



Eurocentrism and British Colonialism: Colonial Discourses on Malay Sociopolitics in 19th-Century Perak

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Abstract. This article examines the role of Eurocentric thought in shaping colonial representations of Malay sociopolitical culture in Perak during the formative period of British imperialism, particularly following the Pangkor Treaty of 1874. It argues that colonial discourse was structured by Eurocentric epistemologies that reconfigured indigenous images to legitimise imperial ideology. Adopting a qualitative method, the study analyses personal writings and official reports produced by British administrators who directly engaged with Perak in the late 19th-century. Figures such as Harry Ord, Andrew Clarke, John F. McNair, Frank Swettenham, William G. Maxwell and Hugh Clifford generated narratives that portrayed Malay society through colonial lenses. A close reading reveals how administrators strategically emphasised perceived backwardness, inefficiency and corruption in Malay political culture as rhetorical devices to rationalise imperial expansion. This construction advanced Britain's dual claim: the extraction of local resources alongside a civilising mission that promised order, progress and humanitarian values. By renarrating local practices, inventing myths of sociopolitical deficiency and embedding Eurocentric frameworks, British officials manufactured a moral justification for exploitative governance. The study contributes to postcolonial historiography by highlighting how discourse, power and knowledge intersected in consolidating imperial control in Perak.

Keywords and phrases: Eurocentrism, colonial discourse, Malays, Perak, British imperialism

Introduction

This study critically interrogates the influence of Eurocentric thought on the colonial construction of Malay sociopolitical culture, with a particular focus on Perak in the 19th-century. As the first Malay state subjected to direct British intervention through the Pangkor Treaty of 1874 and the Residential System (Emerson 1937), Perak offers a significant case study. Unlike the Straits Settlements—Singapore, Melaka and Pulau Pinang—which served primarily as colonial entrepôts, Perak embodied an autonomous polity that became the focal point of early imperial engagement. Consequently, British writings on Perak reflected a shift from purely commercial or administrative concerns to more systematic efforts to define and govern indigenous society.

This encounter provided fertile ground for the colonial production of knowledge about the Malays. Drawing on Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism, this study argues that British officials constructed the Malays as feudal, stagnant and incapable of self-governance, framing them within Eurocentric notions of progress and rationality. These representations were not neutral observations, but discursive strategies that legitimised colonial rule by reconfiguring local institutions through European historical categories (Chakrabarty 2000, 3–6). In doing so, British administrators stripped indigenous sociopolitical systems of autonomous historical agency, rendering them intelligible only through colonial epistemologies.

The Pangkor Treaty marked a decisive transition in British involvement in the Peninsula, setting a precedent for indirect rule elsewhere. British officials extrapolated their experiences in Perak to define broader narratives about Malay sociopolitical decline, linking it to feudal disorder and cultural inertia (CO 273/76 1874). Personal memoirs and administrative reports produced by figures like Andrew Clarke, Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford offered seemingly objective assessments that, in reality, functioned as rhetorical justifications for imperial control. These writings imposed a homogenised view of Malay society, shaping colonial policies and public perceptions while reinforcing imperial authority through claims of cultural and political superiority.

Despite the availability of extensive colonial records, little sustained attention has been given to the epistemological frameworks underpinning them. Much of the scholarship continues to treat British depictions of Malay society as historically reliable, without fully interrogating how Eurocentric assumptions shaped these narratives. This article addresses this gap by reexamining the discursive strategies employed by British officials to construct Perak's sociopolitical landscape as one requiring imperial intervention. It argues for

a renewed historiographical approach that treats colonial sources not as transparent repositories of fact, but as ideological artefacts shaped by the imperatives of empire.

