This article examines British discourses on Malay identity in colonial Singapore against the backdrop of the latent realities of that era. I argue that British discourses are determined by a confluence of ideological, political and methodological underpinnings as well as other factors which gave rise to a tenuous understanding of what it meant to be ‘Malay’. Nevertheless, such discourses should not be disregarded because they provide us with useful vantage points from which the much neglected subject of Malay identity in colonial Singapore could be approached, refined and fully understood. British discourses on Islam, perceived differences between Malays and other ethnic groupings, the Malay language, the notion of a ‘depressed community’ and class divisions will be interrogated in order to arrive at a more comprehensive portrayal of Malay identity in colonial Singapore.

Introduction

There has been, in the last two decades, a proliferation of academic works that seek to examine the history of ‘Malay identity’: its origins, evolution, propagators, opponents, inheritors and victims in the Southeast Asian context. From the highly influential writings of Shamsul A.B. (2004) and Ariffin Omar (1993) to the more recent and insightful collection of articles published by the National University of Singapore, Malay identity will persist as a topic of scholarly interest and debate in the many years to come. With that said, preceding studies have suffered from two key inadequacies. No thorough analysis has been done thus far to uncover the multi-faceted underpinnings and factors that shaped British discourses on Malay identity. Conversely, much emphasis has been placed on the structuring effects of colonial discourses and policies upon the indigenous conceptions of Malay identity. Added to this is the fact that very few attempts have been made to examine Malay identity as it was perceived and articulated by the British and the Malays in the Singapore context. The principal reasons for this gap in scholarly literature are fairly obvious. There is a general tendency of scholars in the field to conflate developments in Singapore with that of Malaya, given the comparatively small Malay population on the island and the shared history between the two neighbouring nation-states. Furthermore, much attention has been given to the ‘greater’ and far more dramatic events, ideologies, groupings as well as institutions in other former colonies such as the Dutch East Indies, and the Philippines (Akademika 1999; Aljunied 2005; Barnard 2004; Hitchcock and King 1997).
This article seeks to redress this lacuna in the scholarly literature by examining British discourses on Malay identity in colonial Singapore from the years 1947 till 1957 against the backdrop of latent realities of that era. In doing so, it provides a sample of the pitfalls and challenges faced by a given colonial power in its efforts to comprehend the identities of its subjects during an age of decolonisation. Two main arguments will be developed successively. Firstly, I argue that British discourses are determined by a confluence of ideological, political and methodological underpinnings as well as other factors which gave rise to a tenuous understanding of what it meant to be ‘Malay’. Secondly, although such discourses are problematic, they should not be disregarded because they provide us with useful vantage points from which the much neglected subject of Malay identity in colonial Singapore could be approached, refined and fully understood. British discourses on Islam, perceived differences between Malays and other ethnic groupings, the Malay language, the notion of a ‘depressed community’ and class divisions will be interrogated in order to arrive at a comprehensive portrayal of Malay identity in colonial Singapore. Some discussion will also be given to the shifts in British discourses, how they have informed colonial policies, and the resistance encountered in the process.

The methodology of this article is socio-historical. In the event that concepts and ideas from selected theorists and social scientists are used, these are, as will be shown, ‘heuristic tools’ to aid in the cross-examination of a variety of texts and contexts. As for the sources, I draw on both published and non-published speeches, annual reports, intelligence summaries, personal correspondences, memoirs, newspapers, anthropological works, oral interviews, novels, poems and films churned out by British and the non-British personalities and institutions. This list of sources is by no means exhaustive. But they are sufficient to shed light on, not only the British perspective, but also to provide a more grounded and nuanced socio-historical exposition of Malay identity in colonial Singapore.

Some definitions and clarifications are in order here. The word ‘British’ refers to scholars, officials and institutions that formed part of the colonial administration and whose discourses have had a direct bearing upon policies towards Malays in Singapore during the period under examination. ‘Discourse’ is an elusive concept which has received many different definitions. Prominent in this regard is Michel Foucault’s protean use of the term as reflected primarily in three of his books, *Madness and civilization* (1961), *The birth of the clinic* (1963), and *The archaeology of knowledge* (1969) (Smart 2002). I am, however, inclined towards Roger Fowlers’ broad and perceptive definition of discourse as ‘speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world, an organization or representation of experience – ‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense (cited in Mills 1999: 6).’ This article does not pretend to enumerate all plausible conceptions of Malay identity by both the British and Malays in colonial Singapore. A monographic study approached from a *longue durée* perspective is much needed. If this article contributes in a small way to furthering research on Malay identity in colonial Singapore, it has fulfilled its purpose.

**Problematising British discourses**

One of the pioneering attempts at unmasking the motives and underpinnings of British discourses on the Malays was undertaken by a historical sociologist, Hussein Alatas.
Published in 1977, *The myth of the lazy native* exerted crucial influence on scholars making a sustained contribution to the debate on Malay identity in contemporary Southeast Asia. Having cited Edward Said’s assessment of the book as an original and scholarly study of European colonialism, a noted Malaysian anthropologist and political commentator stresses that ‘the significance of Alatas’ contribution’ in the study of colonial discourses ‘has not been fully appreciated by scholars from the “Malay world” or Southeast Asia’ (Shamsul 2005: 31; Said 1993: 296). Zawawi Ibrahim, in turn, espouses the view that the perpetuation of negative images of the Malays has persisted up till the present day. Though British rule has ended, the orientalist/colonialist mythologising of the Malays has yet to be eradicated, and this underscores the continued importance of Alatas’ text (Zawawi 2005: 45–70). In light of the significance accorded to the book, it may be useful then to discuss some of the central theses and relevance for this study.

