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Curating Indigeneity: Imperial Pasts and the Shaping of Communal Identities in the Malay Archipelago (Nineteenth–Twentieth Centuries)

Abstract: This paper seeks to unravel how the imperial past of British Malaya has served as a political tool to ascribe and shape the identity politics of diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia and Singapore over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, it concentrates on how this imperial past has been instrumentalised to construct and perpetuate preconceived notions of ethnic communities. It demonstrates how communal identities in British Malaya underwent a transformation in this era as the irruption of colonial capitalism reconfigured local economies, social dynamics, and political cultures. It is argued that these developments contributed towards social schisms between indigenous and allochthone societies in the colonial era. In uncovering how the imperial past has been instrumentalised in the formation and shaping of communal identities and politics in post-colonial Malaysia and Singapore, this paper seeks to draw attention to the concrete ways in which imperial histories have played a role in constructing images of alterity and indigeneity. While extant literature on communal identities have mainly focused on the post-colonial era, this essay further argues for the importance of understanding how the imperial past has been instrumentalised to perpetuate these images of the "other" and to justify political ideologies.

On 20 December 1958, the Singapore Malay-language newspaper, *Berita Harian*, published a damning front page article against the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.[1] Criticising the *Encyclopaedia* for its "biased and unscientific" perspective on Malays, it took particular offense at the following passage, published under the *Encyclopaedia's* heading, "Malays":

1 "Berita Harian bertindak na'melenyapkan penghinaan ini," *Berita Harian*, 20 December 1958, 1. The passage cited above can be found in this article. The original citation on "Malays" can be found in the revised fourteenth edition of the fourteenth volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1958), page 722. The *Berita Harian* (The Daily News) was a Romanized Malay edition of the leading English-language newspaper, the Singaporean *The Straits Times.* Its criticism of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was also published by other newspapers, notably the leading English newspaper, *The Straits Times*. See "Berita tackles Encyclopaedia – 'a gross libel'", *The Straits Times*, 21 December 1958, 9.

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> The Malays are indolent, pleasure loving, improvident, fond of bright clothing, of comfort, of ease, and dislike toil exceedingly. They have no idea of the value of money, and little notion of honesty where money is concerned. They borrow rather than earn money. They frequently refuse to work for a wage though in sore need of cash, and yet at the invitation of one who is their friend they will toil unremittingly without any thought of reward. They are addicted to gambling, and formerly were much given to fighting, but their courage on the whole is not high if judged by European standards. The sexual morality of the Malays is very lax, but prostitution is not common. [. . .]

Asserting that such statements were tantamount to "a great insult" and "a libel to an entire race," the *Berita Harian* urged the editors of the *Encyclopaedia* to remedy the situation. Pointing out that "objections had been raised previously" to no avail, the newspaper insisted on the necessity of revising the article, especially in light of Malaya's recent independence from British colonial rule in August 1957. "The Malays now stand tall and are today senior partners in the democratic government of independent Malaya," declared the *Berita Harian*. "If the *Encyclopaedia*'s description were true, then independence (*merdeka*), which had been achieved by the Malays, would have been a failure," reasoned the newspaper.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s response was swift. Within a week, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s managing editor, John Vilas Dodge (1909–1991), addressed a letter expressing his commitment to rewrite the offending passage "immediately [. . .] at our earliest opportunity."[2] Admitting that his editorial team had been "embarrassed by the paragraph," Dodge revealed that they had "been bombarded with criticism" and that they "would have been anxious to change the article" even if the story had not received such wide notice."[3] Adding that "a noted Malay scholar" and former colonial administrator, Sir Richard Olaf Winstedt (1878–1966), had since been "commissioned to revise the offensive passage in the encyclopaedia," Dodge assured the *Berita Harian* that the revision would be handled "as an assignment of the first priority."[4]

Many leaders and members of the Malay community both welcomed and celebrated *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s decision to correct the article. One Singapore reader of the *Berita Harian*, who addressed a forum letter to the newspaper under the pseudonym *Anak Melayu* (Malay child), wrote to express satisfaction at the outcome of its initiative, explaining that the correction of such erroneous

2 "Winstedt menulis renchana Baharu," *Berita Harian*, 30 December 1958, 1. Also see: "Berita Harian protest forces a change," *The Straits Times*, 30 December 1958, 1. The *Berita Harian*'s story had drawn greater international attention, and it had been circulated by Reuters.

