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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

‘Time’ in the Time of Empire: The Idea of Linear Time during the Era of Late Colonial-Capitalism from William Marsden to Munshi Abdullah

Farish A Noor*

Abstract: Though many historical accounts of Western Imperialism and Colonialism have been written by now, most of these works have tended to focus upon the conquest of territorial space. This paper looks at another, under-studied, dimension of colonial expansionism in Southeast Asia, and will consider how ‘time’ was also a concern among Western colonialists of the 18th to 20th centuries. It will look at how a distinctly Western understanding of time – as something singular, linear, uni-directional and teleological – was brought to the region by Western colonialists and Orientalists, and how the imposition of this linear understanding of time effectively marginalised and erased local understandings of time, history and chronology among native Southeast Asians themselves.

Keywords: Colonialism, Orientalism, chronology, history, linear teleological history.

Abstrak: Walaupun banyak buku-buku tentang sejarah Imperialisme Barat dan Kolonialisme telah ditulis, kebanyakan karya-karya ini lebih cenderung memberi tumpuan kepada perebutan dan penaklukan ruang wilayah. Makalah ini menumpukan fokus kita kepada satu lagi dimensi yang kurang dikaji, dan ia akan mempertimbangkan bagaimana konsep/ide ‘masa’ telah juga menjadi tumpuan para penjajah Barat dari abad ke-18 hingga ke-20. Makalah ini akan menceritakan bagaimana pemahaman Barat tentang ‘masa’ – sebagai sesuatu yang tunggal, linear, dan teleologikal – telah dibawa ke rantau ini oleh para

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penjajah dan Orientalis Barat, dan bagaimana pengenaan konsep masa yang linear dan lurus itu telah juga meminggirkan ide-ide dan konsep-konsep tempatan, termasuklah pemahaman lokal tentang masa, sejarah dan kronologi di kalangan masyarakat asli Asia Tenggara sendiri.

Kata kunci: Kolonialisme, Orientalisme, kronologi, sejarah, sejarah teleologi linear.

Why Time Matters: The Contestation Over ‘Time’ During the Time of Empire

The history and legacy of colonial-capitalism has been a subject studied and written at length by scores of historians the world over. Many of the works that have been written to date have focused on the manner through which vast swathes of the earth were brought under Western colonial rule from the 18th to 20th centuries, and many of these works have focused in particular upon the manner in which terrestrial space was the battleground upon which the clash of empires occurred. That terrestrial space came to be seen as a thing that needed to be understood, tamed, controlled and brought into the order of knowledge and power is not something that surprises us today, considering how Western European understandings of geography were radically challenged by the innovations that were being made during the 14th to 16th centuries, and as Grafton (1992) has shown the ‘discovery’ of the American continent had forced Europeans to question their own understanding of the world around them.

We have come to acknowledge and recognise the fact that disciplines such as geography and cartography were intimately involved in the process of empire-building, and how geographers and cartographers were often at the vanguard of Empire, despite the fact that many of them had never touched a pistol or rifle in their lives. As Matthew Graves and Elizabeth Rechniewski have noted:

“The function of cartography was to transform seized space into legible, ordered imperial territory. In the employ of the European colonial powers, the cartographers of empire carved up the ‘blanks’ and ‘empty quarters’ of the globe into easily assimilated geometrical figures, frequently along lines of longitude and latitude rather than the ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural contours of their indigenous

populations, even in defiance of geographical realities. In this context, the map of empire became an instrument of 'Geography Militant'" (2015: 4).

While it was and remains undeniable that much of the effort that went into empire-building was preoccupied with the question of terrestrial space and political territoriality, there was also another dimension to imperialism and colonial-capitalism that deserves equal attention, and that happens to be the dimension of *time*.

One might wonder aloud as to how time could have been a concern of Empire, for unlike terrestrial space – that can be measured quantitatively, demarcated, mapped and carved out – time somehow slips through our fingers and eludes arrest. Yet upon closer inspection it can be seen that many colonial functionaries, scholars and administrators were in fact concerned about time, and questions of time. Underlying their concerns was a particular understanding of time that was forever present in the colonial enterprise itself. Empire building was not only a time-consuming process, but also a process that took place against the backdrop of time-history. Virtually all of the proponents and advocates of Empire believed that modern colonial-capitalism marked the apogee of Western historical development, and in their writings on and about the lands and peoples they conquered they often fell back upon staid and stale notions of native backwardness and regression that framed the non-Western Other as a subject that was unable to keep up with time, had no regard for time, and were thus out of time. 'Time,' therefore, was a concept that was deeply embedded within the logic of racialised colonial-capitalism, yet it remains a topic that is somewhat under-researched in the field of critical historical studies of colonialism and imperialism.