By utilising Karl Marx’s conception of ideology, Robert Merton’s latent and manifest functions, Franz Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the relations between the colonised and the coloniser and José Rizal’s critique of the myth of native indolence, Alatas argues that western images of the Malays as an indolent race were born from of the ideology of ‘colonial capitalism’ that prevailed throughout the 18th till the 20th century. Through their published writings, British, Spanish, Dutch as well as American scholars and administrators became active purveyors of the myth that, unlike the Chinese and Arabs, Malays were unwilling to work over long periods of time and lacked the competitive spirit that was deemed necessary for development and progress. Such fallacious discourse, according to Alatas, was perpetuated by nationalist writers and politicians in Malaysia, prominent among whom were, Mahathir Mohammed and Senu Abdul Rahman. To be Malay became synonymously linked to being lazy. Or to put it differently, laziness had been embedded within the process of Malay identity formation.

To the extent that Alatas’ theses are persuasive, a deeper scrutiny of the foundations and evolution of British colonialism in Southeast Asia reveals a more composite interplay of factors. That is to say, capitalistic pursuits and economic imperatives were not the most important determinants that shaped British discourses on the Malays in colonial Singapore. Among the associated factors that should be accounted for are Social Darwinism; the adherence to a Muscular Christianity (Protestant or Catholic); the conception of technological superiority; racialised scientism; the notion of ‘mission civilisatrice’ which stresses on hard work, moral reformation, the relentless pursuit of knowledge of the ‘inferior other’; over-reliance on faulty intelligence reports; partial information derived from colonised elites and collaborators and, finally, scholarly deceit. Extensive deliberations on each of these factors have been expounded elsewhere and need not detain us here.¹

More importantly, I would argue that it was the confluence of these ideological, political and methodological underpinnings that had fashioned a large part of British discourses on Malay identity in Singapore. To illustrate this, consider for example, the following excerpt from a British political report: ‘The fasting month of *Puasa* brought its usual lassitude to the Malays. The Maria Hertogh case was forgotten, but

interest in it may well be revived when the Appeal comes on for hearing in Singapore on 25th July. When read out of its restricted context and from an a priori mode of analysis, such observation would immediately be taken as evidence pointing to British assumption of the Malays as being lazy. This is strictly a reductionist view. More crucially, ‘lassitude’ here is not juxtaposed with words such as labour, commodity, surplus and wages which are key concepts of capitalism. The word ‘usual’ is deployed before ‘lassitude’ to stress that the Malays, as Muslims, were lethargic during the fasting month where the consumption of food and water were forbidden during daytime. The assertion stops there and it could perhaps be inferred that this judgement arose from the writer’s disdainful view of an important precept within the Islam. But that is not all. Alternatively, if the words ‘The fasting month’ that precedes all other statements is seriously considered, then it is equally valid to assert that the author of this report had, in reality, held that the Malays were industrious, only to slide into a state of laziness in the holy month of Ramadan. In this regard, Joel Kahn (2006: 79) writes: ‘Reading [Edward] Said and [Hussein] Alatas one might be surprised to learn, for example, that debunking of the myth of Malay laziness was as much a concern of colonial officials as it was of anti-colonial nationalists. One might be equally surprised to find that for many officials the Malays were too industrious and commercially-minded, and that steps needed to be taken to dampen their entrepreneurial spirit.’

This leads to another critical point: the need to avoid lapsing into oversimplification and universalising generalisation. Along with the ideological, political and methodological underpinnings stated earlier, the British discourses on its non-European subjects, as Ania Loomba and Barbara Bush observe, were also differentiated across gender, class and contingent upon the forms of contacts between the colonised and the coloniser (Loomba 1998: 110-12; Bush 2006: 155). Other imperatives that should be equally taken into account were social status as well as personal and institutional biases. This last point deserves some further elaboration. A prominent historian of the British Empire has noted that it is vital ‘to distinguish between the low cunning and paranoia of the security services and the high policy, if not complacency, of the more serious officials’ (Stockwell 1986: 327). While the Special Branch and other intelligence agencies would often perceive the Malays and other communities on the island with much pessimism and paranoia, high-ranking British administrators and officials thought otherwise.

A notable sample of such differentiated opinions of the Malays was that of the United Kingdom Commissioner-General for South-East Asia, Malcolm Macdonald, whom C.M. Turnbull (1987: 7) contends ‘has all but disappeared from the history books, yet, in viewing the whole process of decolonisation and the transition from the British Empire to the Commonwealth Nations, he is, I maintain, the most important single figure, often influential and sometimes decisive’. At a speech delivered during the launch of the first comprehensive Malay Arts and Crafts Exhibition, Macdonald went as far as to dispel the ‘completely mistaken theory that Malays were an inferior people who needed special protection in their own country’. Conversely, the Malays had been as successful as the Indians and the Chinese in the economic and artistic spheres. Another area, in which Malays had excelled, was ‘in the important field of politics and government’. Macdonald cited the names of several Malay politicians who had gained the respect of all communities in Malaya (Straits Times, 11 July 1951). To a

---

great extent, Macdonald’s portrayal of the Malays destabilises Edward Said’s essentialist claim that the British had consistently maintained condescending representations of the Orient (Said 1978: 255–83). Rather, the Orient had, in isolated instances, been appropriated as an equal and formidable counterpart.

Yet such alternative voices and positive portrayals of the Malays were atypical and often subsumed by the dominance of condescending and patronising discourses that permeated the minds of the British in Malaya and Singapore since the late 19th century. According to John G. Butcher (1971: 3), the view of Malay society had become so standardised by World War I that ‘Residents [British administrators] may have found it difficult to imagine a Malay society that did not conform to their own image of it’. Another plausible explanation for the persistence of negative images of the Malays and their identity could be found in the fact that Britain’s decolonisation following the end of World War II was, above all, an extension of its imperialism in new forms. Robinson and Louis (1994: 462–511) describe this process as the ‘imperialism of decolonisation’ whereby British superiority complexes and ideological hegemony over their colonies persisted even though the legacy of repressive colonialism was overtly denounced.

