

# Indigenizing Colonial Knowledge:

## The Formation of Malay Identity in British Malaya

Research >  
Southeast Asia

Concepts of race and ethnicity rank among the legacies that British colonialism has left post-colonial states. Not until racial and ethnic classifications were adopted in fields as varied as school education, mass media, public administration, and legislation, could these colonial concepts be popularized. With my research, I aim to lay bare the process of the indigenization of colonial knowledge in the construction of Malay identity in British Malaya. In what way and to what extent did the colonized accept, modify, and appropriate the colonizer's worldview?

By Soda Naoki

Recently, the question of colonial knowledge and identity formation has been attracting interest in the field of Malaysian and Malay Studies. Scholars such as H.M.J. Maier, A. Milner, and A.B. Shamsul show great insights into this question. Nevertheless, much more research still remains to be conducted on the internalization and utilization of imported knowledge in Malay nationalism.

My current study breaks up the process of the indigenization of colonial knowledge in identity formation into two phases, namely transmission and appropriation. The first phase lies in the process in which new apprehensions of a colonial society were transplanted from British colonizers to Malays. The second phase is the stage in which Malays themselves reorganized their acquired knowledge and made use of it for their own sake.

### The first phase: transmission

Education plays a vital part in the construction of Malay identity in British Malaya thus revealing the process of colonial knowledge transmission. William Roff and many other historians point out the importance of education in the making of Malay nationalism. However, they do not pay enough attention to knowledge transmission in education, a theme on which I intend to shed light.

My current research focuses on the role of Malay vernacular education in

knowledge transmission. The main sources are four authorized textbooks on Malay history and geography that were used in Malay-medium schools and teacher-training colleges in colonial Malaya. One of these textbooks was written by a Briton (R.J. Wilkinson) in English in 1908; two by another Briton (R.O. Winstedt) in Malay in 1918; and one by a Malay (Abdul Hadi Haji Hasan) in Malay started in 1925. These textbooks reflect a transition from 'their' history to 'our' history: from a history of the Malays by an English writer for British readers, to a history of the Malays by a British writer for Malay readers, and finally to a history of the Malays by a Malay writer for Malay readers.

Taking a 'scientific', positivistic approach, all these authors reconstructed the image of the 'Malay world' in terms of community, territory, and time. Firstly, these writings are based on the concept of Malay as a *bangsa*, or race. The textbooks played an important role in popularizing racial classifications that had been originally introduced in population censuses, and share an image of the Malays as a 'mixed race'.

Secondly, the authors had a similar notion of Malay territoriality. They refer to geographical data that are systematically catalogued for each political unit in a similar way. The standardization of geographical knowledge and 'systematic quantification' serve to objectify the territoriality of the Malay community. By absorbing the concept of territorial boundaries, the authors describe the Malay territories at three levels, namely the Malay states (*negeri-negeri Melayu*), Malaya (*tanah Melayu*), and the Malay world (*alam Melayu*). Furthermore, in these textbooks, the authors represent Malaya as the focal point of the Malay territories. This Malaya-centric view reflected the substantialization of the colonial territorial boundary.

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, established as Sultan Idris Training College at Tanjong Malim, Perak, in 1922. The teacher-training college produced a number of Malay nationalists, including Ibrahim Haji Yaacob.



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Finally, these three authors had common conceptions of time. They wrote Malay history according to calendrical time and chronology, and their historical views were progressivist. They believed in the gradual progression to higher forms of human life and accordingly divided Malay history into distinctive periods on a scale of progress and civilization, from 'primitive' to Hindu-Buddhist and to Islamic, then to Portuguese, Dutch, and finally to British. At the same time, the authors also understood the stratification of Malay history to be visible, with older layers retained as new layers were added on.

Thus, by the early 1930s, not only British scholars but also the Malay teacher, Abdul Hadi Haji Hasan, had begun to reformulate the Malay world through modern historiography and geography. The concepts of race and territorial state became increasingly important as the basic components of the Malay world. Both history and geography were made Malay and thus moulded to national histories and national geographies in other parts of the world. These changes would pave the way for the identification of 'Malay' as a potential nation.

### The second phase: appropriation

We cannot, however, take for granted that the Malays automatically absorbed the new framework of knowledge brought by British colonizers.

Malays also accommodated the modern concept of Malayness in terms of their positive transformation and appropriation. To avoid oversimplification, we should turn our eyes to the second phase: appropriation of colonial knowledge.

In an intensive case study, I focussed on the formation of Malay identity in the mind of a prominent Malay nationalist, Ibrahim Haji Yaacob. As president of the first left-wing Malay organization named Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union), established in 1938, Ibrahim formulated a concept of Melayu Raya (Greater Malaya), a pan-Malay national community. He obtained Malay-medium education both at a primary school and later at a teacher-training college. Furthermore, Abdul Hadi, one of the authors of the textbooks mentioned earlier, was his history teacher at the college. Because of this educational background, Ibrahim's personal intellectual history is one of the best cases of indigenization of colonial knowledge in popular Malay nationalism. The main sources that I consult are his writings such as books, articles in newspapers, and unpublished manuscripts.

It seems to me that the following two points merit our attention, though my findings are preliminary in nature. Firstly, Ibrahim makes use of imported knowledge in order to legitimize his nationalist cause. In his writings, he discusses the Malay population, the making of the Malay race that was represented as a 'mixed race', the geographical proximity of territories in the Malay Archipelago, and a common 'national' history of the Malays. He thus selectively utilizes 'scientific' knowledge on Malay race, territories, and history, which had been originally brought by British scholars, to show the oneness and greatness of the Malay world.

Secondly, Ibrahim also reorganizes existing colonial knowledge for the sake of his argument. The most remarkable example is his reinterpretation of progressivist views of Malay history. Following the other textbook writers in their periodization of Malay history, Ibrahim classifies Malay history into four stages: 'primitive', 'Hindu-Buddhist', 'Islamic', and 'colonial'. Yet, unlike these textbook writers, he presents the colonial era as an age of decline, while describing the pre-colonial period as a golden age. He ultimately anticipates the coming of a new era of independence, an age of rebirth and renewal. Here we can clearly see the transformation of imported knowledge.

While British colonizers brought new forms of knowledge to Malays, there seems to have been room for reinterpretation, transformation, and appropriation in the process of the indigenization of colonial knowledge. This indicates that the formation of Malay identity in colonial Malaya was the result of the interaction between external and internal powers of knowledge. One could find other examples of the internalization of foreign ideas such as the localization of the Islamic reformism in the Middle East. To locate my case study in the broader context of Malay intellectual history, my next steps will involve comparisons not only between Ibrahim and other Malay intellectuals but also between Malay-medium education and others, namely English-medium and Islamic (Arabic-medium) education. Though my current study can paint only a partial picture of the interplay of knowledge transmission and identity formation, I hope it will provide a fresh perspective on the question. <

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