



Conceptualizing the Malay World: Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity in Malaya

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Kyoto: Kyoto University Press; Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2020.

Soda Naoki's dissertation-turned-book titled *Conceptualizing the Malay World* is one of the few works in English on the thoughts of Ibrahim Yaakob (1911–79), a Malay nationalist and founding-leader of the left-wing Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM, Young Malay Association).¹⁾ Ibrahim Yaakob's ideas, borne from the volume's sub-title, *Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity in Malaya*, succinctly presents his notion and design of a wider configuration of Malay identity, their sense of belonging, and a reconvening of a past all encapsulated in the term *Indonesia Raya* or *Melayu Raya*—the latter seemed more appropriate in the present context (review). The term simply translates as Greater Indonesia or Greater Malay, respectively. It is a geopolitical concept of resurrecting the pre-colonial Malay world, that is bringing together people of the so-called Malay race across all the territories where they have settled, namely what had become consequent of Western imperialism and colonialism: the Netherlands East Indies, Portuguese Timor, British Malaya, and British Borneo. Besides the entity of Portuguese Timor which was established in 1702, British and Dutch colonial territories were the outcome of the Treaty of London (1824) which arbitrarily drew a plumb line along the Straits of Melaka wherein Britain arbitrarily claimed as its sphere of influence all lands and seas northwards, and the Netherlands, southwards. With this proverbial stroke of the pen, what was then the realm of the Malay race, or regarded as the Malay World which coincides with the greater part of insular Southeast Asia, was split between the Western imperial powers, each respectively follow the drumbeat of their colonial masters.

In present-day terms, Ibrahim Yaakob visualized a united realm referred to as *Melayu Raya*

1) Another work in English on Ibrahim Yaakob *per se*, see Cheah (1979), and similarly in Malay specifically focused on him, see Khoo (1979), Abdul Latiff (1981), and Bachtiar (1985). Undeniably, there are scores of studies on Malay left-wing radicals in both English and Malay; for more recent works, see Aljuneid (2015), Ahmat Adam (2013), Rustam A. Sani (2008), and Ramlah Adam (2004).

comprising Indonesia (Netherlands East Indies), Timore Leste (Portuguese Timor), Malaysia (British Malaya without Singapore, and British Borneo), and Singapore (once part of British Malaya). Ambitious in scope, but a vain vision where subsequent geopolitical events and developments overtook its realization.

Interestingly, Ibrahim Yaakob's *Melayu Raya* was in fact "realized" to a certain extent when Imperial Japan imposed its military occupation during the Pacific War (1941–45) of what subsequently became the region we recognized as Southeast Asia with the notable exception of Thailand.²⁾ The Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) administered the pre-war territories of British Malaya (present-day Peninsular/West Malaysia and Singapore) and Sumatra (a part of today's Indonesia) from its administrative headquarters at Shōnantō (Singapore). Imperial Japan literally turned back the clock, a rational and logical configuration of administrative division, viz. British Malaya and Sumatra (IJA); Java (IJA); British Borneo (IJA); Dutch Borneo, Sulawesi, Maluku to Papua (Imperial Japanese Navy, IJN) (Ooi 2011).

Ibrahim Yaakob himself published three book-length works, viz. *Melihat tanah air* (Observations on the motherland) (1941; 2nd ed. 1975); *Nusa dan bangsa Melayu* (Motherland and Malay nation) (1951); and *Sekitar Malaya merdeka* (On free Malaya) (1957) wherein his ideas of *Melayu Raya* were expounded. There is in fact another book that he wrote, *Sedjarah dan perjuangan di Malaya* (The history and struggle in Malaya) (1948), but under an alias, IK Agastja, which was published in Indonesia while he was in exile. After the war, in order to avoid detention by the British colonial authorities, Ibrahim Yaakob fled to Indonesia where he remained until his passing in 1979.

In *Melihat tanah air*, he lamented the dire economic and political condition and situation of the Malay peasantry: the common people or *rakyat* (masses), viz.

Sesungguhnya akibat membuka Negeri Melayu ini telah mendatangkan berbagai kesan yang membawa bencana kepada kehidupan Bangsa Melayu, oleh sebab desakan modal dan buruh daripada luar itu. Jadinya bagi umat Melayu negerinya meskipun dibuka akan tetapi oleh beberapa sebab yang tertentu tidaklah dapat mereka merasai nikmat tanahairnya sendiri. Diantara sebab-sebabnya ialah (1) Orang Melayu tidak mengerti cara-cara pentadbiran modal, (2) Orang Melayu tidak faham akan muslihat-muslihat yang datang dari luar, ialah oleh sebab mereka telah lebih lima ratus tahun ditindih di bawah kezaliman Kerajaan Raja-Raja dengan peperangan sama mereka sendiri. (Ibrahim 1941, 48)

Indeed, as a result of the opening up of the Malay State, it has brought various devastating effects to the lives of the Malay Nation consequent of the pressure of capital and labour from without.