For the British in Singapore, the years 1947 to 1957 was characterised by seismic shifts which had posed numerous challenges and difficulties for the colonial state in consolidating its technologies of rule and systems of documentation. Due to the major crises faced during the immediate aftermath of World War II and the subsequent outbreak of violent insurgencies and other protest movements, the colonial administration in Singapore were beset by overstretched resources. They thus had to rely on established perceptions and knowledge based on historical experiences with the Malays. To make matters more complicated, the period witnessed a large migration of Malays from different parts of the archipelago to Singapore who contributed, in some measure, to the heightening of political consciousness and social activism among the vibrant local population (A. Samad Ismail 1993: 205–14; Harper 1998: 337; Turnbull 1989 220–67). Although two detailed censuses were undertaken in the years 1947 and 1957 respectively, there was a lack of a thorough and systematic study of the Malays and other minority groupings in the colony. These, along with other circumstances that will be discussed below, resulted in a tenuous understanding of Malay identity.3

But are British discourses on Malay identity in colonial Singapore utterly baseless and therefore to be disregarded? The answer to this is resoundingly in the negative. Although determined by the underpinnings and other factors discussed above, these discourses did not emerge from a vacuum, but were products of an ‘intercultural mimesis’ or ‘transculturation’ which denotes the economic, social, political and ideational exchanges that occurred between a segment of the colonised population with that of the coloniser (Hallisey 1995: 31–62; Pratt 1992: 137; Vickers 2004: 54). Refining the views of Judith Nagata who argued that administratively generated conceptions of Malay identity in colonial Malaya ‘do not always coincide with, and may even conflict with popular categories’ (Nagata 1981: 103), Shamsul suggests that British discourses constitute an ‘authority-defined’ reality that is to be differentiated from an ‘everyday defined’ one. While the former rendering of Malay identity was based upon personal observation and information supplied by native collaborators, the latter was lived by the Malays on a daily basis. These realities existing simultaneously at any given time,

3See two other scholarly studies of the Malays in Singapore, Djamour 1959; Hanna 1966.
are ‘intricately-linked and constantly shaping each other by way of contestation’ (Shamsul 2004: 148). With the benefit of hindsight and new data, I will attempt to mediate between these two realities and demonstrate that while British discourses are useful vantage points from which Malay identity in colonial Singapore could be approached, they are to be interrogated and complemented by alternative perspectives and voices that have been effaced and forgotten (Spivak 1994: 79).

Malay identity in colonial Singapore, c. 1947–c. 1957

‘Community/race’, différence and the notions of belonging

An ubiquitous facet of British discourses on Malay identity in Singapore was that to be Malay was to belong to a given ‘community/race’. Although more commonly used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ‘race’ as a mode of categorisation became increasingly unpopular after World War II due to its association with Nazism (Stepan 1982). A census report published in 1949 noted that Malays constituted one of the many ‘communities’ in Singapore and that any convert ‘to Islam who describes himself as ‘Melayu’ is to all intents and purposes a member of the Malay community’. Yet this observation soon gave way to a more narrow conception whereby converts to Islam would be registered according to their ancestry. By the time the second census was taken in 1957, ‘race’ as a concept was employed again to ‘denote the grouping of communities’ who varied in terms of their descent and mother tongue rather than biological differences (Chua 1964: 100). Indeed, whilst acknowledging the existence of sub-ethnic groupings within the larger ‘Malay’ category, British censuses and intelligence reports maintained that there was a progressive shift towards ethnic homogenisation (del Tufo 1949: 71; Hirschman 1987: 565–66).

The British also maintained that even though the Malays shared common religious beliefs with a majority of the ‘Indonesian’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Arab’ ‘communities’ in the colony, they were dissimilar in terms of the commitment to social change and political activism. The ‘Arabs’, ‘Indonesians’ and ‘Indians’ were depicted as politically-oriented and more susceptible to radicalism, and on the other hand, Malays were inclined to enrol as members of social-based organisations, indulging themselves in sports and recreation. Very few Malays were expected to emerge as influential political figures in the annual Legislative Council elections and the City Council elections in 1957. An explanation given was that Arabs and Indians were often more economically affluent and saw politics as a means to assert their place as minorities within a minority ‘community’.

More specifically, the attempts to differentiate between the ‘Malays’ and ‘Indonesians’ in particular, arose out of British anxiety in regard to revolutionary and anti-colonial activities from within the ranks of migrants from Java and Sumatra. Using Singapore as a base from which weapons and other forms of aid could be supplied to the proponents of Indonesian independence from Dutch rule, these migrants were also active in garnering support of the local populace through a plethora of organisations.

---

4TNA (The National Archives, UK, henceforth TNA), CO 537/7341, Appendix A: Report on Singapore Legislative Council’s election, 10 April 1951; CO 1022/206, Resume of the Singapore political scene, May 1952; and CO 1030/713 Elections to Singapore City Council in 1957.
To anticipate the threats posed by such elements, dozens of British reports were devoted to elucidating the dynamics of what was termed as the ‘Indonesian Revolution’ and its influence in Singapore. By the 1950s, the disparity between being ‘Malay’ as against ‘Indonesian’ became so pronounced in the minds of British administrators to the extent that the existing Aliens’ Ordinance Act of 1940 was proposed to be amended to include all Indonesians in Singapore. This meant that anyone who was deemed by the colonial state to be of Indonesian origin would be required to register with the police and that they would be compelled to update their residential addresses in Singapore on a regular basis.

