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Decolonising the Museum Narrative: A Critical Analysis of Exhibition Texts in the Perak Museum and Borneo Cultures Museum

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Abstract

Museum decolonisation is a vital process for dismantling colonial legacies embedded within institutional narratives and representations. However, a significant research gap exists regarding the linguistic construction of exhibition texts as specific sites of decolonial practice within Malaysian museum studies. This study critically examines exhibition texts at the Perak Museum and the Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM). The methodology employs a theoretical framework integrating the concepts of 'epistemic arrest', linguistic decolonisation, and indigenous storytelling. Findings reveal that the Perak Museum retains an enduring colonial gaze, presenting local history as fragmented and ahistorical. While the BCM demonstrates progress in representing indigenous cosmologies, its historical narrative paradoxically reinforces colonial perspectives by sidelining Malay-Islamic history and using biased terminology that criminalises anti-colonial resistance. These results imply an urgent necessity to shift decolonisation efforts toward reformulating exhibition language. By addressing these linguistic frameworks, museums can move beyond 'inherited memories' to restore suppressed accounts of sovereignty and affirm indigenous civilisations.

Keywords: museum decolonisation, colonial gaze, exhibition text, museums in Malaysia

Introduction

The modern museum, as a concept and an institution, is inextricably linked to the history of European colonialism. Born from the imperial impulse to collect, classify, and display the world, these institutions often served as instruments of colonial power, normalising the subjugation of foreign lands and peoples by framing their cultures as primitive, their histories as non-existent, and their artefacts as specimens of a bygone era. In postcolonial societies, the challenge for museums is profound: how to deconstruct and re-narrate a history that was largely written by the coloniser. This paper argues that this challenge is a central and ongoing struggle for museums in present-day Malaysia, particularly for the Perak Museum and the Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM), which inherited distinct colonial legacies.

The role of museums within colonial projects has been intricately linked to the construction of the 'Other,'[1] a process to portray the West as modern, rational and inherently superior, while casting the "Orient Other," initially denoting Arab and North African regions adjacent to Europe, later extended across Asia as exotic, static, and irrational. Far from

reflecting reality, this dichotomy functioned as a tool of cultural hegemony, reinforcing colonial power by naturalising difference and hierarchy (Said 1978). Museums became essential instruments in this colonial discourse, serving as physical and epistemological spaces where the art of Othering was practiced through exhibition texts, object displays and narrative framing. This process was manifest in how indigenous material culture was exhibited and interpreted, often stripped from its living cultural contexts and re-presented as relics of a static, distant past. Exhibits tended to emphasise the 'primitive' or 'timeless' nature of colonised peoples through labelling and display strategies that denied their contemporaneity, thus reinforcing ideas of European modernity and civilisation as normative benchmarks.[2] Objects in colonial museums were relegated to curiosities or ethnographic specimens, depicted as examples of a culture frozen in time rather than dynamic, evolving societies. The museum display thus actively participated in silencing indigenous voices and perpetuating a distorted view that aligned with colonial hierarchies of power and knowledge.

Decolonisation Variation

Museum decolonisation represents a multifaceted and dynamic process that varies according to historical, cultural and political contexts as there is no one-size-fits-all in museum decolonisation. This undertaking is not limited to issues of restitution and repatriation of artefacts, although those remain significant, but more crucially involves a reconfiguration of exhibition texts, interpretation and curatorial authority to redress historical erasure and empower formerly marginalised communities. At its core, decolonisation in museums is concerned with dismantling colonial legacies embedded within institutional practices, narratives and representations. As museums were often instruments of colonial power, collecting and displaying objects privileged colonial perspectives. Decolonising these institutions means critically re-examining and transforming how collections are presented, how narratives are shaped and whose voices are centred.

The museum decolonisation discourse has expanded considerably in recent decades, encompassing diverse geographical and institutional contexts that range from settler-colonial societies to formerly colonised regions across Africa and Southeast Asia. Within settler-colonial contexts such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the discourse has centred principally on the sharing of curatorial authority with Indigenous communities and the reconfiguration of institutional decision-making structures to incorporate Indigenous voices at every level of governance (Lonetree, 2012; Tuck and Yang, 2012). In formerly colonised regions, including those of Southeast Asia, the imperative has similarly encompassed restitution and repatriation, evidenced by the return of prehistoric remains to Malaysia from the Netherlands[3] and the return of Diponegoro keris to Indonesia among others.[4] Indonesia have also successful received objects from the Netherlands including the “Lombok treasure” and the Pita Maha collection.[5] Similarly, in Africa several objects have been repatriated with notable cases for the return of objects to the country or community origins include Senegal’s Omar Saidou Tall’s sabre from France.[6] Collectively, this body of literature affirms that museum decolonisation constitutes less a fixed endpoint than an ongoing, contested process. It demands the critical transformation of exhibition narratives, curatorial displays and institutional epistemologies, moving away from colonial frameworks toward inclusive, pluralistic and ethically engaged museum practices that acknowledge museums as contested spaces of memory, identity, and history (Peers and Brown, 2005; Coombes, 1994).

However, museum decolonisation extends beyond artefact repatriation and restitution that encompass broader ideological shifts in how histories and identities are curated and expressed. Decolonisation here involves reclaiming cultural narratives, redefining indigenous identities through material culture and resisting the imposed colonial historical canons.