This paper offers a modest contribution to the discussion about time during the time of Empire, and will look at how Western colonial understandings of time were instructive in the manner in which British colonial-capitalism was introduced and spread across Maritime Southeast Asia. I will look at how native understandings of time and temporality were challenged by the arrival of Western colonialism, particularly during the era of weaponised capitalism that was embodied by militarised commercial-mercantile entities such as the British East India Company. We will begin our enquiry at a time when 'Southeast Asia' was still seen as an extension to South Asia, and when some

colonial-era scholars worked with the assumption that the region was somehow bereft of an understanding of time that it could call its own. Into this ‘timeless’ void would be thrown in a number of theories about how and why time was never developed in Southeast Asia itself.

Time for Time: When ‘Time’ Became a Concern for the Advocates of Racialised Colonial-Capitalism in Southeast Asia

It appears (that) the people of Siam, in the farther India, have borrowed their knowledge of astronomy from the Hindus (1790: 575).

William Marsden,
The Chronology of the Hindoos

That Southeast Asia was widely regarded as an extension of the Indian subcontinent (and referred to as ‘Greater India’ or ‘*India Extra Gangem/India Beyond The Ganges*’) was a somewhat common conception among Europeans that dates back to the classical era and was frequently demonstrated in the early writings of European geographers, cartographers and historians such as Sebastian Munster (1488-1552). Southeast Asia was, in earlier times, seen as part of the Indian religio-cultural-historical world, and this was largely due to the long historical contact between these two parts of Asia, that was (and is) evident in the vocabularies and philosophies that circulated across the Indian Ocean, and which has been studied in considerable detail by the likes of Coedes (1968), Chaudhuri (1990) and Munoz (2006).

Though it is undeniable that the traces of India’s cultural imprint can be seen in Southeast Asia (until today), it is still important for us to remember that the movement, migration and sharing of ideas, vocabularies and epistemologies across the Indian Ocean was never a linear, uni-directional process as Chaudhuri has noted. It is also important to remember that the naming of Southeast Asia as a mere ‘extension’ of India is an instance of nominal-epistemic violence that Todorov (1984) has warned us about, for it adds little to our understanding of Southeast Asia while also reducing the differences and complexity of Asia to something fixed and essentialised. Noor (2016, 2018, 2020) has written about how the idea of Southeast Asia was discursively constructed by generations of Western colonial-era authors who ‘invented’ the concept Southeast Asia as part of their effort to identify, demarcate and eventually dominate the region;

while Kratoska, Nordholt and Ruben (2005) as well as Graves and Rechniewski (2015) have reminded us of the fact that the location of Southeast Asia - both in time and space - was never something that was naturally determined, but rather subjective and determined by historical-social-ideological variables too.

Notwithstanding the slew of caveats mentioned above, the fact remains that during the heyday of racialised colonial-capitalism in Southeast Asia there were a number of Western colonial functionaries and scholars who did indeed perpetuate the idea that the region was part of the wider Indian world. Among the most prominent among them was the Irish Orientalist and East India Company-man William Marsden (1754-1836), who had been posted to the British colonial outpost of Bencoolen (in Sumatra) and whose reputation was built upon his most famous work *The History of Sumatra - Containing an Account of the Government, Laws, Customs, and Manners of the Native Inhabitants, with a Description of the Natural Productions, and a Relation of the Ancient Political State of that Island* (1783). The publication of his *History of Sumatra* elevated Marsden to the heights of academic renown and respectability, and established his reputation as one of the first experts on Southeast Asia in British literary and academic circles. But it has to be remembered that Marsden was also widely regarded as one of the old 'India hands,' whose career had been based on his work for the British East India Company, and whose knowledge on Southeast Asia had been shaped by his study of India as well.

In the year 1790 Marsden – while in London – presented a paper before his peers at the Royal Society, entitled *On the Chronology of the Hindoos*. In several ways Marsden's paper was a path-breaking piece of writing, for it was one of the first to introduce the concept of *time* as a topic of serious academic discussion, and drew the attention of his audience to the possibility that there may be different understandings and experiences of time in the world.

At the outset of his paper, Marsden points out that he is primarily interested in the understanding of time among “the *Hindoos*, who profess in general the religion of *Brahma*, and are considered to be the indigenous inhabitants of India” (1790: 560). Marsden begins his account of the chronology of the people of India by making the somewhat disparaging observation that:

Unfortunately for the gratification of rational curiosity, history seems to have been, of all the branches of study, that which the Hindus cultivated with the least care, and we regret to find the periods marked by the revolutions of the heavenly bodies, of which other nations have availed themselves to ascertain and record the important events of human affairs, by them unprofitably applied to the dreams of their mythology (1790: 560-561).