Eurocentrism as Epistemology

Early historiographical critiques tended to define Eurocentrism narrowly, treating it as a literary bias that privileged European colonial narratives over indigenous voices. However, subsequent scholarship has exposed Eurocentrism as a deeply embedded epistemological framework that extends beyond representational preferences to structure how knowledge itself is produced, legitimised and disseminated. As Blaut (1993, 1) argues, Eurocentrism constitutes a systematic prejudice that constructs Europe as the central axis of civilisation and historical progress, asserting European exceptionalism on racial, cultural, environmental and intellectual grounds. This epistemological bias permeated colonial discourse and shaped European understandings of non-European societies, particularly in Southeast Asia. Eurocentrism positioned Europe as the locus of innovation and rationality, while casting indigenous societies such as the Malays as passive, stagnant and derivative. Through this binary, non-Europe functioned as the “outside” whose only possible advancement was by emulating Europe (Blaut 1993, 1). The cultural, material and political differences of non-European societies were rendered inferior by comparison, interpreted through paradigms that upheld European superiority and denied the possibility of autonomous historical agency.

European claims of superiority over non-European societies were long justified through a range of purported criteria, including military prowess, material progress, cultural sophistication and even assumptions about the physical qualities of different peoples. In practice, British colonialism reinforced this hierarchy by highlighting its modern military forces, presenting railways and plantation economies as evidence of economic advancement, promoting English law and education as markers of cultural refinement and deploying racial stereotypes to portray colonised populations as physically and intellectually inferior. Environmental determinism also played a role, with Europe’s unique climate and geography often invoked as factors producing qualitative differences between European and non-European societies. For some scholars, these distinctions were further reinforced by the claim that non-European societies lacked the defining markers of European historical development such as feudalism, the bourgeoisie, capitalism, revolution and democracy (Melotti 1977). Within this framework, civilisational value was assessed according to proximity to a Eurocentric model of progress: the greater the distance from

Europe, the lower the level of civilisation and the more “primitive” the social and political practices of a given society were presumed to be (Quijano and Ennis 2000).

Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* illuminated the discursive production of these binaries, showing how the West constructed itself in contrast to a despotic, irrational and inferior Orient. These essentialised differences were not merely descriptive but ideological, stabilising European superiority by manufacturing the other. Said’s (1978, 7) insights expose how Eurocentrism naturalised hierarchy, cloaking imperial domination in narratives of rationality, normalcy and moral obligation. Amin (1989) elaborates that Eurocentrism is not an analytical framework grounded in historical complexity, but rather an ideological constellation of prejudices presented as scientific truths. It selectively draws on and distorts existing social theories to perpetuate the myth of Europe’s independent and exceptional progress. In tandem, Blaut (1993) argues that Eurocentrism operates at the intersection of partial truths and exaggerated claims: while Europe achieved material advancements, colonial discourse magnified these achievements by contrasting them with caricatures of non-European stagnation (Blaut 1993, 4). Such depictions were not innocent misrepresentations, but strategic constructions designed to legitimise Europe’s civilisational authority.

Amin (1989, vii–viii) further notes that Europe’s so-called independent development was heavily reliant on intercivilisational exchange, particularly with the Islamic world and Asia. Nevertheless, Eurocentric narratives routinely suppress this interdependence, reinforcing two central ideas: first, that Europe is the sole originator of historical progress and second, that non-European societies can only progress by internalising European values and institutions. Within this worldview, concepts such as capitalism, democracy, freedom and human rights are treated as European inventions, obscuring the diverse philosophical traditions and political innovations of non-European societies. This conception of historical progress as a unilinear path, with Europe at the forefront, was reinforced by 19th-century theories of social evolution. Blaut (1993) critiques the “historical tunnel” metaphor in which Europe leads and all others follow through predefined developmental stages. This model underpinned colonial ideologies that equated colonisation with modernisation. Colonialism was thus reframed not as dispossession, but as the historical rupture necessary for indigenous societies to enter into capitalism and modernity.

