem he contributed to 'Lembaga Melayu' in 1917:

Why does the West progress and become successful?
Aren't we all members of the human race?
Do we not work as hard?
Or do we have a kind of poverty?

Za'ba was a product of the English education system set up by the colonials in Malaya. He attended the Christian Brothers College in Negeri Sembilan. This was done against the wishes of his father who feared he would face spiritual repercussions for getting an education against his Islamic faith. The college was set up in 1906 by Christian missionaries in Malaya. A majority of Malay parents at the time were reluctant to send their children to the school due to its religious overtones. From the 350 pupils who attended the school in 1910, only 30-40 students were Malay children. The rest were Chinese, Indians and Seranis. (Hussain & Hussain, 1974: 28). It was through the encouragement of a teacher that Za'ba went against his father's wishes and applied to the school. When he got accepted, he wrote a long letter to his father begging not to be disowned:

"Zainal wants to attend the white people's school, so lets not run away from the fact. You cannot change my mind. Please do not disown me, I am still your son. Just pray for my safety... give me advice which is needed." (written on 14 January, 1910).

Despite this appeal, Za'ba's father ignored his son for three years out of anger for his disregard for his wishes. Za'ba went on to take Junior and Senior Cambridge examinations at the Christian Brothers college and later became accepted at the Kuala Kangsar college to train as a teacher for the vernacular colonial education

system. He began writing avidly on the situation of the Malays and contributing to Malay newspapers from 1916. He wrote under the pseudonym 'Patriot' and 'Anak Melayu Jati' (Child of Pure Malay). He made light of the fact that Malay vernacular schools set up by the colonials were not as equipped, nor did they have as good a curriculum as English schools. He saw that the Malays were left behind due to a lack of knowledge. The British administration that he worked for became aware of his writing activities and began to watch him closely. The director of the college, R.O. Winstedt made the decision to remove him from teaching duties and relegated him solely towards the development of school textbooks. In 1923, the British administration moved Za'ba to a different college in Kuala Lumpur, in an effort to stem his writing activities. This was considered a demotion as it wasn't ranked as highly as the Kuala Kangsar college. The administration also did not raise Za'ba's salary according to the number of years he had worked for them, despite his numerous appeals. Za'ba made his most important writing contributions to the Malay vernacular newspapers during this year, which undoubtedly had a connection to the manner in which he was being treated by the British. He produced two long articles in the English newspaper 'The Malay Mail' entitled 'The Poverty of the Malays' and 'The Salvation of the Malays'. In 'The Poverty of the Malays', he states "the Malays are extremely poor when it comes to knowledge...they do not have poverty when it comes to their intellectual abilities or their attitude, traits which the other races have, but what has been fostered is now pushed aside, especially in connection to the situation we have with other races who are progressing and enjoying wealth in this country." (printed in 'The Malay Mail' in 1923, and reprinted in Al-Ikhwan in 1927).

In his second-follow up article on 'The Salvation of the Malays', Za'ba outlined the main theme of what he believed would rectify the situation of the Malays and progress them as a race:

"There is only one road...that is to improve knowledge, to give the subjects the right kind of education. This is the only ways we can be saved, no other way." (ibid).

The kind of work that Za'ba was carrying out in the British administration exposed him to various policies carried out by the colonials in the field of education. He was disillusioned by the way that the British administration refused to advance the education of religious schools in Malaya. In an earlier article for 'Utusan Melayu', Za'ba related the words of an English official: "Do not do anything whatsoever to improve the education of the Madrasah." (Utusan Melayu, 24.9.1917). The British administration continued in their disapproval of Za'ba's activities and in 1924, he was moved again to the Sultan Idris Training College in



Tanjung Malim. During this period, he was approached by the director O.T. Dussek who informed him that a Mr Hamilton would be visiting him at his home for a short interview. Mr Hamilton worked for the British administration, spoke excellent Malay and had been the author of several language books in Malaya. He questioned Za'ba on his writing activities, referring to articles written under the pseudonym 'Anak Melayu Jati' (Child of the Pure Malay) about the poor state of Malay vernacular schools set up by the British administration, as opposed to English schools. Zainal admitted to writing the articles and the two men shared a brief discussion about the state of affairs regarding education for the Malay subjects. Mr Hamilton then wrote a confidential report to the British administration in which he stated that Za'ba was an honest and hardworking individual who was simply stating his mind about what needed to be improved in British policy. As a result of this report, Za'ba received all the arrears which had been owed to him in salary since 1921 in the estimated sum of \$3000. (Hussain & Hussain, 1974: 42).

