

THE IDEOLOGICAL FANTASY OF BRITISH MALAYA:
A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SWETTENHAM,
CLIFFORD AND BURGESS

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The nation, Benedict Anderson proposes in *Imagined Communities*, is a cultural artefact of popular imagination. It is a characteristically modern artefact that pictures a secular community in serial space and simultaneous time, replacing the existential certainties of Christendom with the infinite virtues of the Nation. In the revised edition of the book, Anderson (1991:163–185) also argues that Third World nationalisms were crafted according to the grammar of the imaginings of colonial states through the census, map and museum. Apply this to Malaysian nationalism and it tells us that the colonial state first imagined Malaysia as a multi-racial entity that is *essentially* Malay: British Malaya as a balance sheet of countable Malays, Chinese and Indians, as a picture of Malay sultanates joined in a fraternal federation, as a veritable storehouse of artefacts narrating the development of Malay “culture” (*adat*, royalty, Islam). It however does not tell us about the anxieties and pleasures attached to these racialized imaginings of Malay/sian nationalism, insofar as the emotions are linked to a society whose putative traditional “culture” was deliberately invented and preserved by the colonial rulers. If we do not want to explain the passions of Malay/sian nationalism as rising from some primordial racial wellspring, how do we account for them as culturally bound emotions open to deconstruction and transformation?

In this essay, I employ the Lacanian concept of fantasy, as transposed by Slavoj Žižek (1989:87–129) to the sociopolitical domain as *ideological fantasy*, to analyze the colonial basis for the racially emotive imagination of the Malay/sian nation. My main argument is that colonial state-builders did not merely import ready-made Western state forms and transplant them in foreign soils, and that they were as much influenced by their imaginings of the colony and its natives as they were by models and practices of modern government. Furthermore, these imaginings were not predetermined *in toto* by Orientalist discursive formations in the metropole. The imaginings were formative of the

imperial subjects who produced them in exigent situations. The British colonialists are properly called western-subjects-in-Malaya. They did not come to this part of the world with subjectivities fully formed and operative but became who they were in the close colonial encounters they experienced in Malaya.

To unpack this, it would be instructive to recall that, in Lacanian theory, it is a fundamental human condition that the subject is formed around an impossibility. This impossibility is the absolute disjuncture between the ego's symbolic system and the materially real. In the formation of a subject, the ego identifies first with its imaginary *other* to realize for the very first time that it is a complete entity separate from its material environment. This imaginary identification is subsequently overlaid by the ego's identification with the symbolic *Other*, which grants the ego a worldview that organizes its imaginary perceptions and makes them meaningful. The demand of the symbolic *Other* is performative. It generates the desire to act on the materially real but is silent on the end and the means, thereby revealing the gap between the symbolic and the material. The imaginary *other* appears as the object of desire in the subject's fantasy, which has two functions. While the fantasy guides the subject in the performance of the symbolic vis-à-vis the materially real, it also paradoxically produces the gap as traumatic so as to conceal it as such. With the "Malay" *other* as the object of desire, the ideological fantasy of British Malaya guides colonial state formation and produces the gap between the symbolic discourse of Civilization and the transnational material realities facing the colony as traumatically "Chinese" so as to conceal it as such.

To reach this conclusion, I read the stylized accounts of two British statesmen. Frank Swettenham took part in the violent extension of British influence over Perak, from 1874 to 1876, and subsequently became Resident of Selangor in 1882 and Perak in 1889, the inaugural Resident General of the Federated Malay States in 1896 and Governor in 1901. In *British Malaya* (Swettenham, 1948), a semi-autobiographical narrative on the formation of the federation, Swettenham provided a standard historical text cited by historians and colonial officials who sought to formulate policy that remained true to the original purpose of British rule. Although Swettenham published many short Malayan stories, he did not attain the literary acclaim received by Hugh Clifford. From 1887 to 1888, Clifford was instrumental in bringing Pahang under British "protection", and a few years later, in putting down a major revolt there that catalyzed the federation. He was Resident of Pahang