Eurocentrism consequently operated as both a justificatory ideology and a civilisational mandate. By constructing indigenous societies as feudal, despotic and culturally inferior, colonial powers framed imperial conquest as a moral obligation. In British Malaya, colonial officials and intellectuals systematically

juxtaposed European political rationality with the alleged irrationality of Malay customs. This comparative logic continues to inform historical interpretations today, as colonial-era texts, often presented as empirical and objective, serve as foundational sources in Malaysian historiography. Azmi (2007) argues that such texts entrenched Eurocentric categories that privilege European models of governance, law and economic development, while depicting Malay systems as stagnant or retrograde. British narratives in Malaya portrayed Malays as incapable of self-rule, necessitating British intervention not only for administrative purposes but as a civilising mission (McNair 1878/1972; Kratoska 1983). This narrative rationalised resource extraction and political domination by cloaking exploitation in humanitarian language. Swettenham's (1906) writings epitomise this logic, framing colonialism as a redemptive force bringing "progress" and "morality" to native societies. His paternalistic vision reflected a broader Eurocentric ideology that blurred the line between domination and benevolence. As Blaut (1993, 2) observes, imperialism was ideologically cast not as destruction but as the diffusion of European modernity. The consequence of this discursive construction was not only the subjugation of colonised peoples but also the enduring marginalisation of their historical agency and intellectual contributions.

As noted by Qasim (2000) and Bottoms (1965), this legacy persists in contemporary historiography, which remains heavily reliant on Western conceptual categories and frameworks. Bastin (1959, 13) similarly critiques the uncritical adoption of European constructs such as feudalism and despotism into the analysis of Southeast Asian polities. Even when written by Asian scholars, such works often reproduce Eurocentric assumptions, reflecting a deep-seated methodological dependence. While postcolonial critiques of Eurocentrism began in the mid-20th century, the epistemological underpinnings of colonial historiography remain insufficiently interrogated. Scholars such as Syed Hussein Alatas (1972a; 1972b; 1977), Zainal (1992), Azmi (2007; 2012a) and Syed Farid Alatas (2001) have criticised the reproduction of colonial categories, arguing for the need to decolonise historical thought. However, as Alatas (2001) emphasises, most efforts have remained surface-level, failing to challenge the structural dominance of Western epistemologies in the Malaysian academy. Alatas (2001, 51) identifies four key symptoms of this intellectual dependence: the prioritisation of Western ideas and methods, the lack of original theory-building, the marginalisation of indigenous intellectual traditions and the persistence of intellectual imperialism. These issues point to a broader structural problem in Southeast Asian social science, where decolonisation is advocated but rarely realised at the epistemological level. Although critiques of Eurocentrism have gained momentum, serious questions

remain: “What constitutes Eurocentric knowledge?”, “How are its assumptions embedded in historical narratives?” and “How do these narratives continue to shape perceptions of Malay political and cultural development?”. Despite growing calls for alternative historiographies, many critiques paradoxically rely on European theoretical tools, thereby reinforcing the very structures they seek to dismantle. This paradox highlights the need for a more rigorous analysis of how colonial discourse functions, not just as historical narrative but as an enduring system of knowledge production.

Eurocentrism is not merely a residue of colonial ideology but a persistent epistemological structure that continues to shape historiographical methods, narrative priorities and interpretive frameworks in Malaysian historical writing. Its critique requires more than thematic revision; it demands a fundamental rethinking of how history is conceptualised, sourced and narrated. The project of decolonising Malay historiography must thus confront not only the colonial archive but also the epistemic assumptions that underlie it, an undertaking that remains urgent, contested and incomplete.

Myths of Despotism and Feudalism

The expansion of British colonialism in the Malay Peninsula played a formative role in institutionalising Eurocentric thought, marked by the systematic denigration of indigenous societies and the glorification of European civilisation. This ideological framework, prevalent across British imperial discourse, was rooted in the belief that European civilisation represented the sole model of true progress, “the obstinacy with which so many representatives of so-called ‘European’ or ‘Western’ civilisation regard the latter, their own as the only true civilisation” (Weller 2017, 36). A key early proponent of this view was Frank Swettenham, whose interventions in the Malaya exemplify the colonial conflation of conquest with moral obligation. According to Swettenham (1942, 103):