Thus at the very beginning of his presentation Marsden has already set up an oppositional dichotomy between the West and the East, where Eastern knowledge (in this case the knowledge of India and Indians) has been relegated to the secondary register of myths and superstitions, as he notes how ‘the unremitted labour (of the Indians) has been devoted to perfecting the calculation of lunar motions, in which *their correctness is surpassed only by the European improvements of very modern times*; but, as a strange perversion, the accuracy thence acquired in their prediction of eclipses, appears to have no other object than that of administering to an idle superstition, which it ought to destroy’ (Marsden, 1790: 561). Western knowledge, for Marsden, was thus placed at the forefront of history and located during *modern times*, while Indian (and by extension, Asian) knowledge continued to lag behind in the murky domain of *idle superstition* instead.

Marsden’s criticism was directed towards Indian historiography in particular, which he regarded as being laced with elements of myth and superstition, all of which rendered their chronology ‘fabulous’ and/or ‘miraculous’, rather than factual and rational. To him, an accurate history of India could only be written by the hands of outsiders (specifically Westerners) for only they were able to accumulate facts and data that were correct. As he argued: “facts will accumulate by degrees, and acquire authority by mutually bearing on each other; and the Hindus, like many other nations of the world, may hereafter be indebted to strangers, more enlightened by philosophy than themselves, for a rational history of their own country” (Marsden, 1790: 561).

Owing to the fact that he felt that Indian chronology was wanting and faulty, Marsden argued that Indian history had to be re-calculated and re-dated according to the European Gregorian calendar. Here was an instance where one conception of time (namely the Indian) was being replaced by another (that is, the European); on the grounds that

the latter was more accurate and reliable than the former. Marsden did, however, concede that there was still one particular problem with the European understanding of time as Western history begins with the beginning of the Christian era, and “there occurs a difficulty which it is proper to consider apart. This arises from an ambiguity in our manner of recounting the years before Christ.”¹

Though Marsden did admit that there existed a foundational glitch in Western understandings of time (that remained unresolved during his time), he did not hesitate to develop his argument that Indian history could be better documented and recorded if historians were to use a Western calendar instead. There was, for Marsden, a bigger difference between Western and Eastern understandings of time, and this difference lay in the manner in which time was *used*. For Marsden Asians in general were still at a stage in their history where their histories were laced by elements of the mythological, fantastic and supernatural, while Western history was thought to be grounded entirely on facts. This dismissal of Eastern understandings of time would be expanded later in his paper, where Marsden argued that Southeast Asians suffered from the same lack of understanding of the uses of time; and he would go even further by suggesting that Southeast Asians never had a conception of time of their own to begin with, and that Southeast Asian chronologies were derivative and imported from other, more advanced, Asian civilisations.

In the second part of his paper Marsden makes this claim as he wrote about the chronology of the Siamese, for “as it appears, the people of Siam, in the farther India, have borrowed their knowledge of astronomy from the Hindus, it will not be thought inconsistent with the subject I am treating, to add some account of the chronological eras in use among them” (1790: 575). Outlandish though it may seem, Marsden seems to

1 Marsden notes that “it is most usual to pass immediately from the year *one after* to the year *one before* Christ, making the interval of time only one year; but some of the best chronologists pass from the year *one after* to the year *zero*, and from thence to the year *one before*; by which means the interval between any number of years before and after Christ is equal to the sum of those numbers.” (*Italics in the original*). Marsden accepted that there was still no concensus among Western chronologists at the time as to which calculation of time was correct (1790: 567.)

have argued that the people of Siam did not have a conception of time of their own, until they borrowed one from the Indians next door; and he concludes that ‘the astronomical era (of the Siamese) is founded immediately upon the tables and modes of calculation adopted from the Hindus’ (1790: 575).

Marsden added that Siamese understandings of time were not only derivative of Indian sources, but also taken from Chinese and Mongol chronologies as well, when he writes about how “the Siamese were also accustomed to make use of a cycle of fifty years, expressed by a repetition of twelve names of certain animals, which, I observe, are for the most part the same with those employed, for the same purpose, by the Chinese and Mogul Tartars, from which we may conclude it has been borrowed” (1790: 576, 577, 584 notes (y) and (z)).