I have outlined the educational background of Za'ba, described the kind of exposure he received during his working life and his activities so that we can get a better idea of how his ideas about race was shaped through these experiences. This sheds some light into the manner in which a colonial subject (in this case, an English-educated subject who worked for the colonial administration) operated under British rule. In this case, we can see how there was a large degree of agency was exercised by a young nationalist like Za'ba in trying to inform members of the larger Malay public about the factors that led to their regression under colonial rule. He was working against the administration despite being a member of its workforce and had to face certain consequences. This did not dampen his spirit however, and he remains one of the most influential thinkers during his time. Za'ba was one of the few Malays who had the opportunity to attend an English college, interact with various other races as a student and later on form a working relationship with British officials. His dealings with these other races made him think profoundly about the situation of the Malays. In an article for Lembaga Melayu in 1917, he stated the influence of this multi-cultural environment on his ideas about race and nationhood:

"It is rare to find anybody, having interacted with other races, who would not then recollect on his own people, his heritage and his country." (Lembaga Melayu, Bil 824, 1.5.1917).

This multi-cultural environment however, seemed to have an adverse effect on the other Malay nationalists in our case study, such Abdul Rahim Kajai and Syed

Syeikh Al-Hadi. Kajai for example, frequently articulated on the need for the Malays to band together in a show of solidarity against the threat of the foreign races. In an article in 'Majlis' about the dangers posed by foreign races in taking resources from Malays, he stated:

"...is our race going to be a race that is bankrupt or are we to become slaves to others forever? Our race cannot get away from this burden as long as more of their generation suck our blood until we are lying down and weak." (Editorial note, Majlis, 23 April 1934).

In particular, Kajai was deeply affected by the economic opportunities offered to Indians and Chinese migrants by the British administration; and British justification that the Malays were lazy and that these were 'model races' who could set an example to the Malays. The British at the time used racialized divide-and-rule strategies to keep their position at the top of economic hierarchy in Malaya and this had an impact on the ways in which notions of race began to be articulated by educated Malays like Kajai:

"As long as the world needs resources, the land of Malaya will continue to be dug by people. Towns, rubber plantations and the Malayan landscape will be converted to become mines and turned inside out. As long as the resources of the plantations are needed by humankind, the 'model races' will continue to progress and increase and open fields and plantations, and the forests of Malaya will be destroyed by these people." (Majlis, 12 November 1934).

The xenophobic feelings held by nationalists like Kajai ran in contradiction to Za'ba who felt that the presence of these races in Malaya represented an opportunity for the Malays to learn from them. At the time, angry articles like the examples written by Kajai above were rife in Malay vernacular newspapers. Za'ba wrote a letter to the newspaper Al-Ikhwan in 1926, stating his disapproval of these open proclamations of hatred for the other races who occupied Malaya:

"In your article, the words that we have been enslaved by other races promotes a feeling of hatred...its better not to be said, as it creates an illness of the heart towards those who have enslaved us...what we should strengthen (apart from educating the public and increasing our knowledge) is the good work of our country which is filled with Chinese and Indians- every year thousands of them come to our country to earn a livelihood. In reality, while we Malays are always in poverty, the Chinese and Indians are doing every kind of work like being coolies and such in our country. Why do we not want to do the same?" (Al-Ikhwan, 1926).