Without British help there had been no progress, no development of rich resources, no order, no safety for life or property; only fighting, oppression, poverty and debts contracted on behalf of the State by those who claimed authority to incur them without thought of how they were to be repaid. With the coming of British Residents and the steps taken under their instructions by those they brought in from outside the States to help them, the revenues increased so fast that, in a few years, all public debts were paid and there were available ample means to carry out even ambitious schemes of public works, all of which contributed – directly or indirectly – to an ever-growing

revenue which not only paid for roads, railways, postal and telegraph services, water works, irrigation, hospitals and public works generally, but produced enough to add considerably to the modest allowances allotted to the Rulers, the Chiefs and to all Malay officers helping in the new methods of administration. Those facts convinced Malay Rulers, their Chiefs and their people, that they had been right in supporting the new order and the men who designed and fashioned it.

Swettenham (1942) envisioned British rule as a civilising mission, legitimising imperial expansion by framing indigenous systems and social as despotic and in need of reform through European governance. Such a perception illustrates how colonial administrators framed domination as benevolence, a narrative that simultaneously obscured the violence of imperial expansion while reinforcing the myth of European superiority (Alatas 1972a, 23). In this sense, British interventions in the Malay world exemplify the early discursive formation of Eurocentrism, one in which the rhetoric of civilisation, order and progress was deployed to legitimise imperial control and reconfigure indigenous societies according to European epistemologies.

Colonial discourse also advanced the notion that genuine progress and prosperity for the Malays could only be achieved under European domination, particularly that of the British, who were portrayed as racially and culturally superior. The Malays were routinely described in derogatory terms, “half-civilised” or “barbaric” and depicted as ignorant, weak and resistant to change. Clarke, for instance, asserted that:

The Malays, like every other rude Eastern nation, require to be treated much more like children and to be taught and this especially in all matters of improvement, whether in the question of good government and organization or of material improvement by opening means of communications, extending cultivation and fostering immigration and trade. (Parliamentary Papers C.1111 1874, 110)

Such views reflected a Eurocentric logic in which colonialism was construed as both a burden and a moral duty: to “civilise” the Malays by dismantling their so-called feudal and oppressive sociopolitical practices. In reality, this rhetoric functioned to legitimise British domination, framing subjugation as a prerequisite for progress and conflating Europeanisation, Westernisation and democratisation with civilisation itself.

From the 1870s onwards, the rationale for British intervention in the Malay Peninsula became increasingly pronounced. In 1874, what contemporaries described as “a forward movement” marked the beginning of a decisive phase

in Britain's expansionist policy. After nearly a century of commercial activity centred in Singapore and Pulau Pinang, the growing demand for raw materials and the opportunities for exploiting the economic wealth of the Malay states necessitated a shift from mercantile engagement to direct political control. The Pangkor Treaty of 1874 represented the first major step in this process of territorial consolidation. By installing a British Resident in Perak, the treaty institutionalised indirect colonial governance and created a precedent that would be replicated across other Malay states. Following his mission, Governor Andrew Clarke addressed the Legislative Council of the Straits Settlements in Singapore, where he articulated a more assertive imperial strategy. Clarke explicitly advocated the incorporation of the autonomous, Muslim-ruled states of the Peninsula under British indirect rule, framing the intervention in Perak as a model for wider application. This policy shift signalled not merely an expansion of influence but the systematic reorganisation of indigenous polities into the orbit of British imperial authority. It also reflected the fusion of economic interests with ideological claims of colonial tutelage, whereby the rhetoric of order, progress and civilisation was deployed to legitimise the subordination of Malay rulers and the restructuring of their political institutions. According to Clarke:

This is really a great and imperial question to think out and consider ... standing as we do here on the grave of ancient Empires, let it be now our mission, gentlemen, to gather together their scattered fragments and form them into the cradle of a new and fair dominion, federated in justice and morality. (CO 273/76 1874)

Although this study does not seek to provide a comprehensive reconstruction of the entire colonial process, it foregrounds the ways in which the British fashioned narratives of the indigenous sociopolitical order. These narratives were consistently informed by disparaging assessments of local institutions and practices, which in turn functioned to legitimise Britain's intervention and continued presence in the region.