Marsden’s writings on India and Southeast Asia would cast a long shadow long into the 19th century, where a number of British Orientalist scholars and colonial functionaries who were at the forefront of empire building and colonisation would write in the same vein. As British colonialism spread into Southeast Asia – thanks to the workings of racialised colonial-capitalism that was brought by militarised colonial companies – British colonial functionaries would also write at length about the lands and peoples they conquered. As they sallied forth, they would carry forward Marsden’s understanding of Asia – as a land that was vast, rich, but also backward and historically degenerate. In the next part of this paper, we will look at how Western understandings of linear time were brought to Southeast Asia by the likes of Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd, and how in their writings they would introduce their understanding of linear singular time while also relegating the communities of Southeast Asia to the premodern past.

Empire’s Singular Time: Linear Temporality and History in the Writings of 19th Century Colonial Functionaries.

The power to *define the nature of the past*, and establish priorities in the creation of a monumental record of a civilisation, and to propound canons of taste, are among the most significant instrumentalities of rulership (1996: 10).

Bernard S. Cohn,
Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge

The 19th century witnessed two parallel and inter-related developments in colonial Southeast Asia: the expansion of Western European colonial power and influence across the region, and also a rise in the number of writings that were produced by a number of Western colonial administrators and functionaries who began to write in earnest about the lands and peoples who had come under their command and control. This included men like Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles (1781-1826), John Crawfurd (1783-1868) and John Anderson (1795-1845), all of whom happened to have served the British East India Company and whose writings and views on and about Southeast Asia were influenced by the writings of William Marsden who we have looked at earlier.

Raffles' claim to fame came in the form of his two-volume work entitled *The History of Java* (1817), while Crawfurd's prolific output included his *History of the Indian Archipelago* (1820), the *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava* (1829), and his *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China* (1830). Not to be forgotten is John Anderson's *Mission to the East Coast of Sumatra in MDCCCXXIII, under the Direction of the Government of Prince of Wales Island* (1826). All of these works claimed to be serious studies of the culture, peoples, economies and history of Southeast Asia, though it has to be remembered that all of these books were also written at a time when the logic of racialised colonial-capitalism had saturated the elite strata of Western society, that was itself shaped and guided by the values of the modern Enlightenment.

Here it would be important for us to locate – historically – the logic of modern colonial-capitalism within the broader schema of Western European history, and to recognise that the ideology of colonial-capitalism was built upon the premises of the project of Modernity itself. With the creation of the world's first colonial-companies – that included the Dutch East Indies Company, the British East India Company, the French *Compagnie des Indes*, etc. – the world witnessed the development of something that was new: militarised and weaponised capitalism. Those who participated in the enterprise of modern colonial-capitalism were men who were very much persuaded by the charms and promises of the Enlightenment itself that pointed to the evolution of humankind towards the goal of rational and possessive individualism. From the

beginnings of this modern project, the modernity of colonial-capitalism was laid bare for all to see: it relied not solely on force and violence, or the use of arms and armies, but also upon what Cohn (1996) has dubbed the modalities of colonial governmentality and modern management. Unlike the empires of the past (such as the Roman or Mongol empires) that often relied upon brute force to achieve their goals, modern colonial-capitalism utilised the tools of modern administration and statecraft to create not only profitable colonies but also compliant and domesticated native societies where the colonised non-Western Other would be invited – via the introduction of contractual relations and the creation of a contractual society – to take part in the colonisation of themselves (as colonial labourers, clerks, teachers, soldiers and police personnel).

Modern colonial-capitalism, as it was introduced by the British and the Dutch to British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, was driven and directed according to a linear understanding of time and historical progression, where colonial-capitalism was seen as the latest (and thus most advanced) form of socio-economic management. Its tenets and practice were secular (as religion was by then seen as outdated and redundant among many Enlightenment intellectuals), as well as bureaucratic, legal, and impersonal. Raffles, Crawfurd and Anderson were themselves true believers in the promises of colonial-capitalism, and were convinced of its transformative potential as a force of change that would bring about socio-economic transformation to the colonies they ruled.

Among the many colonial-era writers who worked in Southeast Asia and wrote about the region and its peoples, Stamford Raffles – whose rise to prominence was due in part to the patronage he received from Lord Minto (Gilbert Elliot Murray Kynynmound (1751-1814), Earl of Minto, Commander in Chief of the East India forces and Governor-General of India) – was perhaps the one whose writing demonstrated the workings of this linear conception of time and history the most. In his work *The History of Java*, Raffles attempted to justify Britain's acquisition and occupation of Java (that occurred during the Napoleonic Wars of Europe and which lasted from 1811 to 1816) on the grounds that the British – or rather, the British East India Company – was an agent of change that would bring progress and development to the land and people of Java.