In a follow up article to the same newspaper, he stated:



“My second criticism- every single achievement and success cannot be made on the foundation of the achievement and success of the race and fatherland...it is a false name and I don't feel I know any true foundation of success and achievement which is true (that has no falsehood)... as Islam (religion) does not love the success of one race and land alone. It also loves all races and the servant of Allah must do the same...” (ibid).

Za'ba and Kajai came from different educational backgrounds and had their own distinct experiences under British colonial rule. Kajai was from the Malay vernacular schools and spent three years afterwards in Mecca under religious instruction. He attempted to get into an English school, but was denied, leading him to learn English on his own.² Kajai worked in a government office as a Malay linguist, and later became an English compositor. In 1913, he decided to pursue a different line of work and became a draughtsman. When his father died, he returned to Mecca to look after his younger sister- and made a number of trips back and forth to Malaya during the period 1913-1925. In 1925, he was afforded the opportunity to write in the newspaper 'Mingguan Idaran Zaman' which had begun circulating in Penang. He wrote about the experiences and social developments of Mecca for the Malay reading public. Kajai and his family returned to Malaya in 1928 and he landed the position of journalist for the newspaper 'Saudara' in 1930. He later became editor of 'Majlis' in 1931 and 'Warta Malaya' in 1936. (Bakar, 1984: 10).

Kajai took it upon himself to educate the Malays on how to progress as a race. He made the acquaintance of Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi during his work on 'Saudara' and both men found that they operated on the same intellectual wavelength. At the time, Syed Syeikh was the editor of 'Saudara'. Kajai was committed to instilling a sense of pride amongst the Malays about their race- a message that Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi was trying to communicate through his newspaper at the time. When Kajai became an editor for 'Majlis', this mission was stated in his editorial note:

“we would like to invite the reader to celebrate and bring the reader's attention to the meanings that have been achieved by the creed written in Malay, that is the creed of our race which is of 'eminence' and which can tie us together... with this creed we can comb the alien races who have come in droves to our country...” (Majlis, 17 Dec 1931).

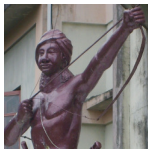
Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi had a different background from Za'ba and Kajai. He came from a privileged

background, having been adopted by the Raja of Riau-Lingga at the age of fourteen. He was sent to a pondok (religious) school in Terengganu to further his understanding of Islam and the Arab language. Unlike Za'ba who had an English education, and Kajai who was a product of Malay vernacular schools, Syed Sheikh received Arabic instruction. The *Raja* then sent him to further his studies in Arabic language and Islamic religion in the Middle East. Syed Sheikh came under the tutorship of Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), one of the foremost Islamic reformists at the time. Abduh's revolutionary ideas brought much change and development in the Middle Eastern community. Syed Syeikh was very much influenced by this new wave of thinking and wanted to transmit it back to the Malay people. (Samat, 1992: 12). When he returned to Malaya, he opened the Madrasah Al-Iqbal in 1907. He also began the magazine 'Al-Imam' in the same year. 'Al-Imam', directly translated as 'Protector' was actually the title given by Muhammad Abduh to all of his followers across the world. Syed Sheikh titled his magazine 'Al-Imam' with the intention to transmit this new wave of Islamic reformism to the Malay people.

Syed Syeikh was deeply respected amongst the Malay community because he was one of the few who graduated from a high-ranking Islamic school in the Middle East. In 1909, Syed Syeikh entered the law profession and became a syariah lawyer in Johor. He did well as a lawyer, but made the decision to leave the field in 1915. This was due to two reasons. Firstly, the system of regulations in Johor was being replaced with British law. This must have been of some disappointment to Syed Syeikh who hoped to bring a new wave of Islamic reformism to the straits settlement. The strengthening of the British administration had placed an obstacle to the growth of Islam in the Malay states. Secondly, Syed Sheikh became attracted towards other fields like education and journalism. He felt this was a better forum upon which to raise Malay awareness who had fallen into poverty as opposed to the alien races who were progressing and achieving success in Malaya.