Granted that British discourse on Malays in Singapore as a ‘community/race’ was reflective of the growing appeal of bangsa (race)-consciousness among the Malay literary and political elites, it did not, however, represent the more subtle understandings of Malay identity on the island, as manifested primarily in the notions of belonging and territoriality (Ariffin 1993; V.M. Hooker 1999: 181–220; Milner 2002: 268–77). Those who were more localised in their ideas of belonging saw the kampung, and, to a considerable extent, Singapore, as the key determinant of their conception of Malayness. Located in sub-ethnic enclaves such as Kampung Glam, Kampung Ubi, Kampung Melayu, Kampung Siglap, Telok Blangah, Pasir Panjang, Padang Terbakar, Ayer Gemuruh, Bedok, Jalan Eunos and Geylang, these Malays developed a strong sense of place as a result of a number of social and historical reasons. The first reason is to be found in the severing of ties with the country of origin by the first generation of immigrants who were fugitives, social outcasts or wayfarers. Having settled in Singapore to start life anew, this first generation of immigrants would, in most instances, not inculcate the succeeding generations with any sense of belonging to the original abode. The sense of territoriality was then cemented by later generations through several processes: (1) the establishment of a village government elected by the people and led by a penghulu (headman); (2) the founding of a mosque or surau (prayer hall); (3) the establishment of religious schools and classes; (4) inter-marriages between occupants within the same village and/or other villages; and (5) collective participation and mutual aid in activities such as berkhitian (circumcision), marriage, the end of the fasting month, Maulud Nabi (celebration of the Prophet’s birthday) and funerals (Hadijah 2005 33–50; Hodder 1953: 31–32).

Aside from this, a small number looked beyond the confines of local villages and maintained that island Singapore along with Peninsular Malaya was a single entity to which they belonged. To be Malay was to look ‘in two directions at once’, and many prided themselves with lineages that could be traced to parts of mainland Malaya.

---

5TNA, CO 537/2177, Indonesian influence in Malay Peninsula (1947); CO 537/3779, Political situation: Indonesian propaganda (1948); CO 537/4780, Political developments: Indonesian influence in the Malay Peninsula (1949); CO 537/4789, Political developments: Persatuan Indonesia Merdeka (P.I.M.) (1949); CO 537/7294, Political developments: Indonesian influence in the Malay Peninsula (1951).
6Registration of Aliens Ordinance, 1940 (1940); CO 537/7302, Franklin Gimson to Foreign Office, 25 February 1951; National Archives of Singapore (henceforth NAS), Oral history interview, A000301, p. 30: Transcription of interview with Mr Roderick Maclean, 1 September 1983.
7NAS Oral history interview, A0000521/09, Recorded interview with Abdul Ghani bin Mohd Sultan.
(Stockwell 1979: 122; Li 1989: 94). Their main occupations were in the uniformed services and they were deployed to Singapore after having served in various states in Malaya. Politically, these Malays were represented by the Kesatuan Melayu Singapura (KMS), also known as Singapore Malay Union (SMU) and the Singapore UMNO (SUMNO). Established in 1926, the SMU was especially vocal in arguing against British plans to exclude Singapore from the Malayan Union proposals. In December 1954, an alliance was forged between SMU and SUMNO to agitate, among other things, for the inclusion of Singapore into the newly formed Malayan Federation. Dissensions between members of the parties came to a head in June 1957, leading to the dissolution of the alliance and eventual collapse of SMU (Utusan Melayu, 9 December 1954 and 10 June 1957).

Then, there existed a highly politicised minority who extended their conception of Malay identity further outwards to the Nusantara (the Malay World). Maintaining close links with leftist activists in the region, they were ardent supporters and promoters of the Indonesian Revolution and the unification of Singapore, Malaya and Indonesia into what was called, the Melaly Raya (Suryono 1992; Mochtar 1992; Zahari 2001: 91). Operating under the umbrella of the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), and the Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS or the Generation of Awakened Women) which were led by charismatic personalities such as Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, congresses, political courses and road marches were organised to foster radicalism and anti-colonial sentiments. However, their following among the local Malays was small owing to the conservative political outlook of the Malays. In the aftermath of the Maria Hertogh riots (1950), leaders of MNP, and other left-wing Malay organisations were detained and the movement suffered from a substantial decrease in membership (Utusan Melayu, 2 January, 1948; Ramlah Adam 2004: 197–414; Stenson 1970: 131–32).8

Furthermore, the discourse that Malays could be clearly differentiated from the ‘Indonesians’ and other ethnic groupings is tenuous in the light of the findings of an anthropological research conducted in the late 1940s and early 1950s as well as oral sources that could buttress a more precise interpretation. Written by British anthropologist Judith Djamour, Malay kinship and marriage in Singapore grew out of a research report on Malay families in Singapore that was published by the Colonial Social Science Research Council in 1953. However, up until its submission as a dissertation submitted to the University of London and subsequent revisions made for publication as a monograph in 1959, the report exercised little immediate influence on British discourses with regard to Malay identity (Djamour 1953; Quah 1996: 141–148). In her book, Djamour unravels the fluidity by which the Malay identity was manifested at that time. She notes that the Malays in Singapore were divided into two broad groupings; the first consisted of immigrants from the peninsula who had lived in the colony for several generations. The second grouping were from Indonesia or what was previously known as the Dutch East Indies, mainly Javanese, Baweanese, Bugis and Banjarese, whose families had been settled on the island for one, two or three generations. Indonesians immigrants, Djamour observed, could claim to be Malays if they were accepted by the village community as such, especially after the establishment of marital ties. Marriage was also the key factor that accounted for the conversion of a

---

8TNA, CO 537/3751, Malayan security services, Political Intelligence Journals, 4/1948, 29 February 1948.
small number of Europeans and Eurasians to Islam, and their subsequent integration into Malay society.\textsuperscript{9}

In slight contrast, Arab, Indian, and Pakistani Muslims were incorporated within the wider Malay category through their active participation in socio-religious activities and adoption of the Malay language and culture — a process known as \textit{masok Melayu} (becoming Malay). This process also refers to the conversion to Islam and identity shift among Chinese children through the widespread practice of informal adoption during this period. Sold by their Chinese parents to Malay families, these female infants were called \textit{anak beli} (a bought child) and/or \textit{anak angkat} (adopted child), were recognised by their Malay names and, consequently, saw themselves as Malays (Djamour 1959: 18, 66–109).