3 Ibid.

4 "Winsted Denial on 'Lazy Malays'", *The Straits Times*, 3 January 1959, 2.

views on the Malays was necessary to dismantle the long-standing stereotype that the Malays were "lazy."[5] "As long as this information in the *Encyclopaedia* is not scraped," wrote *Anak Melayu*, "people in the world who do not understand the Malays well will think that we are lazy and that we do not know how to earn money."[6] Concurrently, other Malay readers, such as Mohamad bin Harun of Taiping, Perak (Northwest Malaysia), wrote to the *Berita Harian* to express an alternative perspective of such long-standing stereotypes. Whilst affirming that he did not subscribe to the *Encyclopaedia*'s views on Malays, he nonetheless added: "Some aspects of [the article] on the characteristics of the Malays really hit the spot. Some of the weaknesses of the Malays, as underlined by the *Encyclopaedia* article, are still found to this day. Can it be said that Malays are more diligent than other races?"[7] Arguing that *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s article had in fact served "as a mirror for us all," Mohamad bin Harun thus asserted: "If you want to change it [the article], then let it be about the traits that have been eroded or that are no longer present in the Malays. As regards the characteristics which have become our flesh and blood, let them be maintained in the article as a mirror for us all."[8] Another perspective on the revision of the article was submitted by the State Councillor of Selangor (West Coast Malaysia) and Chairman of the Selangor Muslim Welfare Committee, Inche Abdullah Yassin. In his interview with *The Straits Budget*, he insisted that *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s description of Malays should take into consideration "the Malays' gentleness, sincerity and straightforwardness" as it was "mainly" because of these attributes "that the British colonial power was able to introduce its open-door policy of bringing cheap

5 "Kerajaan di-minta bantah penghinaan dlm [dalam] Encyclopaedia – Anak Melayu, Singapura," *Berita Harian*, 27 December 1958, 4.

6 Ibid. "Sa-lagi keterangan2 dalam buku yng di-chachi ramai itu tidak di-kikiskan maka sa-lama itu-lah pendudok2 di dunia yang tidak mengetahui bangsa Melayu dari dekat menganggap kita pemalas dan tidak tahu menggungakan wang ringgit dan lain2nnya [sic]."

7 "Orang Melayu suka pinjam, boros. . . - Mohamad bin Harun, Taiping," *Berita Harrian*, 3 January 1959, 4.

8 Ibid. The original citation in Malay is as follows: "Saya tidak setuju dengan keselurohan pendapat dalam renchana itu. Tetapi pada sa-tengah2 bahagian-nya tentang sifat2 orang Melayu memang kena pada tempat-nya. Sa-tengah2 kelemahan orang2 Melayu saperti yang di-terangkan oleh rencana *Encyclopaedia* itu maseh di-dapati hingga hari ini. Dapat-kah ita katakan orang2 Melayu lebeh rajin daripada bangsa2 lain? [...] Saya baca *Encyclopaedia* itu akan mengubah, renchana itu akibat bantahan dari *Berita Harian*. Tetapi apa-kah yang akan di-ubah? Kalau hendak di-ubah pun biar-lah tentang sifat2 yang sudah terkikis atau yang tidak ada pada pribadi orang2 Melayu. Tentang sifat2 yang memang sudah menjadi darrah daging kita itu, biar-lah di-kekalkan dalam rencana itu untok menjadi cermin kita semua. Shukor-lah ada *Encyclopaedia* itu untok memberi peluang kapada kita melihat diri kita sendiri."

labour from overseas, making Malaya's racial problem what it is now."[9] In that regard, he was suggesting that these "positive" characteristics of Malays had been exploited by the British, who in his opinion were responsible for having introduced non-Malay immigrants (Chinese and Indians, amongst others) to the colony and for sowing the seeds of racial tensions in Malaya.

Although the public outcry and subsequent revision of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*'s article on Malays has since been forgotten, the letters addressed to the *Berita Harian,* as well as the opinions expressed by members of Malay community, offer us key insights on their views and understanding of their community or "race" (*bangsa*) at the dawn of Malayan independence from British colonial rule. Of particular interest is the manner in which Malay self-representation was (and arguably, is) constantly expressed and framed within a comparative perspective in which Malays are considered and judged with respect to other communities, such as the Chinese and Indians. Furthermore, Malays are identified within this comparative framework as being "lazy" and lacking in "economic sense" with regards to the other allochthonous ethnic communities of Malaya. Apart from this, Inche Abdullah Yassin's assertion about the consequences of the arrival of other immigrants ("cheap labour from overseas") to British Malaya during the colonial period is useful in understanding the tensions which existed between the different ethnic communities in Malaya at the moment of self-determination. Indeed, his statement is reminiscent of the oft-cited view that the socio-economic condition of Malays had progressively declined during the colonial period. Coupled along with this belief was the long-standing claim that the disparity in economic development between Malays and other ethnic communities was due to British colonial policies, which had favored immigrants to the detriment of Malays.[10] At the same time, underlying these assumptions was the enduring cliché that "Malay indolence" was a marker of difference between Malays and other ethnicities, constituting an immutable attribute which, to borrow Mohamad bin Harun's expression, was a "characteristic which [has] become our flesh and blood."

Given that such racial stereotypes and beliefs on the consequences of British colonial rule have since been challenged by social commentators and scholars alike,[11] it would be unsurprising if such ideas no longer held currency in contempo-

9 "Malays happy over Britannica correction," *The Straits Budget*, 7 January 1959, 8.

