

Book Review

Osman Bakar, Ahmad Murad Merican and Wan Ali Wan Mamat (Eds.). *Colonialism in The Malay Archipelago: Civilisational Encounters*. Kuala Lumpur: Istac & Persatuan Sejarah Malaysia, 2021. 360 pp. ISBN: 9789839379709. Price: RM 69.

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Seen from the lens of the region's sociologists, economists, historians and researchers, the thirteen chapters in *Colonisation in The Malay Archipelago: Civilisational Encounters* present fresh insights into colonization in the Nusantara region which question motives and debunk biases in colonial and post-colonial narratives where Western perspectives condescendingly paint native societies and indigenous peoples as inferior and in need of foreign intervention. Deliberately underplayed in these accounts are the completely selfish motives of Western imperialists namely Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and British, and the aggressive ways of their agents including the colonial administrations and trading companies they established. In the first place, imperialistic political and economic rivalry in Europe was the real driving force behind the colonial policies and strategies formulated by these major European players who saw the expansion of their territory and dominance in faraway places as the surest way of sustaining their bid for gold, God and glory – the three civilizational motives of Christian Europe enacted in the age-old crusades led by Christians and Muslims. The book's focus as articulately described in the Introduction is the civilizational encounters between the colonialists and the colonized peoples.

Romanticized occidental representations of the pioneering spirit and adventurous skills of explorers such as Alfonso de Albuquerque, Magellan and Vasco da Gama in traversing turbulent oceans and negotiating swampy native lands, camouflaged the hard-core objective

of political and economic domination to reap power and profits with great force of execution, at first via trade monopolies and administrative means, and inevitably through military aggression by the later sojourners. The subjugation of peoples with long-standing cultures and civilisations to impose upon them western values and systems was to leave a trail of imprints on the region's history and modern development. The writers seek to uncover the various ramifications of colonial rule, among them economic, political, educational, socio-cultural and demographic.

The real politico-economic motive of Western colonialism is affirmed by Osman Bakar (Chapter 1) who gives documented chronological evidences of the Portuguese imperial vision and policy over the monopoly of the spice trade in Malacca, while Bondan Kayumonoso (Chapter 3) discusses intense Portuguese, Dutch and British rivalry over the nutmeg trade in Banda Islands which resulted in violent warfare, killing mainly the natives. Anwar Ibrahim in his Keynote Address hits out at the "restrictive lens" of colonial authority which "describes, pigeonholes and pinions the history and being" of the society. Errors of fact and interpretation in the accounts of British colonial writers such as Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford denigrated the Malays, their culture and society and displaced a rich civilization. In Chapter 2, Ahmad Murad Merican presents a scathing attack on the distortion and misinterpretation of facts in colonial accounts of events which were one-sided. What were rationalized as right and proper can now be seen as crimes against humanity as the colonialists stole, took possession of, occupied and seceded territories such as Pulau Pinang in the Malay Archipelago.

However, Islamic *dakwah* and teaching were allowed to continue in the *pondok* belt among the more rustic population across the Archipelago. That this development was relatively undisturbed was probably a strategy to show the benign and benevolent side of colonial rule, which in turn led to positive developments for Malay identity, solidarity and later nationalism. This is discussed by Jajat Burhanuddin (Chapter 8), Achmat Salie (Chapter 9), Mohamed Abu Bakar (Chapter 11) and Awang Sariyan (Chapter 12) where Malay as the vehicle for civilization during the Malay Sultanate faced some suppression with the introduction of English education and the colonialists' focus on consolidating Christian and secular education in the town areas which were more important economically and politically. Conversion to

Christianity happened among fair numbers of non-Malay townspeople. Thus, although the native Malays in rural enclaves were untouched by Christian missionary work, non-Malays living in the town areas sent their children to English schools run by missionaries where conversion to Christianity took place. In the Philippines, however, three centuries of Spanish rule ingrained strong Hispanic influences and led to greater conversion to Christianity among the natives. Their ancient Malay past was relegated to history as they became beholden to the civilization brought by their Spanish colonial masters. Even the identity and images of native women and men were Hispanized by Spanish colonial writers according to Fernando A Satiago Jr, Maria Louisa T Camagay and Ian Christopher B Alfonso (Chapter 5-7).

In a completely different area, Mohd Nazari Ismail (Chapter 10) discusses pertinent issues in the development of Islamic banking which has managed to skirt round the civilizational contestation between Islam and the West where the charging of interest for a loan or “debt for profit” is considered as *haram*. While the old Jewish tradition of usury was scorned at for its oppressive characteristics, the introduction of bank loans in the western banking industry is now viewed positively as part of the modern economic system which provides an accessible channel for investment both locally and globally. Thus, like English secular education with its advanced methodologies and curriculum to suit local and international needs, the Islamic Banking system with its Shariah compliant mechanisms is well poised for greater Malay-Muslim participation in the economy.

Of great interest are three chapters of the book - Chapter 2, Chapter 4 and Chapter 13 – which question and debunk three outstanding myths about the natives of the Malay Archipelago perpetuated by their European subjugators, namely they were an uncivilized people, lazy natives and aggressive pirates. In racial-ethnic profiling, stories and examples from the past are often used as historical evidence to support modern stereotyping although they may no longer be contextually relevant. The writers address these myths with some authority, referring not only to alternative writings but more convincingly to reported errors of judgement and mistakes. In Chapter 13 Salleh Yapar endorses Alatas’ (1977) debunking of the myth of the Malays as lazy natives by referring to records of their “robust economic and social-cultural activities”, their skills as shipbuilders, navigators and traders in international commerce

centuries before the arrival of the westerners when they had established enlightened civilisations such as Srivijaya and the Malacca Sultanate with its thriving entrepot and trade centres where the Malay language was the *lingua franca*. Far from being lazy they were admired by the ancient Chinese for being smart and diligent. Farish Noor (Chapter 4) describes the East India Company (EIC) as the “original corporate raiders” in the colonial grab for territory in Borneo through agents such as James Brooke and Henry Keppel. What were long-established networks and arrangements between trading ports such as Malacca, Banten, Aceh and Palembang in the Malay Archipelago became the magnets attracting British colonialists who positioned themselves as saviours in the fight against marauding Bornean pirates plying the coastal areas. These narratives were in fact written by members of the EIC intent on expanding their spheres of political and economic influence. In Chapter 2 Ahmad Murad Merican outrightly condemns “the act of colonialism itself as (is) a crime against humanity” and decries western-biased representations as distortions of the past which have buried the native self. He calls for investigations into the misdeeds of European colonisers and a total reexamination and reconstruction of the past to produce the right images of both the subjugators and the subjugated.

Colonial motives have always been suspect and colonialism an emotive subject among nationalists who view it as a travesty in the nation’s development. Much has been said in Malaysia about the ramifications of British colonialism oscillating between praise for the establishment of a good English education system, a sound legal and justice system, constitutional democracy and government, and blame for their racially motivated policy of divide and rule. Much societal damage has ensued from the policy where the three major races were segregated by the vernacular education policy and the economic activities and demographic locations assigned to each. The gaps and schisms are apparent to this day and are the cause of much attrition in inter-ethnic relations. Lately there was a call to deny that the British ever ruled Malaya. Perhaps it would be more worthwhile to seek truths about British colonialism in Malaya and the true intentions of the British in staying in this country for more than 150 years.