**Islam**

Another aspect of the Malay identity that featured significantly within British discourses was the belief in Islam. Annual reports of the colonial administration of Singapore for the years 1947 through 1957 claimed that an ‘enumeration of religions has not been made and is indeed scarcely possible’. Out of an estimated figure of more than 100,000 persons, the Malays ‘are almost without exception Muslim’.\textsuperscript{10} Malays were also generally assumed to be Sunnis who belonged to the Shafiee school of jurisprudence. They were differentiated from the Shiite and the Ahmadiyya whose members were largely of Indian ancestry.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{adat} (local custom) was recorded to have a weak hold upon the Malays in Singapore which was in stark contrast to Malays in Malaya. Along with the observance of pre-Islamic rituals, practices and the belief in ancient mythologies, Islam was, to the British, but a ‘veneer’ in the Malay mind (Djamour 1959: 16; Winstedt 1951: 27–38). John Bowen terms this as the ‘rule observance’ approach that characterised most western writings on Islam. By adopting such an approach, the British assumed that all practices and behaviour that did not conform to normative texts were to be considered deviant (Bowen 1995: 69–86). True Muslims, in the eyes of the British, were those that adhered strictly to the laws as found in the Qur’an and Hadith and this was seen to be absent. As a corollary to this, the Malays were regarded as nominal in their faith and practice of Islam.

It was largely due to the predominance of this discourse that even though the British were aware of the existence of resistance movements led by Malay preachers and cult leaders who appealed to Islamic symbols and texts in order to mobilise the masses, inconsistencies and contradictions characterised the colonial state’s policies pertaining

---

\textsuperscript{9}NAS, Oral history interview A000715/11, Recorded interview with Buang Bin Haji Siraj.

\textsuperscript{10}See for example Annual Report 1957: 27. The total population of Singapore in 1957 was 1.45 million: 78.1% were Chinese, 10.7% Malays, 7% Indians, with Europeans, Eurasians, Arabs as well other ethnic groupings constituting the remaining population.

\textsuperscript{11}For a discussion on controversies surrounding the Shiite and Ahmadiyya movements in Singapore, see Marcinkowski 2006: 20–40; Sharifah Zaleha 1989: 43–69. As early as 26 January till 4 March 1926, a libel case in which some members of the Ahmadiyya movement filed against an anti-Ahmadi propagandist who denounced the Ahmadies as unbelievers became a highly debated issue within the Muslim community. The judgment was given on 19 March 1926 in favour of the plaintiffs. See Bashir 1928.
to Islamic affairs. In July 1947, intensive measures had been undertaken to curb radical influences on the island through the banning of a militant youth movement, the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Group of Awakened Youths, or API).¹² In the same year, the pre-war Mohammedan Advisory Board was re-established and renamed the Muslim Advisory Board to ensure increased communication between the British government and the Muslim community in dealing with potential threats. From then on, it was assumed that remnants of radicalism within the Malay community were a benign opposition to colonial rule. The Colonial Office in London was convinced that the real battle was against Communism and not Islam. ‘Communism’, as described by the British security services in 1948, ‘is the greatest single factor which is likely to aggravate the internal Security of Malaya during the next few years, in peace or in war.’¹³ Upon the declaration of the Malayan Emergency in 1948, the number of Malay communists declined rapidly to a few prominent radicals who were later proscribed or driven underground. By this time, the probability of an open rebellion or mass violence by Muslims had been completely ruled out. It was believed that Malays in Singapore adhered to a pacifist and superficial interpretation of Islam and that the presence of a handful of militant Muslims on the island would not have an adverse influence upon the majority.¹⁴

Undeniably, prayers and other basic Islamic rites were neglected by most Malays in the post war era, and mosque attendance was relatively low.¹⁵ The highly acclaimed autobiographical novel Salina, which is now regarded as a source of information on social life in Singapore, records most vividly the moral laxness of Malays who were beleaguered by prostitution and other sexual vices (A. Samad Said 1961).¹⁶ Yet the British did not distinguish between the centrality of Islam in the minds of the Malays with the everyday conformity to religious laws and injunctions. Malay followers of communist movements and organisations, for example, were shunned by most Malays who regarded them as un-Islamic. In specific instances, perceived attempts at denigrating Islam had been the crucial factor that brought Malays of all religious leanings to act in defense of the religion through violent and non-violent means (Gillis 2005: 136–71). A legal battle for the custody of a 13 year old Dutch girl, Maria Hertogh, and mass violence that followed was a clear testimony of this.

Brought up by a Malay-Indonesian family, Maria Hertogh converted to Islam and adopted the Malay culture and language. After having been separated for more than seven years, the girl’s parents claimed custody of their child and for her return to the Netherlands. Press sensationalism of the legal case along with the marriage between Maria Hertogh and a Malay teacher, Mansor Adabi, in the midst of the legal proceedings had heightened Muslim sensitivities in Singapore. The situation was made worse upon the British court’s annulment of the marriage and the placement of Maria Hertogh in a Catholic convent which triggered protests from most Malay-Muslim organisations