A tinge of regret colours Raffles' *History of Java*, for he had completed his work shortly after the colony of Java was surrendered by the British back to the Dutch following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe (1817, vol.1: 190). Raffles bitterly opposed this, for he felt that Java was truly the jewel in the crown of Southeast Asia, and had hoped that Britain would retain possession of the island for the sake of the East India Company (1817). His book bore the word 'history' in its title, so we should not be surprised that time features prominently in his discussion of the colony.

Raffles' understanding of linear historical progression rears its head from the beginning of the book. He wrote that "Java very early emerged from barbarism," and "an extensive Hindu empire once existed" there (1817, vol.1: 190). The narrative that he spun in his *History of Java* is the tale of a once-great civilisation that eventually collapsed into decrepitude and obsolescence, but one that also deserved to be recognised and redeemed by the Western world. For Raffles, Javanese civilisation was every bit as rich and complex as that of the ancient Egyptians and Indians- though the keyword here is '*ancient*,' for he also placed Javanese greatness far, far back into the past.

As far as the Javanese themselves were concerned, Raffles regarded them as a 'historically degenerate' but passive, docile and child-like race who were once civilised, but who had later fallen into a state of collective stupor, backwardness, and primitive superstition (1817, vol.1: 57, 61; vol.2: 6, 189). Raffles' lament in his writing stemmed from his belief that the greatness of Javanese culture and civilisation had been neglected by the Dutch and forgotten by the Javanese themselves.² It is here that Raffles' museological modality – to borrow Cohn's term – came into its own (Cohn, 1996: 9-10).

With the advantage of hindsight Raffles earnestly back-dated Javanese history as far as he could go. In his account of the development of Javanese art, architecture, and culture, he traced virtually everything

² Raffles had a low opinion of Dutch scholarship on Java, and at one point he opined that 'the antiquities of Java, have not, until recently, excited much notice; nor have they been sufficiently explored. *The narrow policy of the Dutch denied to other nations the possibility of research; and their own devotion to the pursuits of commerce was too exclusive to allow of them to be much interested by the subject*' (1817, vol.2: 6. Emphasis mine).

back to the ‘extensive Hindu empire’ that was the wellspring from which much of Javanese culture later emerged. (Chapters 9, 10 and 11 of the book – *On Religion; The History of Java from the Earliest Traditions; The History of Java from the Establishment of Mohametanism till the Arrival of the British Forces in 1811* – give a broad account of Java’s past dating back to the Hindu-Buddhist era.) It is interesting to note that Raffles did not claim that Javanese-Hindu culture was wanting or deficient in any way, and on many occasions in his writings he praises the achievements of the ancient Javanese who he regarded as being culturally sophisticated and developed. Yet it is equally important to recognise that the praises that were showered by Raffles upon the Javanese people came with a caveat, and that was his argument that whatever greatness the Javanese may have possessed and achieved was also something of the *past*. Raffles may have genuinely wished to preserve what he regarded as a great Asian civilisation, but for him to do so he first had to locate that civilisation far back in the recesses of forgotten ancient history.

Here in his *History of Java* we see Raffles presenting his readers with not one, but two, portraits of the Javanese: on the one hand we have the sophisticated, cultivated and culturally developed Javanese of ancient times; and on the other hand, we also have the poorer, shallower, degenerated Javanese of the present, who does not know his own history and culture, and who cannot be counted upon to recount the greatness of days long gone. Into this gap steps in the Western colonial-capitalist scholar-functionary (being none other than Raffles, of course) who plays the timely and historical role as the saviour of Java’s former greatness and who is the only one who can redeem the reputation of Java as a civilisation that was once glorious. This, in effect, also places Raffles – and by extension the East India Company, the British government and the British nation as well – at the forefront of time and history as the latest (and most advanced) people on earth, who carry upon their shoulders the burden of the enlightened white man, sent out into the world to ‘preserve’ and ‘rescue’ the past of other fallen nations and civilisations, and to place them all in the archives of the modern colonial museum.