10 For an overview of these long-standing beliefs, see the following article: Charles Hirschman, "The making of race in colonial Malaya: Political economy and racial ideology," *Sociological Forum* 1 (2): 330–61.

11 Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: F. Cass, 1977).

rary Malaysian and Singaporean (post-colonial British Malaya) societies. Indeed, much of the racial (or racist) statements on Malays cited in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article can be attributed to the beliefs British colonials had of Malays during the colonial era. As a case in point, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article had been penned by Sir Hugh Clifford (1866–1941),[12] an "old Malaya hand" who had resided in the colony for more than 20 years during his years of service in the colonial civil service. A keen observer and prolific novelist, he had occupied the position of Governor of the Straits Settlements and British High Commissioner in Malaya (1927–1929).[13] However, comments akin to that of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article remain rampant. For instance, as recently as in March 2019, Malaysia's long-serving Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad (b. 1925) publicly lamented that Malays were still "not business oriented, while the other communities are very business oriented."[14] Explaining that Malays "still do not know how to handle or manage money" and that they engaged in "frivolous spending," Mahathir echoed colonial-era clichés of Malays and cited them as justification for the implementation of affirmative action policies in favour of Malays, adding that "the existing 30 percent *Bumiputera* [Malays and indigenous peoples] shareholding quota in listed companies is necessary."[15] When questioned about the validity of his opinions on "Malay indolence," Mahathir conceded that it was a "generalisation," but reiterated that "people should not be offended over it."[16] These recent statements suggest that the Prime Minister has not wavered in his long-standing conviction that his compatriots were "lazy,"[17] and that they had not succeeded in adopting the "working cultures of more successful races."[18] On a related note, Mahathir has also spoken categorically on how it was "the Chinese and Indians [who] worked as labourers when they first came to this country, doing the dangerous, dirty and difficult jobs."[19] Reiterating a statement rem-

12 "Winsted Denial on 'Lazy Malays'", *The Straits Times*, 3 January 1959, 2.

13 J. de V. Allen, "Two Imperialists: A Study of Sir Frank Swettenham and Sir Hugh Clifford," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 37, no. 1 (1964): 41–73.

14 "Dr M: Bumiputeras don't know how to handle money, spend frivolously," by Yiswaree Palansamy, 30 March 2019, *The Malay Mail*. Mahathir held the office of Prime Minister for two periods: 1981 to 2003 and 2018 to 2020.

15 Ibid.

16 "Dr M: Brits' assumption that Malays are lazy not necessarily the truth," 17 June 2019, *The Malay Mail*.

17 "Dr M: I failed to change lazy Malays," *The Star*, by Rahimy Rahim, 11 September 2014.

18 "Mahathir defends 'Lazy Malays' remarks," *Today*, 15 September 2014. These statements were originally produced in the *Utusan Malaysa,* a newspaper under the control of the political party UMNO (United Malays National Organisation).

19 "A chat with Dr M: Work hard, don't rely on aid," by Khaidir A Majid, Kadir Djkoh and Adha Ghazali, *New Straits Times*, 5 December 2019.

iniscent of colonialist discourse, he emphasised: "Now, their descendants are billionaires because they work."

In retrospect, the longevity of these colonial perspectives on "the Malay character" and the unabating comparisons drawn between Malays and other ethnic communities merit greater scholarly attention. On the one hand, this is because such issues remain pertinent if we seek to understand contemporary politics and society in post-colonial Malaysia. As scholars have under-lined, recent developments in Malaysian politics, namely Mahathir's re-appointment as Prime Minister, have been "accompanied by a resurgence of public discourse concerning the stereotype of laziness applied to the Malay community."[20] How can we account for this? On the other hand, while scholars can trace the origins of such stereotypes and racialist comparisons to the colonial period, there is far less information available on the mechanisms and reasons for which these stereotypes or colonial perspectives continue to endure (and arguably, even thrive) in the post-independent era. Yet, these identity politics, which are rooted in discourses dating to the colonial era, continue to significantly impact post-colonial societies. Mahathir's 2019 justification of the implementation of affirmative action policies, designed to favour *Bumiputeras* (Malays and other indigenous ethnic communities), which account for 70% of the population,[21] is a case in point.

In seeking to address these issues, it bears reminding that the issues of race and ethnicity remain challenging (not to mention incendiary) in multi-ethnic Singapore and Malaysia. Indeed, as scholars have argued, racial categorisation has been used "as a technology of governance for differential control and rewards."[22] As previously alluded to, the consequences of this colonial-era form of racial categorisation "is especially evident in Malaysia today where racial politics has become not only inflammatory but also 'normalised' to implant the logic of 'originary justice', or the *Melayu* as first among equals." At other junctures, specific identities, such as "Malayness," have also been "often employed as cultural capital by minorities to lay claim to indigeneity, and therefore protection from the state."[23] In hindsight, the complexity of these issues over ethnicity, racial categorisation, and the ways in

20 Jonathan Yong Tienxhi, "The Image of Laziness and the Malaysian Middle Class: Unpacking the Politics of Indolence," in *Minorities Matter: Malaysian Politics and People Volume III*, ed. Sophie Lemiere (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), 108. See: "Dr M takes jab at 'lazy, untrustworthy' Malays," by Rafidah Mat Ruzki and Dawn Chan, *New Straits Times*, 8 September 2018.