¹²TNA, CO 537/7243, Malayan Security Services, Political Intelligence Journals, 2/1946, John Dalley Papers; TNA CO 537/2151, Malayan Nationalist Party, and Angkatan Pemuda Insaf.
¹⁴Ibid.
¹⁵Ibid.
¹⁶For an illuminating account of Malays’ declining adherence towards Islam during the Japanese Occupation, see Abu Talib 2003: 176–96.
¹⁷NAS Oral history interview A000960/05, Recorded interview with Hamid bin Ahmad.
in the colony. From 11 December to 13 December 1950, Singapore witnessed one of its most intense outbreaks of mass violence. Europeans and Eurasians became targets of Muslims (who were mostly Malays) and other opportunists. Coupled by the passivity of the Malay policemen who resented the unfair treatment towards their co-religionists, the rioters engaged in widespread destruction of public property, murder, looting and arson. Eighteen persons were killed, 173 others injured and close to 1,000 Muslims were arrested. More than anything else, the event illustrates that Islam was a potent driving force in Malay life and a key attribute of Malay identity.\(^{17}\) Interestingly, even after the outbreak of mass violence, the British were somewhat dubious of the reality that the discourse on Islam as a mere ‘veneer’ was unsound. Such denials were harnessed by the claim that the riots stemmed largely from the radicalism of several Muslim leaders, irresponsibility of the press and the weaknesses inherent within the police force.\(^{18}\)

In addition, the British were also uninformed of other internal variations within the overarching devotion to Sunni Islam and thereby lost sight of lesser known conceptions and manifestations of Malay identity. Up until the early 1960s, there was a general unawareness on the part of the colonial state of the existence of an influential reformist-puritan movement – Muhammadiyah. Although generally accepted as ‘Malay-Muslims’, members of this collective agitated for the dispelling of the widespread view that it was obligatory to hold fast to any one of the four accepted schools of law (Shafiee, Hanafi, Maliki and Ahmad). Their emphasis was to purify Islam from pagan, Hindu and Western influences towards a more authentic and progressive interpretation of the faith. Due to its strong following and open critiques of prevailing religious and cultural practices such as the Maulid (celebration of Prophet’s Birthday), tahlil and talkin (recitation of Qur’anic verses to gain blessings for the living as well as the deceased), by the mid-1950s, members of the group were frequently assaulted by Malays who regarded them as sesat (deviant) and tak beradab (rude or lacking of manners). For members of the Muhammadiyah movement, Malay identity was not only contingent upon Islam; it was also to be based specifically upon the Qur’an, the Sunnah (the ways of Prophet Muhammad), the Ijma’ (consensus of learned scholars) and the negation of all other theological, ideological, political, social, and cultural interpretations that were in contradiction to the true spirit of Islam.\(^{19}\)

Another variation which had gone unnoticed was between the defenders of traditionalist and paternalistic interpretation of Islamic laws and the rights of women as against those who subscribed to a modernist and feminist mode of thought. To the extent that the British were aware of the activities of the members and sympathisers of the Kesatuan Kebajikan Perempuan Islam (Singapore Malay Women’s Welfare Association) led by Che Zaharah bte Noor Mohamed, there was no recognition of the modernist cum feminist ideology which drove the organisation and its efforts to redefine Malay identity. The organisation campaigned against the domestic abuse of Malay women and children that has its roots in the unenlightened interpretation of Islam

\(^{17}\)For detailed accounts on the causes of the Maria Hertogh riots see Cody 2001; Haja Maideen 1989; Hughes 1980; Jesudason 1969; Mohamed Ansari 1973; and Nordin 2005: 561–575.


\(^{19}\)For more information on British perceptions of the movement, see TNA, FO 1091/107. Special Branch Intelligence Summary (nos. 4, 5 and 8/60).
among the Malays. Towards this end, members of this organisation supported the introduction of the Laycock Marriage Bill on the lines of the 1929 Age of Marriage Act in the United Kingdom, to ‘make void marriages between persons either of whom is under the age of sixteen’. In 1953, the Kesatuan Kebajikan Perempuan Islam demanded legislation that would curb the prevalent practice of polygamy among Malays in Singapore and Malaya. Malay men were chided for their dishonourable practice of adopting non-Muslim daughters for the purposes of marriage. In response, male religious leaders harked back at, what seemed to them, to be an irreligious stance and ineffective way of reforming an established marital culture. In their eyes, Che Zaharah and her accomplices had succumbed to western influences and were corrupting Islam and the Malay culture from within. Muslim women, they argued, should know their appropriate place in society. They should refrain from all forms of political activities and agitation towards social reform which was essentially a male domain (Melayu Raya, 10 September 1952; 24 November 1952; 22 January 1953).

The Malay language

The implanting of a codified form of Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) as an essential marker of Malay identity could be traced to British interest in fostering a textualised tradition as means of knowing and, subsequently, colonising the natives. ‘Colonial knowledge’, as Nicholas Dirks succinctly asserts, ‘both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about (Dirks 1996: viii).’ This does not however imply that the Malays were unacquainted with the intricacies of the Malay language and its paramount position in the development of their self-image. Rather, the Malay language was regarded as a medium of social communication to be transmitted and preserved orally from generation to generation even if written texts existed. Working as a language teacher and translator for the British, Munshi Abdullah wrote that the Malays in early 19th-century Malaya thought that it was improper to teach the spoken language (Abdullah 1970: 53). Much weight was however given to the study of the Arabic script and Qur’anic reading because it was held as a foreign language which needed to be learnt for a better understanding of Islamic texts, beliefs and way of life. Displeased with this feature of Malay life, the British founded Malay schools in Singapore as early as the 1820s. They promoted the publication of Malay dictionaries and school textbooks which led to the rise of a flourishing Malay newspaper industry. Consequently, by the early 20th century, the importance of a systemised and written form of language had entered into the Malay consciousness and became an essential aspect of what it meant to be ‘Malay’ (Tham 1990: 96). Following the end of the Japanese Occupation, the British assumed that since the Malay language had been systemised and adopted by the Malays, efforts to imbibe the learning of English in Singapore would be met with positive responses. In late 1951, the Singapore Governor Franklin Gimson confidently suggested that a large number of Malay teachers


and parents would readily support the colonial state’s plans to introduce English as their first language. Underlying these discourses was the assumption that the Malays in Singapore differed from those in mainland Malaya. The former were more cosmopolitan in outlook and viewed the Malay language as a communicative tool rather than a fundamental part of their identity that was to be defended at all costs. The Malays in Singapore responded otherwise.