For Raffles and other Western colonial-capitalists of that era, it seemed as if there was only one path that time could take, and not multiple, parallel, or even alternative histories. The only universal

history they recognised was that which placed Western civilisation at the forefront of progress, while others were relegated to the background - as great, but fallen, civilisations whose time had passed. *The triumph of the West was always in the present tense, while the achievements of the non-Western world could only be recounted in the past tense.*

Raffles was certainly not the only Western coloniser-writer who believed in, and promoted, this understanding of singular, linear time in his writings. His contemporaries like John Crawfurd and John Anderson likewise adopted very similar temporal-historical schemas in their works, and Crawfurd (1820) in particular was explicit in the manner that he ranked the different communities of Southeast Asia according to a racial hierarchy that differentiated between different 'races', according to their historical-temporal location on a singular, universal historical path. There were, for Crawfurd, 'higher' and 'lower' races, and the positionality of each of these races was determined by where they stood on that same universal linear track of historical development and progress.

Today's readers may not be too surprised that these men – all of whom happened to be white, male, colonial-capitalists who served the same militarised colonial company – thought alike and shared the same understanding of singular, linear time. But what is equally important (and perhaps more interesting) is the question of the extent to which their Eurocentric and monological understanding of time may (or may not) have been accepted and internalised by those who became their native colonial subjects. To answer this question, we will now turn to one of the most prominent and influential native writer-intellectuals of the time, namely Munshi Abdullah Abdul Kadir.

Captive Time: The Acceptance of Linear Time in the Writings of Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir

There was *almost no time* for native peoples to reorganise politically, redeploy socially, form wider alliances or develop more effective military tactics. (2008: 256)

John Darwin,
After Tamerlane

Among the vernacular intellectuals who lived and worked under British colonial rule in the 19th century, the figure of the Hadrami-Tamil-Malay

Jawi Peranakan writer and teacher Munshi Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (1796-1854) looms large as one of the most prolific and thoughtful writers of his age. He is known for his works *Kisah Pelayaran ke Timur* (1838) and *Hikayat Munshi Abdullah* (1840), both of which were unprecedented in form and content. Here was a non-Western colonial subject writing about the socio-political realities of Empire from within, and it is crucial for us to remember that Abdullah's subject-position during that time was that of a colonial subject.

Abdullah lived at a time when the world about his was changing at an alarming rate, and he noted in his *Hikayat* that "*aku memikirkan maka sekian-lah lama-nya umur-ku yang telah lalu itu telah beberapa banyak ajaib dan beberapa peredaran dunia, dan adat, dan perkara yang tidak pernah didengar dan dilihat oleh nenek-moyangku, sekian itu telah ku lihat-lah*" ("I thought to myself that in all the years that I have lived there have been so many amazing events and changes in the world, in customs and in things that my ancestors had never heard of or seen that I had witnessed") (1947: 344). Abdullah lived and worked at a time of flux and change, and it is not surprising that his own understanding of time informed much of his writing.

The changes that were taking place in Malacca (and the rest of the Malay Peninsula soon after) was at a rate that grew incessantly, and would eventually leave many of the native polities of Southeast Asia behind. As Andaya put it:

What characterises this period is rather the *pace* of change, itself part of a global phenomenon [...] The Malay archipelago, always sensitive to the shifts of international trade, was now caught up by far-reaching economic and political forces which were drawing Europe and Asia ever closer (1982:114).

Abdullah was, and remains, a controversial and divisive figure until today due to the critique that he levelled against the native communities of Southeast Asia, whom he regarded as lethargic and unwilling to change according to the needs of the time. It was this that contributed in part to the manner in which latter-day scholars would dub him a colonial stooge and an example of the captive native mind (Alatas, 1977: 138). Yet in his works, he left behind a rare glimpse of life in the Malay-Muslim world of the 19th century, seen from the point of view of a Peranakan-Malay Muslim who was troubled by developments that were beyond his control.

To attempt a spirited defence of Abdullah is not my intention here, and would go beyond the scope of this paper. But it ought to be noted that notwithstanding his declared admiration for his employer-patrons Raffles and Lord Minto, Abdullah was not blind to the contradictions and hypocrisies that came in the train of colonial intervention into the Malay world.

His writings did indeed reveal that he was impressed by the spectacular achievements of Modernity that he saw all around him in the colonies: this included the creation of a *modern* code of law that was impersonal and universally enforced across the Empire by faceless bureaucrats, *modern* armies that could be mustered and transported across the globe and yet retained their cohesion and discipline as fighting units, *modern* systems of trade and communication that could bring together goods and services from all over the world, and of course *modern* technology that could build as well as destroy centuries of history in a matter of seconds. But Abdullah was not blind to the fact that the modern men he so admired like Raffles and Minto were also agents of a Western colonialism. A closer reading of his texts reveals that he was also aware of the many shortcomings of the Europeans, though his was the critical mind of a colonised native subject confined to a humdrum existence within the colonial bureaucracy (Abdullah, 1947: 46, 55-56, 89-91, 147). Abdullah never rejected the claims of Modernity and modernisation, for he saw in them a potential tool that could be used to help the Malays progress and prosper in times that were rapidly changing. Finally, Abdullah was also a *Muslim* subject who directed a religio-ethical critique against the injustices of his world. In this regard viewed the problems of his fellow colonised subjects in modern terms that were also tempered by Islamic sensibilities.