Syed Syeikh left the law profession and set up the Madrasah Al-Hadi in 1915. In 1919, he set up the Madrasah Al-Masyhur. By 1926, Syed Sheikh produced another newspaper called 'Al-Ikhwān' (Al-Imam had ceased production in 1908). This was the newspaper which Za'ba had written to in reaction to its propagation of racial pride at the expense of instilling hatred for other races. The newspaper between 1926-1931 and played a major role towards imparting a new form of Islamic reformism and promoting a love for the Malay race. In one of his articles, he stated:

² This was noted in the 'Summary of Life History of Abdul Rahim Kajai, Chief Editor, Malai Sinbun Sha', 1943



“My dear cousins, who are sleeping so soundly, and taking it so easy until you are almost passed out or like a person who has died due to a lack of oxygen. Wake up immediately- wash the sleep out of your eyes. Look around you at the land that has been changed into a different land. People from other races have come to till this soil to meet the demands of this world...” (Al-Ikhwan, 16 September 1926).

These three nationalists- Za’ba, Kajai and Syed Sheikh each had their own response towards how the Malay race should be defined and articulated- based on their own personal experiences, education and exposure in British Malaya. One point of note however, is that their ideas of race was not influenced simply by a direct transmission between the British colonizers and themselves. In the case example of Syed Sheikh, he received his knowledge on race from the Middle East. Kajai was also profoundly inspired by his time in Mecca. These Islamic countries were exposed to modern developments earlier than Malaya, but these new forms of knowledge were transfigured to suit the demands of their own societies- in the case of the Middle East, it influenced religious thinking (as espoused by Muhammad Abduh and his followers) and brought about a wave of Islamic reformism.

In these three case examples, we also see that these Malay nationalists were working covertly against the British. The idea that their mission was an anti-colonial project became more clearly articulated after the Japanese Occupation. The notion of race became the main platform to gather the Malays together in their united cry for independence; which was granted to them in 1957.

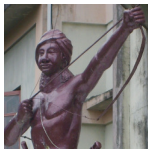
If we were to take the idea that notions of race were transmitted through the British administrative process and rationalized the subjects in a panopticon-like fashion, then it would be implied that these ideas of race would be homogeneously internalized by the colonized. In the case examples however, we can see that Za’ba was diametrically opposed to notions of race articulated by nationalists like Kajai and Syed Sheikh; but at the same time, was on common ground on the idea that the people needed to be roused from their ignorance and be educated. These three nationalists only represent a small part of the story. There were also educated Malays who chose to be British collaborators, and those who refrained from engaging with these Western modes of thought altogether. There is also the larger uneducated Malay population who appeared to be unaware of the changes occurring around them (as observed by these nationalists in their writings).

The work of Anthony Milner sheds light on the fact that a process of translation was taking place as these imported ideas such as race began to take hold in the

Malay mind. There appeared to be a specifically Malay response and adaptation of the concept of race into their world. The ‘adat’(customs) that governed pre-modern thinking echoed throughout these new articulations of ‘bangsa’ (race). This brings to our attention, the kind of dynamism at play when a new concept travels and becomes imported into a different cultural milieu. This brings us back to the work of Bill Ashcroft, who urges colonial historians to look at the kind of engagements that occur between the colonizers and the subject rather than focus on the symbol of power held by the colonizers in dismantling an earlier form of thought. His contention is that power shifts to postcolonial societies when they are able to adapt Western modes of thought to reproduce their own forms of knowledge. This process is marked by complexities as post-colonial societies did not reproduce these forms of knowledge wholesale but rather transformed them through their own cultural lenses. This observation has been made by Homi Bhabha in his concept of the ambivalence of post-colonial mimicry- a contradiction in the colonial response to Western forms of knowledge as they reproduce themselves as ‘almost the same but not quite.’ (Bhabha, 1994: 5). There is a composite difference that is evoked when colonial societies engage with the apparatus of colonial discourse. This demonstrates the stance these societies take as they appropriate knowledge without getting trapped within its confines; a duality is produced in the process that marks the colonized subjects as independent from the colonial power.

