A theory of colonialism in the Malay world

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Introduction

More than five decades have passed since the formal dissolution of colonial rule in Malaysia but scholarly interest in that momentous period in the country’s history remains as strong as ever. Studies of various aspects of colonialism in the peninsula have grown dramatically over the years, so much so that reviews of only a small subset of the field can easily occupy an entire monograph. This is no place to enter into an elaborate critique of the published works on the subject. What is perhaps more pertinent to note here is that such positive movement in scholarship about the colonial past is not unique to the Malaysian (earlier on known as ‘Malayan’) context. In mainland and island Southeast Asia, as in most countries in South Asia, Latin America and Africa, ‘colonial and postcolonial studies’ have become a burgeoning intellectual enterprise that draws scholars, journalists and creative writers in an investigation of the genesis, evolution and impact of European colonialism as well as native responses to foreign rule. Academic positions and chairs dedicated explicitly to the study and popularization of imperial history and its legacies have now become institutionalized. The number of journals and articles critical of all things ‘colonial’ has broadened enormously to include almost every facet of life—medicine, sexuality, politics, economics, law, religion, ideology, the environment, popular culture, sport and so forth. And yet, one crucial dimension which has by far distinguished studies of colonialism in Malaysia from studies of other formerly colonized lands is the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which the colonized theorized and wrote about their colonial experiences.

Many reasons could be adduced to explain this discrepancy, but probably none is more important than the tacit or, even worse, false assumption among most indigenous and non-indigenous scholars that Malay intellectuals offered little by way of conceptualizing, theorizing and explaining the various transformations which colonial rule brought about upon local societies. Much of the available literature on colonialism written by Malays during the period of decolonization is perceived as journalistic and populist in nature and therefore lacking in the theoretical sophistication as well as the methodological rigour that is evident in the works of their South Asian and African counterparts. Mined solely for facts and figures, literary styles and linguistic conventions rather than for wide-ranging insights and relevant generalizations, it is assumed that the works of the Malay intellectuals were never
on a par with those of postcolonial thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, C L R James or Aimé Césaire—to mention just a few prominent names from our contemporary world—whose writings have spawned detailed and globally acclaimed studies aimed at decentring the dominance of European thought. As scholars of the Malay world, our recourse to overcome these alleged limitations in indigenous writings has been to frame our questions and analyses with the theoretical models devised by European social scientists and scholars who were generally ignorant of Malay societies. But why, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has asked in a rather evocative manner, ‘cannot we, once again, return the gaze?’ Why have we not devised alternative paradigms, perspectives and theories that would obliterate Eurocentrism in the human sciences?

This article provides an affirmative response to the question posed by Chakrabarty. It seeks to open up new spaces for the study of colonialism in Malaysia and address the absence of Southeast Asia in the expanding archive of Postcolonial Studies. I am guided by the belief that Malay intellectuals in the postwar period have indeed contributed to the formulation of theories about colonialism in Malaysia in particular and the Malay world in general. One distinguishing feature of these theories is that they are grounded in experiences and subjectivities shared by not only Malays but also other anti-colonial writers, thinkers and activists who lived within and outside the Southeast Asian region. In demonstrating such a claim, this article directs its analytical gaze to the writings of a Malay intellectual and activist, Dr Burhanuddin Al-Helmy (1911–1969). This choice is not arbitrary, nor is it coincidental; rather it is determined by factors that are both empirical and theoretical.