The Eurocentric discourse depicted the Malay politics as naturally predisposed to political disorder, incapable of self-rule and in need of European tutelage. A similar sentiment was echoed by Maxwell who claimed that the Malays had:

[N]ever possessed "self-government". The rule of the rajas and the chiefs was one of the most absolute and cynical autocracies that the mind of man has ever conceived; and the people living under it were mercilessly exploited and possessed no rights either of person or property. (Kratoska 1983, 161)

Maxwell further concluded that:

[T]he system of government in the various state is despotic. The rulers—whether sultans, rajahs or what not—have occasionally to fight for their authority ... there was no attempt at a proper administration of justice, simply the strong and wealthy dominated and oppressed the poor and the weak. (Kratoska 1983, 161)

Such pronouncements exemplify the Eurocentric tendency to portray Malay. By framing Malay governance as absolute tyranny and Malay society as inherently lawless, British administrators sought to underscore the alleged necessity of colonial rule as a civilising force.

The Eurocentric mode of representation is particularly evident in reports produced by British officials on Perak. As the first Malay state to undergo formal British intervention and one endowed with considerable economic resources, Perak became a focal point of colonial attention. Unsurprisingly, British accounts of the state frequently reflected the administrators' preoccupation with resource extraction and the consolidation of imperial authority. At the same time, these writings projected broader claims about Malay civilisation as a whole. The colonial construction of Perak's history was framed not merely as an account of a single polity, but as a lens through which the entire socio-political character of the Malays could be interpreted. During the early stages of intervention, British administrators generated a substantial body of notes and reports detailing the Malay political system, the conduct of chiefs and the resistance they encountered. The entire Malay Peninsula, according to Harry Ord, was characterised as a land of "the lawless and the turbulent" (Wilkinson 1920, 118). Echoing this sentiment, Governor Andrew Clarke asserted:

My experience as an Executive and Judicial Officer for the last twenty-seven years among an Eastern people has taught me that they are perfectly incapable of good government or even of maintaining order, without guidance or assistance from some stronger hand than is ever to be found amongst themselves. (CO 882/2 1874)

In this discursive framework, the Malay sultanate, aristocracy, systems of governance and customary practices were consistently represented as manifestations of "Asiatic despotism", absolutism, lawlessness and misrule.

Colonial writings also reveal a deeply entrenched belief that the Malays were inherently treacherous and predisposed to piracy, reinforcing their depiction as a people unfit for trust or civilised engagement. As one account bluntly

observed, the Malays were considered “treacherous by nature and pirates by trade”, inhabiting a land where “there were no special inducements for a white man to trust himself in such a barbarous country” (Swettenham 1907, 7–8). Such portrayals constructed Malays as a dangerous racial category, one that required firm surveillance, regulation and ultimately, British political intervention. In this way, racial stereotyping became a tool of governance, legitimising imperial expansion by framing the colonised population as morally and culturally incapable of self-rule.

The colonial construction of Malay sociopolitical culture was further reinforced through the association of Asiatic-Oriental despotism with indigenous practices of slavery. British administrators and explorers frequently depicted Malay systems of *corvée* labour and debt bondage as emblematic of a vicious, cruel and irrational social order. These portrayals emphasised what they regarded as an “idiotic” and “unjust” system of governance, in which commoners were allegedly ruled at whim by despotic chiefs. By linking Malay social practices to what they termed “Oriental slavery”, British officials drew comparisons with both the despotic traditions of Asia and the archaic, inhumane forms of bondage associated with Europe’s own distant past. Such representations not only erased the cultural specificity of Malay institutions but also functioned ideologically: they provided a moral vocabulary through which British intervention could be justified as a humanitarian mission aimed at eradicating cruelty and delivering civilisation. In these accounts, Malay customs were subsumed into a broader Orientalist discourse that equated all top-down sociopolitical practices in the Malay world with slavery and oppression. As Captain Speedy remarked, the debt-slave custom was “the oriental custom”. His report elaborated:

One terribly unjust and cruel custom, which from the earliest times has existed and I regret extremely to say still exists throughout Perak and Larut, may be given as an instance of the imperfection of Malay rule. It is that called “ber-utang” (sic) or slave debtor. (Parliamentary Papers C.1320 1875, 76; 84)

Such depictions were motivated less by empirical accuracy than by the desire to construct an image of corrupted natives whose practices required external reform.