21 "Malays" account for 57.9% of the population (30.4 million) with "Other Bumiputera" at 12.2%. Demographic Statistics Malaysia (Second Quarter 2023), Ministry of Economy, Malaysia, https://www.dosm.gov.my/.

22 Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, eds., *Melayu. The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011), xvi.

23 Ibid., xi. Here, the authors refer to the case of modern-day Singapore.

which "race" has been utilised to serve different political or socio-economic agendas can also be gleaned from the fact that who or what constitutes a "Malay" or "Malayness" defies any easy definition. As scholars have demonstrated over the past decades, the very "nature of essence of 'Malayness' remains problematic – one of the most challenging and confusing terms in the world of Southeast Asia."[24] In addition, its significance as "more than just a civilisational notion but a living reality; a signifier that persists and thrives,"[25] is useful in reminding us of the importance of understanding how such racial categories and understandings have been shaped in the long run. In this sense, if we are to gain a better comprehension of these issues, a thorough historical contextualisation of the myriad ways in which racial categories have been used and understood is necessary.

In light of the above, this chapter seeks to unravel how the imperial past of British Malaya has served as a political tool for different interest groups to ascribe and shape the identity politics of diverse ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay, Indian . . .) over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, it concentrates on how this imperial past has been instrumentalised to construct and perpetuate stereotypes and preconceived notions of ethnic communities and their (self-)identities. It seeks to address the following questions: (1) in what concrete ways has Malaya's colonial past shaped the perspectives that different ethnic communities have of each other? By the same token, how has this shared colonial experience shaped the comparative framework in which Malay self-representation is expressed and considered with regard to other ethnicities? In addition, (2) how has Malaya's imperial past and its impact upon colonial society been recounted and transmitted over time? Indeed, what are the narrative structures, tropes, or metaphors used in communicating this shared history? Finally, (3) why do these tropes (and colonial stereotypes) of different ethnic communities in British Malaya (e.g., clichés of the "lazy Malay", the "business-oriented Chinese" or the "industrious Indians" to cite Mahathir) continue to endure after independence? What are the mechanisms perpetuating these colonial stereotypes in the post-colonial present?

Given the vast scope and breadth of these questions, this chapter addresses these issues by focusing the analysis upon the example raised previously – that is,

24 Timothy P. Barnard and Hendrik M.J. Maier, "Melayu, Malay, Malais: Journeys through the Identity of a Collection," in *Contesting Malayness: Malay Identity Across Boundaries*, ed. Timothy P. Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), xiii. Also see the work of Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays. Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006); Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree. Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Singapore: NUS Press 2010); and Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).

25 Mohamad and Aljunied, eds., *Melayu*, xx.

the trope of the "lazy" Malay supposedly "lacking in business acumen," as opposed to other "more industrious" and "business oriented" communities in British Malaya. It demonstrates that these colonial stereotypes emerged as communal identities and underwent a transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Malaya. In particular, this chapter argues that the irruption of colonial capitalism in the Malay Archipelago reconfigured local economies, social dynamics, and political cultures, forming the basis in which colonial perceptions of the different ethnic communities (Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others) emerged. Building upon the pioneering work of Syed Hussein Alatas, who has contributed much to this area of analysis,[26] this chapter demonstrates how this economic transformation of the region led British colonials to not only develop the stereotype that Malays were "lazy," but also the idea that they were "economically irrational," violent, ungovernable,[27] and even potentially dangerous. It analyses print source material (newspapers, colonial writings, amongst others) of the colonial era to gain a better understanding of the narratives, tropes, and mechanisms used in perpetuating these perspectives. In providing a concrete case study and analysis of how key concepts such as indigeneity were thoroughly constructed within and by Malaya's imperial past, this chapter aims to contribute towards extant historiography on the impact and consequences of imperial pasts in the "post" colonial present.

The Colonial Past and the Origins of the "Lazy" and "Ungovernable" Native

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the irruption of colonial capitalism in colonies throughout maritime Southeast Asia reconfigured local economies, social dynamics, and the political cultures of diverse peoples and communities. As a case in point, the population of this region was thoroughly transformed as colonials actively recruited immigrant labourers from East and South Asia in a bid to exploit the resources of the region. In some territories such as British Malaya, the number of immigrant labourers escalated to staggering heights, reaching between 85% and 100% of the total population in new urban centres.[28] Between 1800 and 1911, the pop-

26 Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native.*

27 See the analysis of Eddie Tay, *Colony, Nation, and Globalisation: Not at Home in Singaporean and Malaysian Literature* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 26.