No book on Malaysian and Malay politics in post-World War II Southeast Asia could be said to be complete without a reference to, or discussion of, the writings and activism of Burhanuddin. Already the subject of biographies, monographs, scholarly articles and academic theses, he has been described by a noted historian as ‘one of Malay nationalism’s most important ideologists’. Burhanuddin was one of the pioneering Malay writers who sought to articulate the colonial situation in a precise and yet intuitive manner whilst playing an important role in the resistance movement against the British. His ideas were informed by the discourses of the subalterns and the literate elites, which places him squarely in the Gramscian category of ‘organic intellectuals’. In explicating the function of organic intellectuals discussed in the works of Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said writes: ‘organic intellectuals are actively involved in society, that is, they constantly struggle to change minds and expand markets; unlike teachers and priests, who seem more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in year out, organic intellectuals are always on the move, on the make’. Although it is to be acknowledged that several aspects of the ideas of organic intellectuals such as Burhanuddin are somewhat empirically inaccurate in view of later developments in scholarship and a lack of access to vital information that could buttress his analyses, I argue that Burhanuddin’s general theory of colonialism is particularly instructive in expanding our understanding of non-European intellectual responses to foreign rule.
Such standpoints however raise the pertinent question: what is a theory of colonialism? I define ‘a theory of colonialism’ in its widest sense as referring to a set of interrelated presuppositions, statements, explanations and concepts that presents a logical view of the genesis and causes of colonialism as well as the policies, strategies and ideologies employed by a given power and its collaborators to exploit, control and dominate peoples and lands which they regard as foreign or inferior to themselves. A comprehensive theory of colonialism should also include an exposition of the various forms of resistance and responses—popular or otherwise—among native communities to destabilize, subvert and subdue an external power. Because all theories are, by nature, speculative and conjectural, it follows then that the theory of colonialism developed by Burhanuddin, like those developed by Marx, Lenin and Hobson among others, should be regarded only as a partial projection of the colonial situation and not a total and accurate view of that reality.

At the centre of my analysis is a small yet significant book written by Burhanuddin, namely Perjuangan Kita (‘Our Struggle’, published in 1946). Although this book was only 88 pages when it was first published, it is valuable for several reasons. First, it was written during the period of British decolonization which coincided with the heightening of anti-colonialist sentiments in Malaya. The ideas embedded in the book reflect a spirited attempt at exposing the evils of European colonialism, and the problems facing Malay societies, and charting new paths towards the creation of an independent state. The second reason for the book’s importance is to be found in the wide popularity which Perjuangan Kita enjoyed in its time. Having influenced a whole spectrum of Malay and non-Malay audiences since its first publication, Burhanuddin published an extension of Perjuangan Kita called Asas Falsafah Kebangsaan Melayu in 1954. Both books were reprinted several times in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1950s and 1960s in view of their wide appeal. More recently, these two works have been collated and re-published with other speeches which testify to the enduring appeal of Burhanuddin’s writings. According to Kamaruddin Jaafar, Burhanuddin’s works have received widespread support from the Malays from the post-World War II period up to the present, to the extent that they have become sources of reference for scholars and lay readers alike. These factors, along with the intrinsic significance of his theory of colonialism, are sufficient justification to elevate Burhanuddin’s Perjuangan Kita to being an essential part of the pantheon of ‘classics’ in studies of the Malay world and colonialism in the region.

As for methodology, I propose that a more perceptive and urbane reading of Burhanuddin’s works can only be achieved by situating them squarely within the intellectual field of the history of ideas, as well as in the general context of the colonial experience. The main purpose of my method is to uncover Burhanuddin’s governing concepts, implicit methodologies and tacit assumptions while exposing the underlying logic of the author’s arguments. By situating the text within a multitude of local, regional and global historical contexts and climates of opinion, and by placing them in dialogue with the prevailing discourses of their times, I hope to show how Burhanuddin’s ideas...
may (and may not) transcend the circumstances in which they were created. It is this complex dialectic, and, in some instances, ruptures in the relationship between texts and contexts, that makes Burhanuddin a fascinating (if not menacing) thinker who has shaped the minds of his admirers and interlocutors, and even his critics.\textsuperscript{10}

The remainder of this article is divided into two main parts. I begin with an exploration of a variety of influences that shaped Burhanuddin’s \textit{Perjuangan Kita} and the methods he applied to systematically explain the roots and persistence of colonialism in the Malay world. This is important in order to show that the text was a product of its author’s biographical and historical circumstances and the sources he drew upon to marshal his arguments. The article will then bring to light Burhanuddin’s theory of colonialism. His definition of colonialism, especially the manner in which European colonialism differed from the Malay empires that preceded its ascendance, the concepts used to explain the causes of colonial rule, and the processes that permitted its sustenance, form the core of this section. In addition, I will discuss the impact that colonialism had upon local societies and Burhanuddin’s insights into attempts to liberate the Malay world from the shackles of foreign rule. In the effort to place Burhanuddin’s ideas within the wider compass of Third World theories of colonialism in his time, I will draw comparisons between his ideas and those of some prominent non-European thinkers.