This could be clearly seen during the attempts to implement the Reorientation Plan, which was to take effect on 1 January 1952. The British hoped to equip students in Malay schools with the English language and other necessary knowledge and skills so as to enable them to cope with the rapid changes of the post-war years. The colonial administration envisioned that the plan would open up a wider range of career choices for the Malays in order to help them to compete with the other ethnic groups on the island. Under the plan, the Malay language was to be employed as the language of instruction during the first three years of school. The English language would be taught concurrently in the first year. From the fourth to seventh year of primary education, all subjects would be in taught in English, with the exception of Malay literature. In this way, the Malays would be better prepared for secondary school education, in order to qualify for the Cambridge School Certificate (Annual Report 1951 – Department of Education 1952: 79).

Though well-intended, the plan was introduced in the midst of a rise in linguistic nationalism among the Malays. At the forefront of an array of organisations that promoted the mastery of the Malay language as a means to bolster the identity of the Malays was the Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50, asas means ‘basis’; Literary Generation of 1950). Established in August, 1950 and guided by the motto Seni untuk Masyarakat (Arts for Society), the group championed several aims, among which, was the refinement and promotion of the Malay language as the lingua franca of Singapore and Malaya. Aside from the publication of hundreds of novels, poems, short stories and essays related to society, language and literature, ASAS 50 gained prominence through three regional congresses that were held in 1952 and 1954 respectively. Issues such as the establishment of a Malay Language Department in the University of Malaya, the inculcation of the Malay language as the second language of all non-Malays in Malaya and romanisation of the Jawi script were proposed during these landmark meetings (Abdullah Hussain 1987: 3–53).

Together with other prominent Malay activists and organisations in Singapore, ASAS 50 remonstrated against what they considered as the insidious British scheme to downplay the importance of the Malay language in education and daily life. Representatives of a dozen Malay organisations maintained that the Reorientation Plan had been conceived without prior consultation. The most vehement resistance came from members of the Singapore Malay Teachers Union whose opposition was based upon the concern for the loss of relevance and employment in the years to come. Resistance against the government’s proposal became particularly acute with the formation of the Malay Education Council (MEC, known in Malay as Majlis Pelajaran Melayu [MPM]). Consisting of 52 Malay/Muslim organisations in Singapore, the MEC issued petitions and public protests against the plan. Their efforts received full support from all

\[22\text{Wilson 1969: 172; Zahoor Ahmad, 1969.}\]
leading Malay newspapers and organisations on the island (*Utusan Melayu*, 13 August 1954). Towards the end of 1955, the Reorientation Plan was abandoned to make way for the enhancement of Malay language education in Singapore (Doraisamy 1969: 110; Zahoor 1969: 15–26).

To a great extent, the campaign for the preservation of the Malay language revealed how British attempts to exercise control over an assumed aspect of Malay identity had in fact led to its reification. It is worth noting that a similar process — albeit with variations in precursors, intensity and pace — had taken place in other British colonies which points to the interconnectedness of the empire, particularly in its strategies of domination and the unintended effects. In India, for example, local languages such as Hindi and Sanskrit were transformed and standardised to serve British aims. And comparable to the case of the Malay language in Singapore, the indigenous linguistic systems which the British had innovated were taken over by the colonised and used as a mobilising element in the struggle for independence (Cohn 1996: 56).

‘Depressed community’ and class divisions

The fourth aspect of Malay identity in colonial Singapore to be considered is that of the ‘depressed community’. Mention has been made earlier of the ambiguities in the usage of the term, ‘community’. That aside, the word ‘depressed’ which emerges frequently in British discourses is, admittedly, a perceptive observation of what it meant to be Malay in such a context. The British held that the Malays shared the predicament confronting the majority of ‘Indians’ in Singapore. Generally, Malays maintained large families, were of low educational background, employed in poorly paid occupations, seldom engaged in mercantile pursuits, socially downtrodden and were ‘economically marginalised’. Unlike the other ethnic groupings, Malays in Singapore were however unique in that their ‘depressed’ state was also attributed to a culture of being resigned to fate. 23

Owing to their assumption that the Malays were generally satisfied with their state of affairs, the colonial state’s approach to solving socio-economic backwardness that defined the Malays in Singapore were, in the main, minimalist in scope (Lily 1998: 185-86). In several editorials published by leading Malay newspapers during this period, it was highlighted that the dismal socio-economic conditions of the Malays stemmed from their negative attitudes to education and learning as well as the ineffectiveness of British policies. Living in squatter settlements and densely populated houses built on low-lying swampy areas, the Malays were plagued by diseases such as typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis and malaria. Illiteracy among adults was common and children would frequently drop out of school at an early age to work and support the family. As a result, Malays were ‘backward in all areas of life. That is to say, the key to solving the “Malay problem” is to redress their grievances and poverty’ (*Utusan Melayu*, 20–21 December 1950, 9 April 1954, 25 February 1957; *Melayu Raya*, 6 January 1951).

---

It is also intriguing to note that the British recognised the existence of class divisions within the Malay society as reflected in the occupational patterns (see below). This is somewhat unsurprising given that class was a dominant form of social organisation in post-war Britain (Cannadine 2000). Yet no attempt was made to correlate class with Malay identity. Class divisions, I contend, had had a great bearing upon Malay identity and this has been memorialised in the many novels, short stories, poems and films that were produced during this period. The concept of class was put to use to highlight the suffering and plight of the Malay masses as well as the exploitative and predatory practices of the upper classes. Malays in Singapore, as evidently shown in four poems written by Usman Awang (a well-known literary activist and member of ASAS 50), were depicted as forming a large part of the *buruh* (working/labouring class), whose identity was built around deprivation and moral decadence. At the same time, lower class Malays displayed a strong sense of hope and optimism in overcoming adversity (*Hiburan*, 6 May 1950; *Utusan Zaman*, 15 May 1955, 29 July 1956). In the same vein, the producer, director and actor, P. Ramlee, highlighted class and its relationship with Malay identity through several of his films that were screened in local cinemas in the 1950s. A case in point is the *Penarek beca* (The trishaw driver) (1955) which narrates the story of a trishaw driver’s relationship with the daughter of a wealthy Malay man. So vivid was the portrayal of the antagonisms between the *kelas bawahan* (lower classes) and *kelas atasan* (upper classes) within Malay society in Singapore that the film was named the ‘Best Film’ in 1955 by the *Utusan Filem* and *Sport* magazine (Uhde and Uhde 2000: 13; Barnard and Barnard 2002: 9–23).

