



Imperialism and 'medieval' natives

The Malay image in Anglo-American travelogues and colonialism in Malaya and the Philippines

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ABSTRACT ● The location of Orientalist racial difference and Ornamental class familiarity in imperial discourse can be combined to understand the nuances of colonial representations. Revisiting the Malay image, I argue that the medievalist convention of portraying the native as situated in intermediate evolution between savagery and Western civilization was crucial for imperialism. The Malay image shifted from the representation of orientals exhibiting incommensurable difference in early European travelogues to civilizable medievals in early nineteenth-century British writings. British authors also vacillated between representing Malays as model and degenerate medievals with different racial and class symbolic valences. The vacillating representation influenced colonial state building in the late nineteenth century. I show this by looking at the travel writings of British and American colonial statesmen who supported contrastive colonial policies. ●

KEYWORDS ● colonial representation ● ethnographic discourse ● Filipino ● imperialism ● Malay ● medievalism ● Orientalism ● Ornamentalism ● travel writing

The Malay image between Orientalism and Ornamentalism

David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism* has reopened the question of the relationship between imperialism and cultural representations of colonized

peoples. Cannadine argues that the recognition of aristocratic likeness in the ruling classes of native societies was decisive for British imperial policy, that 'the British Empire was first and foremost a class act', taking precedence over 'collective racial othering' (2001: 10). Thus, Cannadine reasserts a tradition of sociological interpretation of colonial representations linking imperialism to modern state building and the martial worldview of the European ruling classes (Schumpeter, 1951; Robinson and Gallagher, 1968) that has been submerged in the literary emphases of colonial cultural studies. This article aims to bridge the opposing terms – difference versus familiarity, race versus class, text versus state – raised in Cannadine's challenge by studying representations of the 'Malay' in British and American travel writings of the nineteenth century. In fact, these oppositions have already been tackled in Alatas' (1977) analysis of how the racial construction of Malays as intractably lazy distorted local economic realities and justified the establishment of colonial plantation capitalism in the Malay Archipelago.

But Alatas' analysis does not exhaust the multiple dimensions defining colonial representations and their ideological effects. There are at least three reasons for revisiting the Malay image. One, despite the constant signification of indolence, epochal discursive shifts changing the racial meanings can be observed. Two, while racial meanings justified colonial class projects, interpretations of native class society also affected racial meanings. Three, these representations were formative of the colonial state and not just of colonial capitalism. While Alatas (1977: 17) asserts that the Malay image 'remained basically the same' during the long centuries despite the interruption of the 'second phase of colonial expansion' in the late nineteenth century, I argue exactly the opposite; that is, the Malay image shifted because of the second expansion. The late nineteenth century saw the great dislocation of local states as Western powers began expanding and consolidating their empire through colonial state formation. In the Philippines, Spain was building a modern colonial state when the Filipino nationalist revolution interrupted the process and American imperialism usurped it in 1898. In Malaya, increasing British colonial control over the Malay states culminated in the 1895 federation of four Malay states. I argue that the varied portrayal of Malays as 'savage' or 'oriental' by continental travelers shifted to the representation of Malays as 'medieval' in the early 1800s in pioneer British colonial writings, which was then further elaborated in the late 1800s in the travelogues of British and American colonial state builders.

The perception of class similarity did not preclude nineteenth-century writers from seeing the natives also as racially inferior. Both class and race determined colonial perception. Framed by the 'medieval' image, Malay society was seen as similar to metropolitan society but belonging to an anterior stage of socioeconomic development because of perceived Malay racial inferiority. Representations of the 'savage' and 'oriental' are well delineated in the academic literature (Said, 1978; Berkhofer, Jr, 1979; McGregor, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993; Liebersohn, 1998), but studies of the representations of the natives as