\textbf{A multitude of influences and methods}

Two intertwining influences played major roles in shaping Burhanuddin’s theory of colonialism. The first was social and contextual, while the second was textual—ideas that he drew upon from deep readings of several major works in the Islamic and secular traditions. To begin with the social and contextual influences, a brief survey of Burhanuddin’s life, education and activism up until the writing of \textit{Perjuangan Kita} reveals an assortment of persons and institutions from which he derived his ideas.\textsuperscript{11} Born in Perak on 29 August 1911, Burhanuddin was exposed to the reformist ideas of the Kaum Muda during his schooling days in Jambi Sumatra in 1924. The two years of intense study in an Islamic pondok (dormitory) school there was enough to instil in him a growing sense of awareness that the Muslim world was in a state of rapid change and decline. Muslims, from Burhanuddin’s perspective, had lost their selfhood by becoming blind imitators of Western civilization. These developments had compelled many to abandon their beliefs and faith. Conversely, the shunning of the spirit of reason and scientific enquiry among elites and the learned, who saw modern forms of knowledge and education as corrupting the minds of ordinary Muslims, had reinforced tendencies towards parochialism, insularity and fanaticism.

In 1927, Burhanuddin was enrolled in the famous Madrasah al-Mashor al-Islamiah in Pulau Pinang, established in 1916 by Arab philanthropists and managed by renowned Muslim scholars such as Shaikh Tahir Jalaluddin,
Syed Shaikh Ahmad Al-Hadi and Ghulam Sarwar. Burhanuddin mastered the Arabic language and the Islamic sciences within a year’s stint there.\(^{12}\) He then left for India in search of knowledge and self-exploration. The revolutionary pulses in the subcontinent must have convinced him that what was urgently needed for the Malays and Muslims in general to recover their lost pride was for them to take their place at the vanguard of social, educational and, more importantly, political reform. In addition to this, his exposure to the independence movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru and travels to Palestine during the heat of protests against the Balfour Declaration strengthened his conviction that colonialism was the essential obstacle to the healthy growth of the Malay world. Several years of study in the field of homeopathic medicine and Islamic sciences at the Ismaeliah Medical College in Delhi and Aligarh Muslim University respectively opened his mind to deeper problems facing colonized societies. Like Frantz Fanon, who was similarly trained in the medical sciences, Burhanuddin became cognizant that the care of the self and the liberation of the body and the mind from inferiority complexes and mimicry of the West were the first essential steps towards the larger project of liberation from the yoke of colonialism.\(^{13}\)

It is therefore unsurprising that, upon his return to Malaya, Burhanuddin set out to promote ideas about independence and resistance. In 1937, he was arrested for publishing a magazine which discussed jaundiced British policies in Malaya. Two years later, Burhanuddin accepted an invitation from Mustapha Hussain to become a member of the leftist-nationalist organization, Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM).\(^{14}\) Immersing himself within the politics of the movement, he embraced the ideal of unifying the Malay world into a conglomerate called the *Indonesia Raya*. Although the KMM was eventually dissolved upon the Japanese Occupation of Malaya from 1942 to 1945, those years were eventful in that they provided the opportunity for Burhanuddin to widen his exposure to Muslim anti-colonial activism via the Maahad Il-Ihya Assyarif as well as within armed groups established by the Japanese. Seeing that the popularity of the leftist movement had waned rapidly upon the return of the British and that the political vacuum left by the Japanese needed to be filled, Burhanuddin and his compatriots set out to establish the Partai Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM) on 17 October 1945. It was during these challenging times that *Perjuangan Kita* was written. The book could be regarded as a simultaneous attempt by a leftist-nationalist Malay intellectual to look back to the past glories of Malaya, while also considering the period when the ill-effects of colonialism began to surface and bringing the story up to the present—a defining moment which would determine whether the Malay world would gain its freedom or endure continued servitude at the hands of the Europeans. A programme for action for the future was, for Burhanuddin, something which the PKMM could offer.

Yet, these contextual influences provide us with only a partial picture of the conditions and circumstances that led to the writing of the *Perjuangan Kita*. A close reading of the book indicates that Burhanuddin was deeply
influenced by several leading texts in the Islamic and secular traditions. Although he does not make explicit reference to all of these texts in the way one would expect in the work of a professional academic, Burhanuddin demonstrates an acute ability to harmonize these two traditions to develop his unique interpretation of colonialism and its effects upon colonized societies and to offer his readers a way out of that predicament.