The common occupations of Malay men and women from the lower classes were office clerks, peons, drivers, maids, seamen, as well as the lower ranks of the police force, the fire-fighting services and the military. Everyday life for the lower classes was depicted by a poignant expression, *Kais pagi makan pagi, kais petang makan petang*, which means living hand to mouth (Chua 1964: 202–54; Athsani and Ridzwan 1971: 16). Reporting on a survey of incomes and housing that was conducted between 1953 and 1954, Goh Keng Swee (1956: 19) wrote:

Malays and Indonesians have the least percentage of people living in the high income brackets. Only 6 per cent of the Malay urban population is found in the wealthier households were excluded from our Survey, as compared with 17 per cent, the general average. The Indonesians are in an even worse position with 3 per cent. The weak economic position of the Malay community is, of course, a well known fact. They hardly participate in the commercial life of the city as business-men, and those who are well-off are mainly professional workers of one kind or another.

The small number of Malays who constituted the upper classes held lucrative posts in the legal, medical, commercial and engineering sectors of the Singapore’s economy. They were also members of prestigious clubs and associations in the colony which placed them in the same social standing alongside the wealthy Arabs, Eurasians and Europeans.

---

24NAS Oral history interview A0001258/03, Recorded interview with Abdul Aziz Omar.
Furthermore, Malays of the upper classes saw themselves as ‘modernised’ unlike the majority who were deemed as backward. There were, of course, exceptions to the rule. Among those worthy of mention were Ahmad bin Mohammed Ibrahim, Haji Embok Suloh and Sardon bin Jubir. Renowned as practising lawyers, businessmen and members of the Singapore Legislative Council, these Malay personalities were also philanthropists, social reformists and political activists who campaigned for the welfare of the lower classes. While maintaining the lifestyle of the elites, their conception of Malay identity was manifested primarily through their commitment to Islam and Muslim affairs, the promotion of the Malay language, and the donning of traditional Malay costume. Ahmad Ibrahim, for that matter, was never seen in public without a songkok, which to him, was an important symbol of Malay identity (Abdul Monir et. al. 2007: 21; Tan 1986: M.B. Hooker 1986).25

Conclusion

What did it mean to be Malay in colonial Singapore? The answer to this neglected question is far more complex than the British had sought to interpret for the purposes of their policies. As the foregoing discussion has shown, Malay identity in colonial Singapore was highly contingent upon differing conceptions of belonging, diverse interpretations of Islam, primacy placed upon language, of being marginalised both economically and socially, as well as divisions along class lines. Beyond what the British had assumed, the notion of a homogenous Malay community/race is problematic as the differentiations between Malays and other ethnic groupings were not at all clear. There existed different conceptions of belonging and territoriality from the village to that of the region. Additionally, Malays subscribed to other latent variations of the same faith. Islam was also more than a mere veneer and featured strongly in the Malay mind in the event of infringement of their religious rights. Having fostered a textualised tradition, the British wrongly believed that the Malay language could be substituted by the inculcation of English. Malays in post-war Singapore had begun to view their language as not only a medium of social communication but also an important feature of their identity to be preserved and safeguarded. Finally, I have demonstrated that although it is to be admitted that British had rightly pointed out that Malay identity could be linked to their ‘depressed’ state, the British did not recognise class divisions that could shed further light on that identity.

In Seeing like a state, James Scott posits that all efforts made by modern states the world over to render their citizens ‘legible’ and ‘visible’ through censuses, surveillance, maps and other technologies of control are susceptible to errors, omissions and spurious conjectures (Scott 1998: 1). This article has shown that the British colonial state in Singapore was no exception. Even so, I have argued for the need to uncover the multi-faceted underpinnings that determined British discourses on identity as against the latent realities of the time. By doing so, perhaps more could be learnt about how a given colonial power strove to comprehend the multifaceted identities of its subjects during an age of decolonisation, the problems it had encountered and alternative conceptions that may have been ignored.

25NAS Oral history interview A000704/10, Recorded interview with Sukaiim bin Ibrahim.
References

Archival sources

The National Archives (TNA), Kew, United Kingdom

CO 537 Colonial Office and predecessors: Confidential General and Confidential Original Correspondence, 1945–1955.
CO 1022 Colonial Office: South East Asia Department: Original Correspondence, 1950–1952.
FO 371 Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence, 1948–1955.
FO 1091 Commissioner General for the United Kingdom in South East Asia, and United Kingdom Commissioner for Singapore and South East Asia: Registered Files, 1950–1961.

National Archives of Singapore (NAS): Oral history interviews
A0000521/09 Recorded interview with Abdul Ghani bin Mohd Sultan.
A000715/11 Recorded interview with Buang Bin Haji Siraj.
A000704/10 Recorded interview with Sukaimi bin Ibrahim.
A000960/05 Recorded interview with Hamid bin Ahmad.
A0001258/03 Recorded interview with Abdul Aziz Omar.

Published sources

Government reports


Newspapers and periodicals

Hiburan
Malaya Tribune
Melayu Raya
Utusan Melayu
Utusan Zaman
Straits Times
Books and journals