28 Anthony Reid, "Malaysia/Singapore as Immigrant Societies," *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* 141 (2010): 6–7. Also see Amarjit Kaur, "Indian Labour, Labour Standards and Workers' Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900-1940," *Modern Asian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 425–75.

ulation quadrupled, increasing from 500,000 to 2,300,000 around the turn of the century.[29] Malaya was not unique in this; in the Philippines, an "unparalleled influx of Chinese labourers" during much of the nineteenth century altered the fabric of society in enduring ways.[30] In providing us with a global view of these migration patterns, scholars have also estimated that between 1846 and 1940, approximately 48–52 million people from India and southeast China found their way into parts of Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and the Indian Ocean between 1846 and 1940.[31]

In British Malaya, this spectacular increase in immigrant laborers was directly related to the demand for workers in lucrative industries such as tin mining, rubber cultivation, and others. As many local Malays had refused to work under perilous conditions for the benefit of colonial capitalism, colonials actively encouraged the mass immigration of Chinese and Indian laborers (as well as unfree, convict laborers from British India) to exploit the region's resources.[32] This, in turn, contributed to colonial stereotypes of Malays as "lazy natives" who were "economically irrational" since they did not partake in the enterprise of colonial capitalism. This cliché was reinforced when colonials turned to increasing numbers of Chinese and Indian immigrants willing to work under perilous conditions.[33] In contrast, these immigrants were typecast as being "industrious" or "vigorous" since they had supported the economic success of the plantations and mining industries under imperial rule. Such stereotypes of the different ethnic groups in Malaya soon gained currency; as Lynn Lees Hollen has argued, "[s]tereotypes of each ethnic group that linked culture, character, and capacity circulated widely within the European community in Malaya" and "[e]ach race was fitted by character and temperament into an appropriate place."[34] The following article published in 1890 by *The Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle* on the "Labour Question" in Malaya typifies these assessments:

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29 See *Report of the Labour Commission of 1890*, 68, cited in Lynn Hollen Lees, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects. British Malaya, 1786-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 52. Also see John H. Drabble, *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800-1990: The Transition to Modern Economic Growth* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), 91.

30 Mònica Ginés-Blasi, "A Philippine 'Coolie Trade': Trade and Exploitation of Chinese Labour in Spanish Colonial Philippines, 1850-98," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* 51, no. 3 (2020): 467–83.

31 Adam McKeown, "Global Migration, 1846-1940," *Journal of World History* 15, no. 32 (June 2004): 155–89 and Adam McKeown, "Conceptualising Chinese Diasporas, 1842-1949," *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 2 (May 1999).

32 Anand A. Yang, "Indian Convict Workers in Southeast Asia in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 179–208.

33 See the analysis of Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native.*

34 Lees, *Planting Empire*, 58.

> The usefulness of the Indian labourers is confined to certain special work only; nor can we depend on the lazy Malays as a source of cooly [sic] labour. The prosperity of the colony has hitherto been dependent mainly, if not entirely, on the large influx of Chinese coolies, and it is incumbent on all employers of Chinese labour, as well as the Government, to do their utmost in order to encourage Chinese immigration to the colony and the Protected Native States.[35]

As the above indicates, Malays were frequently compared to other ethnic communities in Malaya, often in an unflattering light. The opinion that Malays were "indolent" was accompanied by the colonial assessment that it was thus Malaya's other ethnic communities, and not the Malays, who were working towards the progress and economic development of the colony. These perspectives were articulated by British writers such as Walter Alleyne Ireland, who remarked in 1905: "The Malay of the Peninsula is the most steadfast loafer on the face of this earth [. . .] for nine tenths of his waking hours, year in and year out, he sits on a wooden bench in the shade and watches the Chinaman and the Tamil build roads and railways, work the mines, cultivate the soil, raise cattle, and pay the taxes."[36] Such opinions were not mere empty chatter; as scholars have demonstrated, these assessments on racial characteristics played significant roles in influencing British colonial policies, contributing towards the "division between natives and non-natives in the country."[37]

Other than contributing towards colonial stereotypes on "racial composition" in Malaya, the demographic and economic development of the region had further destabilized Malay society, leading to what some sociologists have termed "social déclassement" or a loss in social position. Indeed, the idea that Malays were "lazy" was followed by the belief that they would stagnate and even regress. By the turn of the twentieth century, such widely held assumptions of Malays led colonials and observers to assert with confidence: "Malays are too indolent by nature [. . .] their doom is sealed, that as time progresses, they must go to the wall [. . .] they will survive only as objects of scientific interest to the ethnologist and the historian."[38] The following view expressed by "Bangkor" (Penang, Straits Set-

35 "The Labour Question," *Straits Independent and Penang Chronicle*, 16 August 1890, 2.