From the Islamic tradition, he developed and employed the method of argument by way of theological reasoning. He derived from the Qur’an the notion that to agitate for the liberation of men from the tyranny of other men is to adhere to one of the central teachings of the Islamic faith. He cited verses such as Surah Ali-Imran verse 110 to further argue that Muslims in the Malay world should rally together under one banner to free themselves from the non-believers, here referring to the non-Muslim colonizers. The verse from Surah Ali-Imran reads:

You are the best among all the nations that were raised among mankind—you enjoin good deeds and forbid immorality and you believe in Allah. (3: 110)

Clearly, some degree of exegesis is at play here and this is characteristic of Burhanuddin’s use of the Qur’anic verses. Read in a literal fashion, the verse cited above refers to a group of people who are seen in the eyes of God as preeminent simply because of their faith in Him and their fulfilment of the commandment to display good conduct on Earth. No special reference is made to Muslims or to interlocutors and antagonists. Burhanuddin however provides a contextualized reading of the verse to refer to Muslims in Malaya as the best of nations who have yet to discharge the duties placed upon them. Entwined with this narrative of an obligation left undone is the image of an external power—the colonial regime—whose presence in a land which was once ruled by Muslims has led to loss of public morality and natural rights of the natives. The best of nations has thus become the worst of men with the coming of the West.

To this must be added the ideas of Muslim thinkers which make up the second set of Muslim sources which Burhanuddin mined for the purposes of his theory of colonialism. Burhanuddin refers to Sayyid Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Amir Shakib Arsalan and Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi as known Muslim scholars who shared the belief that a strong adherence to Islam was the key to reviving the Muslim Ummah (community). Another commonality between these thinkers was that they were convinced that ‘to love one’s country is part of faith (hubul watan minal iman)’. The road to freedom must begin with a strong commitment to one’s homeland. Only then would God help the colonized and the subjugated. Interweaving this and the early traditions together even at an early stage in the book, the first paragraph of the Perjuangan Kita ends with an invocation: Hasil dunia dan akhirat, hidup dan mati kita, seperti tuntutan yang dikehendaki dan diredhai Allah rabbul alamin (The outcomes of this life and the hereafter, our life and death, will be in accordance with the demands acceptable to Allah).
Burhanuddin also made use of historical accounts to develop his points. He devoted nearly half of the entire book to explaining the origins of the Malay ethnic stock, the rise of Malay sultanates, the reasons for their decline, the intrigues of the colonialists, and resistance encountered in the process of subjugation. His was an emplotment that is filled with tragedy and romance interlaced with narratives of the past magnificence of the Malay peoples, reminding us somewhat of Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India.* History is also used to absolve the leftist-nationalists of the charge of having collaborated with the Japanese. Burhanuddin highlighted that this short-term strategy was adopted to achieve a long-term goal. It follows then that the PKMM never departed from the ideals of its predecessor, the KMM—that is, to achieve complete independence from the British and the Dutch by any means necessary.

Although we have little evidence to show that Burhanuddin was influenced by the works of leading socialists or communists, the correlations he established between colonialism and the rule of capital do indicate that he may have encountered such texts and used them in ways that do not necessarily reveal his inclination to that ideology. Indeed, even if Burhanuddin was influenced by communist ideology and its various permutations, as his contemporary Ahmad Boestamam noted, he kept that ideology subservient to his overarching religious faith as a Muslim. It is however important to note that the title of Burhanuddin’s book is akin to a pamphlet written by the Indonesian nationalist, Sutan Sjahrir. Sjahrir’s ideas about socialism and his views on the mobilization of proletarian masses in resisting the colonial state informed Burhanuddin’s writing of the book. Another socialist thinker who probably shaped Burhanuddin’s thoughts was the Filipino freedom fighter and novelist, Jose Rizal. Even though Burhanuddin made no specific reference to Rizal, his point about the British manufacturing of the ideology of Malay indolence as a necessary justification for the imposition of colonial rule shows striking similarities to Rizal’s ideas.