British colonial narratives frequently attributed Malay socioeconomic stagnation to alleged cultural “laziness”, a discourse McNair (1878/1972, 293–294) and Swettenham (1906/1955, 137) advanced by depicting indigenous systems as predatory structures that deprived peasants of surplus and discouraged

productive labour. This trope was reinforced through strategic comparisons that elevated the industriousness of Chinese labourers and British administrative efficiency while pathologising Malay society as inherently indolent (Parliamentary Papers C.1320 1875, 78–81). However, scholars such as Alatas (1977) argue that this construct formed part of a broader ideological project, “the myth of the lazy native”, where Malay resistance to coercive and exploitative labour systems was reinterpreted as moral and racial deficiency. Similarly, Azmi (2012a) contends that this colonial perception stemmed from the British impulse to disparage locals who refused to labour under their exploitative system especially when compared to Chinese labourers, whom Alatas noted as the British *ulet* (underlings). In truth, the so-called “laziness” of the Malays represented a form of resistance to subjugation, rather than evidence of cultural or racial inferiority.

The prejudices of British administrators in the Malay Peninsula were deeply rooted in Eurocentric self-pride, so entrenched that they became indistinguishable from racial superiority. As McIntyre (1967, 71–72) observed, the very context in which colonial reports were produced reflected the ideological imperatives of empire, embedding notions of European supremacy within representations of the Malays. Non-European polities, including the Malay states, were routinely characterised as lawless, uncivilised and barbarous, often on the basis of assumptions or manipulated evidence designed to legitimise intervention. Such views reveal a discursive pattern in which the Malays were demeaned while Europeans were exalted. A British officer in Singapore, for instance, asserted that “the innate superiority of the ordinary Englishman in his sense of honour and justice, is sufficient to dominate the inferior character of the Malay”. Similarly, Clifford (1897/1927) contrasted himself as a European “the white man, belonging to one of the civilised races in the Old World” with the Malays, whom he deemed civilised only “after the fashion of unchanging Asia”, in stark contrast to what he called the “restless progressive civilisation of the West” (Azmi 2012b, 50–51). These statements encapsulate the fusion of Eurocentrism and racism that underpinned colonial discourse, whereby European identity was universalised as the standard of civilisation, while Malay society was relegated to the realm of inferiority.

Following the intervention of 1874, colonial discourse increasingly employed the image of “Malay feudalism”, aligning it with the European historical experience of medievalism. According to Clifford (1897/1927, 3):

Until the British Government interfered in the administration of the Malay States in 1874, the people of the Peninsula were, to all intents and purposes, living in the Middle Ages. Each State was ruled by its own Sultan or Raja under a complete Feudal System, which presents a curiously close parallel to that which was in force in Medieval Europe.

Within this Eurocentric framework, Malay society was inserted into a “tunnel of progress”, whereby feudal backwardness was cast as a necessary stage preceding civilisation, thus implying that advancement could only be achieved through colonisation and Europeanisation (Goh 2007). In this vein, British administrators frequently described Perak’s political and social structures by recasting indigenous practices through European analogies such as vassalage, serfdom, corvée labour and the manorial system. Crucially, this so-called “Malay feudalism” was defined in highly negative terms: it was equated with oppression, internecine conflict, disunity and endemic civil war. Such portrayals functioned ideologically, for they constructed a narrative of suffering under indigenous rule that positioned British law and administration as a humane and necessary corrective. Clifford (1898/1927) echoed this logic, arguing that feudalism was not only universal but a necessary evolutionary stage for all civilised states. However, Clifford (1898/1927) claimed that the Malays had merely replicated the early European model and then stagnated:

The feudal system, in some form or another, would appear to be one of the inevitable phrases through which the government of every civilised country must pass in the process of its evolution from more primitive beginnings to methods of administration based on upon wider, nobler conceptions of the duty of the State to those whom it rules yet serves; and an examination of the modern history of the Malayan States of which I am speaking, shows us with great distinctness that the Malays, in common with other more civilised folk, had worked out for themselves unaided a theory of government on feudal lines which bears a startling resemblance to the European models of a long-passed epoch. But here they had halted. To live in independent Malaya is to live in the Europe of the thirteenth century. (Kratoska 1983, 224; 1989, 123)

This projection did not merely constitute a comparative framework but functioned as a discursive strategy to deny Malay political culture any autonomous modernity. The assertion that to live in Malaya was “to live in the Europe of the 13th century” exemplifies the colonial tendency to locate the Malays in an arrested stage of development, thereby legitimising British intervention as the necessary vehicle to propel them into modernity. Eurocentric thought was also manifested prominently in the British conception of progress, which was grounded in European historical experience and values.

From Colonial Discourse to Postcolonial Historiography

The impact of Eurocentric thought on the study of Malay history has been profound. Historiography on the 19th-century Malay states remains overwhelmingly shaped by Eurocentric frameworks. This is most apparent in the persistent reliance on colonial reports, which continue to serve as primary references in historical discourse. The uncritical use of these sources has facilitated the reproduction of negative images of the Malays constructed by British officials. As a result, imperial intervention is too often interpreted not as an act of domination, but as a civilising and progressive enterprise. Such a perspective obscures the exploitative character of colonialism while reinforcing the narrative of indigenous political and social backwardness prior to British rule. Consequently, colonialism has frequently been remembered as a “saviour” of the Malays, while critiques by local historians and social scientists are directed more harshly at indigenous systems than at the violence and structural inequalities of imperial domination itself.

The influence of Eurocentric thought has also reinforced a dichotomous framework in the historiography of the Malay states, whereby history is commonly divided into a “before” and “after” of colonialism. This division, either explicit or implicit, remains a pervasive feature of Malaysian historical writing. The pre-colonial era is typically cast in negative terms, characterised by political underdevelopment, absence of law and order, social decline, cultural backwardness and oppressive rule by despotic monarchs. Indigenous practices such as slavery, religious conservatism and feudal exploitation are frequently emphasised as markers of regression and stagnation. Within this framework, Malays are portrayed as resistant to reform and incapable of progress until the arrival of the British, who are credited with introducing modernisation and order. Such dichotomous narratives not only obscure the complexities of pre-colonial Malay society but also perpetuate the colonial myth that European intervention was the decisive catalyst for indigenous advancement.

In contrast, the post-colonial period is frequently portrayed as the beginning of progress and democracy, even when material conditions for the natives did not necessarily reflect prosperity. Within colonial records, this period was constructed as the antithesis of pre-colonial “backwardness”. Clifford, for example, celebrated British rule in the Malay states as the eradication of tyranny and the dawn of civilisation, claiming it “has brought peace, happiness and prosperity to those to whom these things were formerly strangers; and has given to the Malays a new life – a life which for the first time in their history is a thing worth the living” (as cited in Kratoska 1983, 248). Such representations not only sanctified colonialism as a civilising mission but also embedded

the Eurocentric belief that true progress could only begin under European tutelage. These colonial representations were subsequently absorbed into local historiography and continue to shape assertions about the Malays in the 19th-century. Influential scholars such as Syed Hussein Alatas, Chandra Muzaffar, Syed Husin Ali and Shaharuddin Maaruf (Azmi 2012a, 24) have argued that the Malays, prior to British intervention, were constrained by a “psychological feudalism” that impeded development and democratisation. Cheah (1994) similarly contends that the decline of the Malay states was primarily the result of entrenched feudal practices, which weakened and divided the polity until British intervention “rescued” and unified it. Such interpretations, however, reveal the enduring legacy of Eurocentric categories particularly the colonial construction of “Malay feudalism” that continue to frame indigenous history through lenses derived from Western historiography.