36 Walter Alleyne Ireland, *The Far Eastern Tropics* (London: Archibald Constable, 1905): 115–16. The many reviews of Alleyne Ireland's book (published in the local newspapers and elsewhere) indicate the wide-spread interest and impact of his book.

37 Rusaslina Idrus, "Malays and Orang Asli: Contesting Indigeneity," in *Melayu. The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, ed. Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

38 Colonial opinions, cited in B. Stoney, "The Malays of British Malaya," in *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, ed. H. Cartwright and Arnold Wright (London, Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Company, Ltd., 1908), 227–28.

tlements) to the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* in 1904 exemplifies this perspective. Drawing upon Alleyne Ireland's opinions, "Bangkor" affirmed:

> Mr. Alleyne Ireland's estimation of the Malay that he is 'the most steadfast loafer on the face of the earth . . . you can make no appeal to him for industry', though ludicrous, would, it is hoped, bring home to mind what he is, and what he should be. [. . .] In spite of the many advantages and facilities afforded by the British rule, the Malay has lagged behind [. . .] Now that there is a tendency all over the world to advance in every way, initiated by the excellent example set by Japan, the Malay should not stagnate as hitherto. He will probably retrogress. His days as a nation are numbered. He belongs to the rubbish-heap of the world.[39]

Apart from these opinions related to "Malay indolence," a third prevailing stereotype on Malay "nature" was to be found in the idea that an innate, violent streak was inherent to Malays. This aspect of the Malay "character" was derived from colonial perceptions of indigenous acts of violence which came to be known as "running amok." In the realm of literature, "running amok" has had an impact on novelists and travel-writers such as Isabella Bird, W. Somerset Maugham, and Joseph Conrad.[40] Non-Anglophone novelists, such as Stefan Zweig (*Der Amokläufer*, 1922) and Henri Fauconnier (*Malaisie*, 1930) to name but a few, have equally been fascinated by amok and its connotations of an exclusively "native" or "primitive" example of violence in Malaya. Indeed, these writers have brought some of the more sensational and dramatic aspects of amok to a wider audience by using it as a key theme in their writing. In the colonial era, the phenomenon of "running amok" similarly left an indelible impression on colonials, an example of which can be found in the writings of Sir Frank Swettenham (1850–1946), who had served in the Malayan civil service in various capacities for more than 30 years. In his 1899 book, *The Real Malay*, Swettenham dedicated a chapter on amok, entitled "Faulty Composition":

> The nature of the Malays of our island is not unlike their clime. Beneath their civil and apparently gentle surface fierce passions smoulder, which require but a spark to kindle into a devastating flame. Maddened by jealousy, or some real or fancied wrong, the ordinary mild Malay becomes a demon. Then his eyes glare like those of a wild beast, out leaps his *kris* (ceremonial knife) or *parang*, and he rushes on the amok, smiting every-one he meets.[41]

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39 "Our Mail Bag: The Lazy Malay (To the Editor. 'Pinang Gazette')," *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 6 May 1904, 2. This letter was signed: "By Bangkor, Penang, 6–5-04."

40 For more information on travel writing and imperial expansion, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

41 Frank Swettenham, *The Real Malay* (London: John Lane, 1899). Swetttenham had notably served as Governor of the Straits Settlements and Resident-General of the Federated Malay States.

Although these colonial stereotypes have often been examined separately, studying them in relation with one another can allow us to gain a better understanding of how these perspectives were articulated and perpetuated in the colonial era. As a case in point, while the stereotype of the "lazy" Malay and the trope of the "violent" amok-running Malay have attracted equal attention, scholars have not attempted to make connections between them. Yet, the roots of these colonial views on the "Malay nature" can be found in a common background – that of the economic and demographic transformation of the region. In this regard, little attention has been paid to the way in which this economic transformation, as well as the social déclassement alluded to prior, could have been a source of frustration for Malays, driving some to commit violent acts later identified as "amok." Indeed, as the numerous colonial police reports and coroner records suggest,[42] cases of violence identified as "amok" systematically started as cases of dementia violence committed by male perpetrators within the framework of their family unit before spilling into the public spaces. These sources indicate that the origins of the domestic disputes which provided the initial spark of violence could be found in the incapacity of the (male) head of the household to bear the responsibility of guaranteeing a suitable standard of living for his own family. Such disputes and sense of impotency would then overwhelm the individual, leading him to execute sudden, violent acts. Seen from this point of view, colonial representations of "amok" and stereotypes on the "violent" nature of Malays are thus much more closely linked to the economic transformation of the Malay Archipelago than previously imagined.