The last item in the list of the multitude of influences and methods to be considered here is Malay rhetorical devices derived from texts and non-textual sources. By Malay rhetorical devices, I am referring to an array of tropes, proverbs, idioms, metaphors, similes, imagery, metonymies and euphemisms that pervade the entire book. The use of these various forms of rhetorical devices was meant to appeal to the senses and emotions of a largely Malay audience which was accustomed to an oral culture. These devices also served as an effective method to convey complex ideas without resorting to the use of too much factual information. As Burhanuddin himself revealed, his style was partly informed by the writings of Munsyi Abdullah, the famous Malay social critic. His trope of the fall of the Melakan sultanate as a momentous event in Malay history also suggests that Burhanuddin had an in-depth knowledge of the hikayat literature, notably the *Sejarah Melayu*. A few examples of Burhanuddin’s rhetorical devices are sufficient to strengthen the assertion that he was in no uncertain terms a product of his Malay social, cultural and textual environment:
Kemakmuran, kebesaran, kemegahan dan keagungan kerajaan Melayu semerbak namanya seluruh dunia.
(The prosperity, opulence, magnificence and greatness of the Malay Kingdoms were known the world over.) (p 32)

Anak Melayu di atas ibu pertiwindya sendirinya yang kaya dan makmur jadi seperti ayam kelaparan di atas padi, itik kedahagaan berenang di air.
(Malays, whose motherland was rich and prosperous, became like chickens dying of hunger in the paddy fields, ducks suffering from thirst whilst paddling in water.) (p 38)

Gajah berjuang pelandok mati terhimpit, ibu pertiwi meraong menjerit minta selamatkan anak-anaknya.
(The elephants fought, trampling the deer in their path, the motherland laments and screams for the safety of its children.) (p 41)

Bangsa lemah jadilah ugamanya lemah. Bangsa yang rendah, ugamanya juga turut diperhina dan diperinghakan. Bebas dan merdeka bangsa dan watan baharulah betul merdeka ugama yang dianut oleh seseorang itu.
(When the race is weak, so are its beliefs. A weak race yields beliefs that will be scorned and insulted. It is only when a given race and its country is free that the beliefs which it holds to dearly are proven to be true.) (p 48)

A theory of colonialism

Having discussed the multitude of influences and methods which Burhanuddin employed in the service of his ideas, I will turn next to his theory of colonialism, which touches upon issues such as the causes and forms of European rule and its effects upon the Malay world. Yet, before doing so, it is important to clarify at the outset the concepts which Burhanuddin used to describe colonialism and his definition of the term.

Burhanuddin used the term ‘imperialis’, which is a Malay transliteration of the English word ‘imperialist’, to describe colonial rule. He attributes colonialism specifically to the European powers, here referring to the Portuguese, Dutch, English and Spanish. We know this for a fact because, while he mentioned the Indian and Chinese ‘empires (empayar)’ and described the Malay sultanates as ‘polities (kerajaan)’, he did not label them as imperialists. What further differentiated the European imperialists from others was the capitalist (kapitalis) and exploitative ends that drove their project of domination, the colonies (kolonis) they established and ruled from their imperial centres, and their wide-ranging impact upon local societies. This, according to Burhanuddin, was unprecedented in the history of man, for even if the Indians and the Chinese had once established empires, they had not exploited these subjugated regions on a scale as massive and devastating as had the Europeans. The symbiosis of capitalism and imperialism together with the attendant establishment of industries and markets through formal and informal means made European colonialism far more global in design and intent, far more extensive and obnoxious than any previous project.
of empire-building. We see here the influence of, or, otherwise, affinity with, the ideas of Vladimir Lenin in Burhanuddin’s theory of imperialism. According to Lenin:

Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun; in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed. 24

For Burhanuddin, the origins of colonialism in the Malay world began in the sixteenth century, after the fall of the Melakan sultanate to the Portuguese in 1511, and the situation remained unchanged until the second half of the twentieth century.25 In arguing as such, it is obvious here that Burhanuddin saw the dismantling of the first Muslim polity in the Malay Peninsula as symbolic of the decline of the Malay world as a whole.

Causes of colonialism

But what are the factors that brought about the ascendance of European colonialism in the Malay world? Burhanuddin outlined six key causes which are entwined with one another. The first was the treason of the political elites. Their acquiescence to the colonialist project provided the pretext for domination in many areas of native life. Burhanuddin directs his discursive attacks towards the Malay royalty in history who, in order to protect their personal interests, had sought the help and protection of the British to ensure that the trade and security of their country were kept safe from any threats. They signed unequal treaties with the imperialists which led to the culture of dependency upon a foreign power among the political elites. He also blamed political elites for instilling an unquestioning attitude towards their leadership and traditions. Kings were exalted to the point of worship. To question their authority and legitimacy was to commit treason, even in times of crisis and in instances when injustice was apparent.26