Munshi Abdullah's understanding of Modernity, progress and development was one that was founded upon the same understanding of linear time that was at work in the mind of his patron-employer Raffles. But there remains a very important difference between the worldviews of these two individuals.

Raffles, as we have seen earlier, viewed human history in terms of a linear progression from the primitive and pre-modern to the civilised and modern; and this linear time-flow was dotted with historical moments where different civilisations had developed and reached the peak of

their success. For Raffles history was a linear series of episodes, where different civilisations would be given their fifteen minutes of fame before they would be sidelined and superseded by other, more modern and developed civilisations. Thus, Raffles never denied the greatness of Indian, Javanese or Malay civilisation, though he did place these civilisations in the distant past, and by doing so permanently relegated them to the past-tense while placing Western culture and civilisation in the present-tense of human progress.

Abdullah seems to have accepted and internalised this linear conception of historical progress too, though he was not prepared to throw in the towel and concede defeat. The thrust of Abdullah's critique lay in his argument that Malay-Muslim civilisation was not doomed to remain forever in the past, but could be reactivated and brought back to the fore if Muslims were able and willing to learn the lessons of Modernity and to adjust to the reality of modern times. This made Abdullah a modernist-reformist Muslim thinker, though one whose reformist ideas were grounded in the belief in teleology and unidirectional historical progress. The difference between the reformist ideas of Abdullah and those of the Muslim reformers of previous centuries (such as Buhara al-Jauhari and Shiekh Nuruddin of the 17th century) was that his concerns were more urgent in nature, and located in the immediate present. While the latter seemed more concerned with purifying Southeast Asian Islam of its heterodox and deviationist elements, Abdullah was concerned about ensuring the political and economic survival of Muslims instead. Living as he did in colonial settlements like Malacca and Singapore where Malay-Muslim power had been eclipsed and erased by the British, Abdullah clearly saw and understood the magnitude of the problem that confronted the Malay community.

It is here, in his critique of his own Malay-Muslim community, that Abdullah's thoughts hovered around the problem of powerlessness over time. Abdullah's argument was that the decline of Malay-Muslim power was due to the fact that the Muslim world was no longer at the historical forefront of scientific and economic development, and were no longer the producers of science, but rather the passive consumers of it.

Abdullah's critique was also an ethical one, which saw in this climate of powerlessness the conditions that created a vicious cycle

of degradation, humiliation, and moral decline. Consequently, his critique was both descriptive as well as prescriptive: his attitude to Modernity was thoroughly modern in that he saw it as the instruments for liberation of his own people. His goal, however, remained Islamic in character. The fact that it is the *Taj-us Salatin* of Buchara al-Jauhari that he prescribes as a solution to the corruption of the Malay rulers is significant in this respect (Abdullah, 1961: 88). What Abdullah wanted the Malays to do was to learn the lessons of Modernity so that they could once again return to the path of development and develop themselves as progressive, confident Muslims.³ This entails not a rejection of linear temporality, but rather the acceptance of the idea that time is indeed linear.

The upshot of Abdullah's argument was that weak and backward societies *can* get ahead in the race of history if they were to smarten up to the realities of the modern world and learn how to develop in a modern way. Only then could weaker societies get ahead in time, and be at the forefront of Modernity and progress. The tragedy that befell Abdullah and his people was that time was precisely the one thing that the natives of Southeast Asia did *not* have and did *not* control, for as Andaya has noted "transition to the changed political and economic environment of the nineteenth century *required time, and it was one of the ironies of history that this was precisely what Western imperialism could least afford to give*" (Andaya, 1982: 113).

Time Over Time: The Ascendancy of Eurocentric Understandings of Time and the Demise of Other Knowledge-Systems

Living as we do in a world that has grown as increasingly 'flat' and homogeneous thanks to the process of capital-driven globalisation, scholars and cultural activists the world over have lamented the loss of so many indigenous knowledge and belief-systems. In the past few decades, the world has witnessed not only the extinction of hundreds of species of plant and animal life, but also human cultures and languages.