Having identified these colonial tropes and the historical context in which they arose, it is useful to examine the reasons for which they took on such a hold in the colonial period. Amongst the different rationales which may account for this, scientific (and pseudoscientific) explanations proved to be one of the most important and pervasive, which was especially so because they provided a sense of objectivity in their assertions about Malaya and its peoples. Indeed, science, medicine, and other "scientific" concepts, such as environmentally deterministic theories, played key roles in buttressing the colonial stereotypes which persisted into the twentieth century. Apart from this, scientific knowledge was also em-

42 J. Christina Wu, "Disciplining Native Masculinities: Colonial Violence in Malaya, 'Land of the Pirate and the Amok'", in *Violence Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World*, ed. Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 186.

ployed as tools of imperialism in facilitating colonial rule,[43] constituting both "the ambitions and the methods of an encompassing imperialism."[44]

One example of how such "scientific knowledge" was developed was as follows. In Malaya, colonial opinions on the way in which the warm equatorial climate rendered Malays "lethargic," "lazy," and potentially violent were rife. "The East," wrote one *Straits Times* reporter in 1911, "is remarkable for certain forms of crime which hardly find any parallel in other parts of the world [. . .] the hot weather, the ascending climax of heat, tedium and discomfort brings with it an out-burst of homicidal crimes distinguished generally by their suddenness and the slightness of the provocation."[45] According to colonials, the climate's impact on Malays was permanent as "Malays have been here so long [in the Peninsula] that the climate has by this time done its worst [. . .] their doom is sealed."[46] Others, such as the educationalist and biologist Leonard Richmond Wheeler (1888–1948), who had served in the Malayan Civil Service, asserted that the "lassitude and passivity" of Malays were "partly climatic, partly born of Islam."[47] This connection between Malaya's equatorial climate and the poor mental (as well as physical) condition of its inhabitants was emphasized by colonial medical professionals. As a case in point, Singapore Colonial Surgeon Wellington blamed the equatorial climate of Malaya for the ill mental health of its inhabitants.[48] In 1923, he posited that Malaya's "continual summer" was "enervating and bad for the nervous system," underlining that the "tissues become lethargic, and muscles and brain refuse to act with the vigour natural in a temperate climate." In a similar vein, Kenneth Black, Professor of Surgery at Singapore's King Edward VII College of Medicine, warned in 1933 that the "noxious stimuli" in Malaya could potentially "culminate in irritability, memory loss, poor concentration, impaired self-control, alcohol abuse, mental breakdown, insanity, and suicide."[49]

Colonial science and medicine also helped to perpetuate the comparative framework in which Malays and other ethnic communities were evaluated. According to colonial doctors, other Asian communities in Malaya were of a differ-

43 Richard Keller, "Madness and Colonization: Psychiatry in the British and French Empires, 1800–1962," *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 2 (2001): 296–97.

44 David Arnold, *Imperial Medicine and Indigenous Societies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 2.

45 "Running Amok," *The Straits Times*, 22 July 1911, 12.

46 Colonial opinions, cited in B. Stoney, "The Malays of British Malaya," in *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*, ed. H. Cartwright and Arnold Wright, 227–28.

47 Leonard Richmond Wheeler, *The Modern Malay* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1928), 23.

48 Ng Beng Yeong, *Till the Break of Day. A History of Mental Health Services in Singapore 1841 – 1993* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2016), 60.

49 Ibid.

ent "temperament" from Malays. As such, Dr. Johnston Abraham opined in a 1912 article of the *British Medical Journal*: "Temperamentally all the Malay races are exceedingly highly strung and nervous."[50] He suggested that "the enervating climate of the Malay Peninsula" was thus "responsible for the condition" and, emphasising upon the inevitable impact of the Malayan climate, he warned readers: "Even Europeans get 'jumpy' and intensely irritable after a few years there." Other medical professionals, such as the psychologist F.H. Van Loon, also postulated that the supposed difference between Malays and other ethnicities could be linked to the fact that "all primitive races resemble very much the psyche of children." Indeed, noted Van Loon, the "higher a people (or individual) is civilised, the better it learns to control its affective reaction."[51] The similarities drawn between the "psyche of children" and that of Malays persisted for much of the colonial period; as late as 1958, in the post-independent era, colonials such as Sir Richard Winsted continued to be of the opinion that "The Malay is still a child of nature in a sophisticated world that awaits his exploration."[52] Building on these clichés concerning the "child-like" nature of Malays, colonials perpetuated the idea that Malays did not (or could not) be counted upon for Malaya's economic development; rather, other ethnic groups, under the guidance of colonial tutelage, were responsible for the colony's economic development. This colonial view was notably expressed in a self-congratulatory tone in the following article of *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* in 1924.[53] Written by Philip Coote, author of *The Malay States* (1923), it declared: "There is probably no country in the world which has made such rapid social and industrial progress during the last half century as British Malaya [. . .] in an incredibly short time Malaya has been transformed from a land of impenetrable jungle peopled with ferocious savages into a prosperous country of rubber, tin, coconuts and other products." Speaking of Malays, Coote credited the colonial presence with having "tamed the indomitable spirit of the Malay" and for having successfully "transformed a land of virgin jungle into a wealthy and productive country." "The metamorphosis has been extraordinary," recounted Coote, "for in the place of the wild, uncontrolled savage there is now the lazy, listless Malay who seeks only to live a quiet life with as little trouble as is possible." Echoing these views, Malay politicians such as Mahathir