Then there was the backwardness of the religious class (ahli agama). Having internalized a fatalist conception of life, the bearers of religious faiths justified European colonialism by propagating the belief that the colonial phase in human history was part and parcel of nasi dan takdir (luck and fate). Such defeatist attitudes, which found wide acceptance among the common people, opened the doors to European interference in local affairs. 27 Disunity amongst the native peoples was the fourth cause of their slide into foreign domination. Civil wars and internal struggles weakened local societies and paved the way for the coming of foreigners into the country. Burhanuddin believed that this process began as early as the fall of the Melakan sultanate, an era which was seen by all Malays as the pinnacle of Malay civilization. The end of the Melakan sultanate signalled the fall of other sultanates at that time and thereafter.28 But these mere human causes
would not have spelled the end of freedom for the Malays had it not been for
the retribution from God.

*Maka dikutuk* Tuhan *bersur-ansur tebal menjatuhkan bangsa Melayu dengan
kesalahan dan kelekaan pembesar-pembesarnya sendiri.*
(Hence, the curse of God was cast upon the Malay race due to the faults and
negligence of the rulers.)

The last point deserves some further elaboration. Partha Chatterjee has
argued that many of the writings of nationalists and anti-colonial activists
share the same thematic concerns and premises as those of the colonialists,
even when the problematics are the exact opposite. While opposed to the rule
of difference imposed by the Europeans (the problematic), nationalists and
anti-colonial activists embrace the notion of progress towards reason and
modernity (the thematic) which underlines the colonial project. Some
exceptions to this general observation should be made with regard to
Burhanuddin. He was not only critical of European modernity and concep-
tions of history—he also constructed arguments to explain the causes of
colonial encroachment into indigenous life which transcend the logic of
Western reason. To him, God (*Allah*) occupies an important place in the
history of man. God’s role in the making and unmaking of civilizations is,
however, contingent upon the actions of man. He fulfils the desire of mankind
to be denigrated and abused. Colonialism is thus a consequence of the failure
of men to obey God’s commandment that human beings should free
themselves from tyranny and oppression and chart the course of their own
lives.

In sum, Burhanuddin posited that the causes of colonialism were to be
found *within* the colonized societies, in their failings and complacency. The
sustenance of colonialism, on the other hand, was to be attributed to the
connivance of the imperialists.

*Sustaining colonialism*

Burhanuddin held that the colonialists sustained their control over the Malay
world through several strategies. By deepening the divisions among the
political elites, the rulers and their subjects became part of the imperial chess
game (*percaturan politik koloni*) which later led to the total collapse of the
indigenous political system. The other related colonial strategy was to
regulate and monopolize trade in the colonized lands. This was done by
bringing Chinese, Indian, Persian and Arab merchants to the Malay world
with the sole aim of grabbing a lion’s share of the commerce in the region.
Europeans, in turn, came with the implicit motive of dominating Malay lands
through trade by trading companies such as the East India Companies. Coupled
with the mass migration of coolies and workers employed on rubber
plantations and in gold and tin mines in the service of the European masters,
the sheer numbers of these immigrants and their control of the economy
made colonialism an almost indispensable facet of indigenous life.
Perhaps more importantly, Burhanuddin attributed the sustenance of colonialism to the role of colonial ideology. The colonialists propounded the myth that Malays were uncivilized and were stifled by their innate negative traits. Malays were portrayed as lazy and mostly pirates and robbers. These ideas contributed to the historical amnesia that became lamentably commonplace in books and in the minds of Europeans and the Malays. It should be mentioned here that this aspect of Burhanuddin’s theory of colonialism is rather undeveloped in comparison to the writings of his predecessor, Jose Rizal, and, later on, Syed Hussein Alatas. Even so, one common ground which all these three thinkers shared was the great significance they attached to the relationship between the political economy of colonialism and the role of myths and ideologies in justifying European rule. The will to exploit the native economy and to interfere in political affairs gave rise to ideas of the indolence and backwardness of the natives—and vice versa.

The impact of colonialism

Finally, at the heart of Burhanuddin’s theory of colonialism is an attempt to delineate the extensive impact that European rule had upon the indigenous way of life. As a system of domination, colonialism is said to have ushered in a complete annihilation of indigenous civilizations (tamaddun). In the venture to introduce a new technology of governance, the colonialists uprooted the long-standing native systems of governance and replaced them with a system that was modelled upon that developed in Europe. Indigenous rulers became mere puppets who were ruled over directly and/or indirectly by European governors and advisers. The new bureaucracy also reconfigured the geobody of the Malay world. Artificial boundaries were constructed which led to the rise of local particularisms. These border restrictions minimized interactions between communities, kith and kin across state borders.