The persistence of Eurocentrism is evident in the continued use of dichotomous categories such as “civilised” and “barbaric”, which obscure the violent legacies of European colonialism and the destructive dimensions of Western “civilisation” in the non-European world (Gordon 2017, 150). The widespread belief that the Europeanisation and Westernisation of the Malays represented progress reflects the enduring impact of Eurocentric historiography. Many scholars have interpreted the introduction of modern administration, laws, institutions and infrastructure during the British era as evidence of indigenous modernisation. Yet, in practice, these reforms primarily served colonial interests rather than the well-being of the natives. The myth of Europeanisation thus functioned to legitimise exploitation by reframing domination and enslavement as benevolent progress. This discursive strategy was reinforced through the simultaneous demonisation of indigenous culture and glorification of colonial authority. The construction of such historical concepts particularly the Eurocentric periodisation of Malay history remains one of the most pervasive legacies of colonial historiography. Contemporary narratives of the nineteenth-century Malays continue to rely heavily on colonial sources, conceptual frameworks and interpretive lenses that privilege European perspectives over indigenous experiences. Such narratives underscore how Eurocentrism functioned both as a justification of colonial violence and as a means of naturalising racial hierarchy in the global order.

Heavy reliance on Eurocentric colonial historiography has generated considerable misconceptions about the political and social character of nineteenth-century Malay society. Lacking deep knowledge of indigenous practices and shaped by colonial ideology, British administrators often resorted to speculation and prejudice. Their reports habitually characterised Malay society as indolent, feudal and despotic. The claims that were rarely grounded

in robust evidence or systematic research. Assertions that nineteenth-century Malay political life was dominated by oppression, disunity and civil war, allegedly mirroring the feudal period of Western Europe, are difficult to substantiate (Azmi 2012b, 60). As Sullivan (1982, xvi) demonstrates in his study of Perak, colonial claims of cruelty and exploitation collapse under scrutiny: no convincing evidence exists of systemic oppression and the persistence of stable Malay settlements along the Perak River indicates continuity rather than widespread displacement. Such findings underscore how colonial narratives were less reflections of reality than ideological constructs designed to justify intervention.

Contrary to colonial portrayals of 19th-century as an era of decline and anarchy, evidence suggests that many Malay states particularly those free from direct British interference, experienced relative stability. Claims of endemic civil war, political decay and feudal oppression, reiterated by both colonial administrators and later scholars such as Cheah, collapse under closer scrutiny. Rigorous studies indicate that political unrest in Perak and other tin-producing states stemmed less from internal dissension than from disruptions caused by British imperialism and rival colonial interventions (Azmi 2012b). Indeed, the negative depictions of Malay sociopolitical life that populate colonial records: violence, despotism, disunity and decline, are better understood as ideological constructions. These myths, exaggerated and strategically deployed, functioned to reinforce Eurocentric assumptions of indigenous inferiority and to legitimise the colonial project in the Malay Peninsula.

Conclusion

Overall, the sociopolitical practices and culture of the 19th-century Malays have been widely misconstrued due to the pervasive influence of Eurocentric thought and colonial ideology. Shaped by prejudicial colonial records, indigenous history was framed in overwhelmingly negative terms. The heavy reliance of local scholars on these colonial sources and imported European concepts has further entrenched Eurocentrism within the historiography of the Malays. What emerged as the central framework for constructing myths of “decadence” and “evil” in the indigenous political order was not grounded in rigorous empirical inquiry, but in racialised prejudice. British colonial accounts consistently portrayed Malay governance as despotic and oppressive, society as politically fragmented and the states as economically stagnant. Such depictions were mediated through Eurocentric categories that denigrated native values while elevating European norms as universal markers of progress. By reconstructing indigenous narratives through this distorted

lens, colonial writers not only disparaged Malay civilisation but also legitimised imperial intervention and the broader project of British colonisation in the peninsula.

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