³ For this reason Abdullah should not be thought of as a 'modernising' Muslim, as he was not trying to 'modernise' or 'reform' Islam into something modern, in the same way that many of the reformist Muslim thinkers of the next century would. Abdullah did not propose any program of secularisation that was predicated upon a secular notion of humanism, which regarded the individual autonomous human agent as the final goal of progress.

Some have opined that the rapid demise of so many cultures is due to the rampant commercialisation that we see in the world today, made worse by the workings of a popular global media that trivialises and reduces radical difference and plurality to the level of banal sameness. Yet others have also noted that the languages and cultures that have disappeared from the face of the earth are *mostly from the developing South*, and not the developed North; and have thus come to the painful conclusion that what we are in fact witnessing is nothing less than *epistemicide* (the systematic and deliberate extermination of knowledge-systems) on a global scale, that is the result of the power and economic differentials that we see today, which are in turn part of the longer and older legacy of Empire and colonialism.

As different, alternative understandings of time and space are slowly but surely pushed to the margins and nudged into oblivion, we are left with an increasingly singular understanding of time that is universal. Humanity is moving to the beat of a singular drum, and this unanimity of pace and purpose has undoubtedly served the interests of global capital more than anything else. A singular universal understanding of time is one of the prerequisites of a singular global market: online *Zoom* meetings can begin right on time, precious cargoes are delivered on schedule, trains and planes land exactly when they are expected to. But there is also an attendant cost to this increased efficiency and singularity, and that cost has been the subject of this paper.

Though time may not be something that can be thought of in terms of territoriality or space, it was an idea that was contested during the era of late colonial-capitalism in Southeast Asia. What I have tried to show in this paper is that during the era of colonial intervention into local politics and society in Southeast Asia there was not only a concerted and sustained attempt to map out the geography of native societies that would later come under Western colonial rule, but to also challenge local understandings of time and temporality, and to introduce a decidedly Western and Eurocentric understanding of time – as linear, determined, and teleological.

This process began in the late 18th century, when colonial-era scholars and the advocates of Western colonial-capitalism like William Marsden put forth the notion that the communities of Southeast Asia lacked an understanding of time, and that Southeast Asian notions

of time were in fact imported from abroad, namely from the Indian subcontinent. This claim was accompanied by the related notion that much of Southeast Asian culture was derivative and imported, and that the civilisation and culture of Southeast Asia were inherited from earlier periods of external influence and intervention from India. By claiming thus, two things were achieved simultaneously: the denial of the existence of local knowledge (about time and temporality) and also the assertion that 'cultural colonialism' (that was sometimes also labelled as 'Indianisation') had already taken place long before the advent of Western colonialism.

From the 19th to 20th century British colonialism was consolidated across what was then referred to as 'British Malaya.' As Tarling (1969) has shown, the arrival and consolidation of British rule in the Malay Peninsula would eventually alter practically all aspects of native political-economic life, and this transformation was brought about through the use of a number of modern tools of statecraft and colony-making, that included the colonial census, colonial mapping, the re-writing of local history and the economic transformation of the colony. So deep and extensive were the changes that took place that by the early 20th century colonial administrators like Swettenham (1908) were already boasting that they had re-made the country, and created an entirely new socio-political order that was developed along the lines of a particular Western understanding of historical development and progress.

But among the many tools of Empire and colony-building that were used in the socio-economic and socio-political transformation of Malaya, there was also one that has thus far received scant attention: the colonial timetable and colonial understanding of linear time. Scott (1985), in his study of modes of everyday peasant resistance to colonial and postcolonial law or governance is among the few who have noted that the 'myth of the lazy native' that was once so prevalent among colonial writers and administrators, fails to take into account that 'laziness' was perhaps one of the few modes of resistance left to those colonial subjects who did not wish to be subjected to the regime of colonial time and the colonial timetable. In his analysis Scott has noted that modes of peasant resistance – that included not working on time, not coming on time, wasting time, etc. – were all indicative of an attempt to resist the imposition of a singular temporal schema or framework that tried to reduce colonial subjects to the status of productive native labour;

and as such ‘laziness’ did not only demonstrate apathy towards time and timetables, but was in effect a mode of active resistance against the hegemony of a singular temporal order.

This paper was an attempt to bring considerations of time back on to the table, and aims to initiate a serious discussion about how time ought to be considered an important variable in our understanding of the workings of modern colonial-capitalism and imperialism. Much more work needs to be done by historians of Empire, to critically understand and explain just how and why the contestation over time and understandings of time was every bit as important as our discussions about geography and colonial territorial expansionism. We hope that this was a timely intervention in itself, and that others will follow suit; though only time will tell if the question of time will ever be taken up seriously in the future.

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

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(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

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