Colonialism brought inequalities in terms of wealth, ethnic background and class. Malays were confined to the rural areas, where they worked in the fields and were hobbled by poverty, while the members of the trading class, who were largely Indians, Arabs, Persians, Europeans and Chinese, lived luxurious lives. Only a few Malays gained from the country’s prosperity. Burhanuddin, of course, did not deny the problems inherent within the pre-colonial sultanate system. Inequality was an embedded feature of that system. But he argues in the same vein as Aimé Césaire who famously posited that ‘colonialist Europe has grafted modern abuse onto ancient injustice, hateful racism onto old inequality’. To put it in the words of Fanon whose position was in a number of ways analogous with that of Burhanuddin and Césaire:

Colonialism hardly ever exploits the whole of a country. It contented itself with bringing to light the natural resources, which it extracts to meet the needs of the mother-country’s industries, thereby allowing certain sectors of the colony to
become relatively rich. But the rest of the colony follows its path of under-
development and poverty, or at all events sinks into it more deeply.\footnote{38}

More crucially, for Burhanuddin, colonialism begets anti-colonialism re-
ponses. This paradox of colonialism occupies the last section of *Perjuangan Kita*. In his formulation, resistance to colonialism was rooted in the Malay mind and culture. He argues that:

\textit{rasa jiwa merdeka yang dipusakakan oleh datuk nenek bangsa Melayu kerana mempertahankan rasa jiwa kemerdekaan bangsa dan tanah air itu masih hidup turun temurun dalam jiwa raga bangsa Melayu.}

(the spirit of liberation that was handed down by the Malay predecessors to uphold the independence of the race and the land lived on from generation to generation in the hearts of the Malays.)\footnote{39}

Burhanuddin cites the Naning wars, the killing of Birch in Perak, and the resistance of Tok Bahaman in Pahang, Tok Janggut in Kelantan, and Haji Abdul Rahman in Trengganu as significant instances of unceasing violent responses to colonial rule. More than that, these incidents also suggest that \textit{amok} is an innate feature of the Malays and not other races. The phenomenon \textit{amok} has been commonly said to be a culture-bound syndrome that is specific to the Malay world. Someone who runs amok would usually kill several people and animals before being subdued and/or killed by others. While colonial writers and later scholars tend to attribute the causes of \textit{amok} to moral shock, anomie or psychological distress, for Burhanuddin, \textit{amok} is a creative energy that flows in the life and blood of every Malay, all of whom are naturally averse to foreign rule and exploitation. That is to say, \textit{amok} only became widespread upon the imposition of European rule in the Malay world. This postulation by Burhanuddin has now been confirmed by the careful research done by John Spores. According to Spores, there were more incidences of \textit{amok} during the colonial period than in the times that preceded it, due in part to the rapid social, political and economic changes that served to disrupt and threaten the native way of life.\footnote{40}

But traits and traditions cannot fully explain the rise of anti-colonialism. Burhanuddin notes other external factors that contributed to the development of a liberationist ideology. The rise of print capitalism in the form of newspapers, books and magazines contributed to a new consciousness among the Malays. Students who studied in global centres of learning such as Mecca, India and Egypt developed ideas of progress and civilization. The exploitation of peasants who gained no equal returns for their labour and the low incomes of the teaching class brought about disenchantment with colonial rule. All these factors provided the conditions for the birth of the spirit of politics that came in the form of talks, writings, clubs, organizations and congresses.\footnote{41} To Burhanuddin, World War II was a turning point in anti-colonialism because the Japanese destroyed the myth of white invisibility.\footnote{42} As he saw it, colonialism was nearing its end.
Conclusion

It is hard to deny that there are flaws and inadequacies in Burhanuddin’s theory of colonialism. This is due mainly to the nature of the evidence that he amassed to develop his arguments and the presuppositions he had about foreign powers presiding over his homeland. Burhanuddin saw nothing in colonialism that was worthy of praise. His theory of colonialism was thus one that deprecated all that came with the European colonialists. He scrutinized the non-Malay races, and local elites who were in cahoots with the colonizers to sustain colonialism were placed under the critical scrutiny of his pen. It was this unholy alliance that had destroyed what was once a flourishing Malay-Muslim civilization. Absent from Burhanuddin’s analysis was the fact that it was colonialism that brought the rise of a modern consciousness in the Malay world; a consciousness that he had turned on its head. He was unwilling to submit, as Maznah Mohamad has rightly observed, that his ideas were not ‘necessarily freed from the dominance, if not taint, of the Eurocentric-Enlightenment epistemic framing of histories, worldviews and prescriptives’.