2) Treaty between Thailand and Japan Concerning the Continuance of Friendly Relations and the Mutual Respect of Each Other's Territorial Integrity ensured that Thailand was spared invasion and occupation, and at the same time Imperial Japanese forces were allowed passage for the invasion of British Malaya. This Japanese–Thai agreement was signed in Tokyo on June 12, 1940 prior to the outbreak of hostilities.

Therefore, for the Malays of the country, even though it was opened to all, but due to some specific reasons, they could not experience the blessings of their own homeland. Among the reasons are (1) The Malays were unable to grasp and understand the ways and means of the financial administration of capital, (2) The Malays do not understand the tricks and deceptions of outsiders, because they have been oppressed for more than five hundred years under the tyrannous governance of their rulers who fought among themselves.

He did not mince his words when he placed the onus on the Malay rulers of the past for the oppression of the Malay peasantry, and in subtle fashion, the former in current collaboration with the British colonialist, were responsible for the dire straits of the *rakyat* owing to the influx and machinations of foreign capital and immigrant labor.

But more revealing for the present purpose is his conclusion-cum-resolution following his travels throughout his homeland during which he had witnessed the plight of the *rakyat*.

Pada masa yang akhir-akhir ini iaitu lepas daripada lima ratus tahun lamanya mereka (orang Malaya) menghadapi peperangan saudara bingga Semenanjung Tanah Melayu ini terbagi kepada beberapa puak yang bernegeri dan berlawanan diantaranya sendiri, maka pada masa ini mulailah datang cita-cita hendak bersekutu semula. Bukanlah sahaja di antara umat-umat Malaya dua juta di Tanah Melayu ini, tetapi dengan umat (rumpun) Melayu di Indonesia seramai enam puluh lima juta itu. Mereka ingin hendak bersatu berkerjasama menggerakkan ikatan kebangsaan bersama menuju Indonesia Raya. Tetapi hari ini hanyalah satu perasaan sahaja baru dan sebahagian ramai dari pihak kaum pertuanan atau darah Raja-Raja yang masih memegang teguh dengan perasaan lamanya sangatlah menentang perasaan-perasaan baru hendak mempersatukan umat (rumpun) Melayu semuanya itu. (Ibrahim 1941, 20)

In recent times, after more than five hundred years, they (the Malays) faced internecine wars until the Malay Peninsula was divided into several independent factions/states that opposed one another, so at this time, the desire and sentiment to be reunited has emerged. Among not only the two million Malays in Malaya, but with the sixty-five million Malay brethren in Indonesia. They intend to unite and work together to foster a national bond towards the pursuit of Greater Indonesia. But today it is just a new feeling and many from the ruling elite or the nobility who still hold fast to their conservative beliefs are very much against the new sentiments to unite the Malay people.

In his writings, Ibrahim Yaakob is explicit in expounding his ideas as a panacea to the plight of the Malay masses.

Soda, on his part, “examines the interrelations between the indigenization of ‘colonial knowledge,’ by which [he] mean[s] ‘the colonizer’s knowledge of the colonized,’ and the quest for a pan-Malay identity in Malaya [Peninsular Malaysia]” (p. 1). What is more, “In what way, to what extent and for what purpose did the colonized accept, modify and adapt the colonizer’s worldview?” (p. 1).

How did Soda intend to undertake his study?

Education played a vital role in knowledge transmission and identity construction in British Malaya. [Hence] [t]his research focuses primarily on Malay-medium education in Malaya. . . . it explores the transmission of knowledge at a central training college for male Malay-school teachers, namely the Sultan Idris Training College (SITC). (p. 1)

Furthermore,

Despite the significance of colonial education, we cannot assume that the Malays unquestioningly absorbed the new framework of knowledge brought by British colonialists. Malays could also transform and reconstitute the modern concept of 'Malayness,' which means the condition of being Malay or the set of characteristics that are used to define Malay. We must understand why and how colonial education substantially contributed to bringing about an 'unintended result' for the colonizer, that is, the growth of ethno-national feeling among the colonized. (pp. 1–2)

Hence, in “investigating the indigenization of colonial knowledge,” Soda utilized Ibrahim Yaakob’s intellectual history as “*an ideal case*,” hence “*The single most important figure in this study*” (p. 2, emphasis added). But why focus on a notion that has not been realized, or to put it more bluntly, has been a failure?