A concluding look at the notion of colonial subjectivity

As a conclusion to this paper, I would like to delve into the general theme of colonial subjectivity and discuss its implications on present research. Theories that have depicted the subject as rationalized by the colonial state have very often been translated into narratives about the dominance of the West in the globalized world. Post-colonial societies are characterized in these narratives as permanently dependent on the West and its modes of thought. This does not bring out the depth and complexity of the interactions between Europe and post-colonial societies in the present day. The administration of British rule did lead to an ‘epistemological invasion’ but these educated Malays (such as the three educated nationalists showcased in this paper) demonstrated a remarkable capacity and adaptability to these new modes of thought. The rapid transformation of Malaya (which separated into two nations: Malaysia and Singapore in 1963) attests to this. The manner in which the Malays appropriated Western



forms of knowledge to advance their independent nation challenges the classical interpretation of the West as the torch-bearer of global development.

Frederick Cooper has made an important contribution to the field of post-colonial scholarship through a general analysis of the limitations of this field (see 'Colonialism in Question', 2005). According to him, post-colonial writers do not do justice to the present by reducing it to a colonial effect. This obscures the way major continents of Asia, Europe and Africa have shaped each other over time. The experiences of the people and the independence movements in the colonies have been accorded little attention as the focus is on how deeply imbedded Euro-centric concepts are in their claims for progress and democracy. Cooper acknowledges the validity of these studies but finds that "scholars are less willing to acknowledge to what extent asymmetrical power is assailable power, or that the terrain 'Europe' might change even as other people seem to be conducting their battles for recognition on 'European' terms. (2005: 31). Cooper calls for a re-evaluation of post-colonial concepts in the global era as new trends are shaping the movement of people, capital and culture across the globe. Globalization theorists are beginning to uncover the complexities that mark the connections between various parts of the world; the thing that is missing according to Cooper is the historical depth of these findings. The process here is not a straightforward one; the nature of this appropriation and subsequent interactions are constantly reconfiguring these power relationships and this makes it a difficult structure to analyze. Cooper calls for a refinement in the analytical tools of the colonial historian and a more direct understanding of the specific processes that underlie globalization as a movement.

These established academic frameworks in colonial scholarship were based on an understanding that knowledge played the crucial role in the hegemonic implementation of colonial rule (a theory illustrated most articulately by Bernard Cohn's seminal piece 'Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge'). They represent keen insights that have been made on the overhaul of previous knowledge patterns of colonized peoples to favour European modes of thinking; eventually trapping the post-colonial society within this epistemic invasion through its power to define the 'universal'. It remains to be an important contribution to the field of post-colonial scholarship but it tends to concentrate on the power aspects of the colonial project rather than take into account the dynamic transformation of these societies that have been stimulated by the colonial experience.

The case studies presented in this paper hopes to shed some light on the kind of appropriation of knowledge that occurred when it came to Malay expressions of racial theory developed in Europe. There was a very specific cultural adaption of this concept and it provided the Malays a tool to fight for their independence. In this sense, knowledge can be seen as grounds of contestation between the colonizer and the colonized. The manner in which the colonial subject has developed their own dialogue within this larger mode of intellectual thought marks its shift as a Western privilege. In this sense, we can postulate that it was more of an engagement and a stimulating transformation that occurred on an epistemic level, rather than a colonizing of the mind. It also demonstrates that we can establish more than one singular framework of modernity as these forms of knowledge become incorporated and reproduced in a different cultural context, as was the case with the Malay world.

Paula Pannu is a Ph.d student in History at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Her Ph.d project entitled 'The Production and Consumption of Knowledge in Colonial Malaya' seeks to trace the agency of the Malay subject in appropriating knowledge under British colonial rule. This is a continuation from her B.A (Hons) project written at the National University of Singapore entitled 'The Production and Transmission of Knowledge in Colonial Malaya' which won the Wong Lin Ken Memorial Medal for best thesis and had been converted into an article for the Asian Journal of Social Science in 2009. Her main research interest is tracing how British modes of knowledge impacted upon the Malay world and led to its subsequent transformation.

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