For Burhanuddin, there was no room for empathetic understanding in the case of the colonial situation or to acknowledge the influence of European ideas upon his own thought and action. Colonialism was evil and the Europeans and local elites who supported the colonialist project were exploitative. There was nothing less than that to it.

And yet, the weaknesses surrounding Burhanuddin’s theory only go to show that more ink should be spent in the study of colonialism in the Malay world. No known work that scrutinizes Malay theories of colonialism has been published thus far and if this topic is left unaddressed, it will contribute to the continued dependence of local scholars upon ideas that emanate from Europe. A way out of this is to rethink our approaches to the ideas and writings of Malay intellectuals. We need to read, once again, texts that were written by Burhanuddin, Pramoedya, Jose Rizal, Ishak Haji Muhammad and others, beyond ascertaining facts to give more room for theorization and conceptualization. In order to elevate the theories of colonialism that emanate from Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia to the rank of those developed elsewhere in the world, there is a need to draw comparisons and mark contrasts between the arguments and propositions that are expressed by writers at both ends. Only then can ideals of ‘reversing the gaze to Europe’ and of ‘devising alternative perspectives, paradigms and approaches’ to put an end to Eurocentrism in the human sciences be fully realized. This article is a first step towards that goal.

Notes

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2 Exceptions to this are two excellent monographs by Zawiah Yahya and Anthony C Milner who examined Malay discourses pertaining to politics and colonial rule as well as the ways in which European writings on the Malays could be read in a more nuanced way and from a non-Eurocentric viewpoint. See Zawiah Yahya, Resisting Colonialist Discourse, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1994; and Anthony C Milner, The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.


5 The neglect of Southeast Asia in Postcolonial Studies has been discussed in great detail in an earlier issue of this journal. See Postcolonial Studies 11(3), 2008.


9 Kamaruddin Jaafar, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy: Pemikiran dan Perjuangan, Kuala Lumpur: Ikdas, 2000. All references to Burhanuddin’s ideas in this article have been taken from this book. Perjuangan Kita was published earlier in the Jawi script. I have cross-checked Kamaruddin’s transliterated edition with the original and found them to be similar. For the original edition, see Burhanuddin Muhammad Nor, Perjuangan Kita, 17 Oktober 1945–17 Oktober 1946, Singapura: Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya, 1946.


15 Kamaruddin, Dr. Barhanuddin Al Helmy, p 50.

16 Kamaruddin, Dr. Barhanuddin Al Helmy, p 48.


18 Kamaruddin, Dr. Barhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 31–47.

19 Kamaruddin, Dr. Barhanuddin Al Helmy, p 34.


23 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 34, 35, 37.
24 Vladimir I Lenin, ‘Letters from Afar’, in Slavoj Zizek (ed), Zizek on Lenin: The 1917 Writings, New York: Verso, 2002, p 49. Closer to the Malay world, Wan Zawawi Ibrahim depicts colonialism in a comparable way to Burhanuddin when he writes: ‘Similar to other colonial expansions, the extension of formal British political control into Malaysia (then Malaya or what is now Peninsular Malaysia/West Malaysia) in the 19th century was spurred by its need to consolidate the raw materials (initially tin, and later rubber), required for industrial capitalism at home. The state (i.e. the colonial state) at this time became purely an instrument of colonial capitalism.’ See Wan Zawawi Ibrahim, ‘Globalization and National Identity: Managing Ethnicity and Cultural Pluralism in Malaysia’, in Yoichiro Sato (ed), Growth and Governance in Asia, Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2004, p 120.

25 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 34, 35, 48.
26 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 34, 35.
27 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 38.
28 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 34, 35.
29 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 52.
30 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp 36–53.
31 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 36.
32 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 34.
33 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 37.
34 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 34.
36 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 37–38.
38 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, p 129.
39 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 35.
41 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, p 39.
42 Kamaruddin, Dr. Burhanuddin Al Helmy, pp 41–43.