Yet, [Ibrahim Yaakob’s] advocacy of *Melayu Raya* can be considered as a catalyst for the postwar development of pan-Malayness in Malaya. Furthermore, a case study of Ibrahim’s conceptualization of a pan-Malay nation provides a clue for understanding the broader definition of Malayness, the officialization of the concept of *bumiputera* (lit. sons of the soil) and the authorization of the *bumiputera* policy in Malaysia. (p. 2)

Specifically, Soda “concentrates on the impact of British colonialism on the formation of pan-Malay identity in British Malaya,” where he argued, “exercised a very powerful intellectual hegemony over the local [Malay] population” through government Malay-medium schools in general and SITC in particular. He “concentrates on formal school education, in particular the teaching of history and geography of the Malay world” as was undertaken at SITC (p. 4).

Nonetheless, admittedly there are limitations to his study, and Soda identified the caveats, namely influences and impacts from other sources including Indonesian nationalism, Islamic reformism, wartime occupation by Imperial Japan, acquisition of knowledge and information from non-formal schooling, and other contemporary school systems such as English-medium education and Islamic religious education (pp. 3–4).

Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, five chapters form the core content of his study wherein each are given self-explanatory titles: Malay Vernacular Education in British Malaya (chapter 2), Knowledge and Experience: The Case of the Sultan Idris Training College (chapter 3), The Malay World in Textbooks: The Transmission of Colonial Knowledge (chapter 4), Ibrahim Haji Yaacob and Pan-Malayism: The Appropriation of Colonial Knowledge (chapter 5), and *Melayu*

Raya and Malaysia: Contested Pan-Malayism (chapter 6).

“To sum up,” Soda concludes, “although British colonizers imposed new forms of knowledge about the Malay world on the local ‘Malay’ populace in colonial Malaya, it was not uncommon for the locals, evidenced by Ibrahim, to *appropriate and reorganize colonial knowledge for their own claims*, even for anti-colonial and trans-colonial pan-Malayism” (p. 152, emphasis added).

Moreover,

While nationalist thinking and action in other countries, especially in the Netherlands East Indies or Indonesia, were important influences in formulating pan-Malayism in British Malaya, British colonialism played an equally important, if unintended, role in the formation of pan-Malay identity. (p. 152)

The onus is placed on British colonialism, hence the book’s sub-title, *Colonialism and Pan-Malay Identity in Malaya*.

The begging question, then, is: what do we learn from the outcome and findings of Soda’s research and analysis? Is a pan-Malay identity consequent of the notion of a *Melayu Raya*, since literally buried by London and Kuala Lumpur in 1963, and Jakarta three years later; does it still have any relevancy and/or even potency? Or is it all mere past history, a recollection of sentiments, or simply a romanticizing of the “What if”?

Soda argues that the relevancy of pan-Malayism in the 1970s has taken on “as a form of trans-national regionalism” in Malaysia as expressed by movements such as *Dunia Melayu* (Malay World) and *Dunia Melayu Dunia Islam* (DMDI) (Malay and Islamic World) that sought “solidarity and cooperation,” and were “more interested in socio-cultural and economic spheres” rather than “explicitly political matters” (pp. 153–154). Pan-Malayism was appropriated and tied to the concept of *bumiputera*, and in turn, to the affirmative policies implemented from the 1970s through the 1990s (pp. 154–156). In the post-NEP (New Economic Policy) era, pan-Malayism was related to new concepts including *Bangsa Malaysia*, the notion of belonging to one nation Malaysia; *Bangsa Melayu Baru* and *Bumiputera Baru*, or *nouveau* Malay/Bumiputera referring to Malay capitalists and Malay middle class; and the “1Malaysia” concept which espouses the notion of “unity in diversity” in Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society (pp. 156–158).

Whether we agree, or hold other viewpoints with Soda’s appropriation of pan-Malayism that has been re-interpreted and reconstructed in the aforesaid movements and/or invented concepts of Malaysia’s ruling elite, his advice that we “*continue to analyze* not only the production of new concepts and forms of knowledge but also their transmission, localization, transformation, reproduction and reconstruction,” should be given ample consideration (p. 158, emphasis added).

Devoid of conspicuous grammatical infelicities, the reader-friendly narrative and clear analysis are satisfying to both specialists and lay readers. This 206-page handsome volume is recom-

mended to those interested in the creation and formation of identity, whether ethnic, political, socio-cultural, or religious.

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The US Volunteers in the Southern Philippines: Counterinsurgency, Pacification, and Collaboration, 1899–1901

JOHN SCOTT REED

Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020.

John Scott Reed's 302-page book outlines the achievements of the United States Volunteers (USV) during the Philippine-American War of 1899–1902, America's most successful counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign waged outside the Western Hemisphere. The USVs, comprised of 25 volunteer