50 Cited in "Latah and Amok," *Straits Echo*, 16 April 1912, 7.

51 F.H.G. Van Loon "Amok and Lattah," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 21, no. 4 (1927): 434.

52 Richard Winsted, *A History of Classical Malay Literature* (Monograph of Malay Subjects), JMBRAS 31, no. 5 (1958): 5.

53 "Malaya of Yesterday and To-Day," *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 10 March 1924, 3.

have claimed that "Civilisation has subdued the Malay."[54] The fact that such colonial discourses continued to have such a hold in the post-independent era illustrate the enduring impact of the colonial past in the post-colonial present.

Conclusion

Colonial discourses and stereotypes on Malays and other ethnic communities in Malaya shaped colonial policies and formed the basis by which the socio-economic policies of the post-colonial state came to be structured. In that regard, post-independent Malaysia's New Economic Policy (henceforth NEP) is an example of how the colonial past, as discussed above, continues to exert an influence on the present. Introduced in 1971, NEP was first presented as the solution "to correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the identification of race with economic functions."[55] Its key elements included quotas for Bumiputera (Malays and other indigenous peoples) to secure admission to universities, schools, public sector employment, and a statutory share of 30% corporate equity, as well as preferential treatment in applying for public housing, amongst others. As Kenzo Horii has summarised succinctly, NEP was also planned with the idea of rectifying "the fundamental contradiction of Malaysian society" – the concentration of economic wealth in the hands of the rich Chinese and monopoly of political power by the Malay ruling groups"[56] – which constituted the "skewed social structure formed in the eighty-four years of colonial rule." However, since 1971, Malaysia has "increasingly become an ethnic hegemonic state as a result of a shift in political and economic resources to the state and the Bumiputera."[57]

Furthermore, the colonial past continues to weigh upon the present through its impact on how ethnicity is conceived in contemporary Malaysian society. As this chapter has demonstrated, colonial knowledges such as science and medicine played key roles in perpetuating opinions on the "characteristics" of different ethnic groups in Malaya, thus constructing and codifying what each ethnicity "was" while attributing the roles that each of them had to play in the colonial era.[58] The

54 Mahathir bin Mohamad, *The Malay Dilemma* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), 151–52. First edition 1970.

55 See Article 153 of the Malaysian Constitution.

56 Kenzo Horii, "Disintegration of the Colonial Economic Legacies and Social Restructuring in Malaysia," *The Developing Economies* 39, no. 4 (December 1991): 281–313.

57 Ibid.

58 Also see Sarah A. Radcliffe, "Geography and indigeneity I: Indigeneity, coloniality and knowledge," *Progress in Human Geography* 41, no. 2 (2015): 1–10.

extent of their impact is also evident in post-independent Malaysia; indeed, scholars have shown how stereotypes such as "the myth of the lazy Malay has helped to legitimise intra- and inter-ethnic inequality, and establish new notions of 'deservedness' and 'undeservedness' within neo-liberal capitalism." In these ways and more, the colonial past continues to have "important political implications in contemporary Malaysian democracy."[59]

By analysing the ways in which Malaya's colonial past has shaped its present, it is hoped that this chapter has contributed to a better understanding of how colonial intervention and its impact – such as the economic and demographic transformation of the region – has played key roles in its past and present. Future work could also delve into other aspects of this economic transformation. Building on the argument that colonial powers produced knowledges in their bid to assess and ultimately justify and concretise their rule over colonised peoples,[60] an avenue for more research might lie in the study of the production and circulation of new knowledges and practices brought on by colonial interactions with local populations.[61] The long-term repercussions of these new knowledges and historical developments on the social structures, economic systems, and political cultures of this region stretched well into the post-colonial era, and recent work has allowed us to understand how this constituted a "permanent invasion upon the minds of the Malays," arguably serving as "the most lasting legacy of British colonial rule."[62] Nonetheless, the socio-economic context in which this knowledge arose requires greater attention if we seek to obtain a fuller and better comprehension of the enduring impact of the colonial past in human societies.

59 Yong, "The Image of Laziness and the Malaysian Middle Class," 108.

60 Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner, eds., *Engaging Colonial Knowledge. Reading European Archives in World History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

61 Sandra Khor Manickam, *Taming the Wild. Aborigines and Racial Knowledge in Colonial Malaya* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015).

62 Paula Pannu, "The Production and Transmission of Knowledge in Colonial Malaya," *Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 37, no. 3 (2009): 427. Also see A.B. Shamsul, "History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Practice of 'Malay-ness' in Malaysia Reconsidered," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 355–66.

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