Exhibitions in these museums increasingly foreground indigenous and local voices, emphasising the continuity and vitality of cultural traditions rather than their subjugation or disappearance. Such museums endeavour to decolonise by rewriting exhibition texts, inserting critical reflections on colonial impacts, affirming their agency within the museum space.

Literature Review

Nevertheless, a conspicuous and significant lacuna persists within this otherwise expansive body of scholarship: the linguistic construction of museum exhibition texts as discrete and consequential sites of colonial reproduction and decolonial possibility has received insufficient critical attention, particularly within the Malaysian museum studies literature.

Studies on Malaysian museums examine a framework of national, state and public institutions that navigates the intersection of colonial history, nationalist agendas and cultural preservation. Museums in present-day Malaysia originated during the British colonial era, with early sites serving as instruments of imperial knowledge production. Following independence, Dellios (1999) observes that while institutions such as Muzium Negara were modelled on indigenous architectural forms, their underlying mental architecture remained rooted in the perspectives of Western-educated elites, effectively functioning as "Malaysian bodies with European souls". While research by Kalb (1997) and Harris (2006) identifies a strategic pivot toward Malay-centric and Islamic narratives to define national identity, a framework critiqued by Abu Talib Ahmad (2014) for its selective representation of the colonial encounter.

A recent critical turn has begun to interrogate persistent Eurocentricity in museum interpretation, with Rahimin Affandi (2017) and Mohd Syafiq Zaini et al. (2022) highlighting how the framing of artefacts remains tied to colonial Enlightenment philosophies. Ahmad Farid (2020, 2024) further explores decolonial practices through the new museum approach in Pahang, providing a necessary challenge to established colonial legacies and calling for a fundamental rethinking of the museum's narrative role. However, despite this evolving focus on decolonisation, there remains a conspicuous lack of research addressing the linguistic construction of the museum narrative itself. This absence within the studies within Malaysian museums, presents a distinct research gap exists regarding the critical analysis of exhibition texts as specific sites of decolonial practice.

The present study addresses this gap through a critical examination of exhibition texts at the Perak Museum and the Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM), employing a theoretical framework that integrates Farish A. Noor's concept of epistemic arrest, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorisation of language and decolonisation, and Amy Lonetree's practice of indigenous storytelling. Epistemic arrest is defined as the systematic interruption and foreclosure of indigenous knowledge production by colonial powers, who established European epistemological frameworks as the sole authoritative standard for interpreting local histories, which delegitimised pre-colonial systems, repositioning colonised subjects as objects of study rather than active knowledge producers. Complementing this, Alatas (1977) provides an analytical lens through the concept of the captive mind, which describes the psychological and intellectual subordination of postcolonial elites to Western thought. This condition is characterised by an uncritical imitation of Western models and a persistent alienation from indigenous intellectual traditions. Within Malaysian museum practice, the captive mind is evidenced when exhibition texts reproduce colonial interpretive frameworks. This often results in a hierarchy where indigenous knowledge holders are utilised as mere informants rather than recognised as epistemologically authoritative interpreters of their own heritage.

The second pillar of this framework is drawn from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) seminal work *Decolonising the Mind*, which foregrounds language as the primary vehicle through which colonialism exerts its continued authority over formerly colonised peoples. Ngũgĩ argues

that the adoption of European languages as the medium of education, official communication and cultural interpretation alienates colonised peoples from their own intellectual traditions, historical consciousnesses and ways of knowing that are embedded within indigenous languages. For Ngũgĩ, genuine decolonisation is inseparable from the reclamation of indigenous languages as legitimate and authoritative vehicles for knowledge production, artistic expression, and intellectual life.

Lastly, Amy Lonetree's (2012) theorisation of indigenous storytelling as a decolonial practice within museum settings. Writing from the Ho-Chunk tradition and drawing on her work with Native American museums in the United States, Lonetree argues that genuinely decolonial museums must centre indigenous communities as the rightful authors and authorities regarding the interpretation of their own cultures and histories, rather than positioning them as informants whose raw knowledge is subsequently organised and mediated by professional curators employing Western exhibition conventions.

The integration epistemic arrest, theorisation of linguistic decolonisation and indigenous storytelling framework provides a robust and multi-dimensional analytical apparatus for the critical examination of exhibition texts in the Perak Museum and the Borneo Cultures Museum.

Colonial Museums in Malaysia

The Perak Museum in Taiping, established in 1883, and the Sarawak Museum, founded in 1891 (with its collection now housed in the new Borneo Cultures Museum),[7] are more than just repositories of artefacts. They are living archives of Malaysia's complex colonial history. The establishment of these first museums in Malaysia was fundamentally linked to the British colonial administrative project and the systematic documentation of the empire's natural and cultural resources. The Perak Museum in Taiping was initiated by Sir Hugh Low, the British Resident of Perak then and was placed under the direction of Leonard Wray Jr., who served as its first curator. Administratively, the institution was positioned within the colonial bureaucracy to facilitate the collection of botanic, zoological and ethnographic specimens that would demonstrate the economic and scientific potential of the Malay Peninsula. Conversely, the Sarawak Museum was established in 1891 in Kuching under the patronage of Charles Brooke.

While the Perak Museum operated within the direct framework of the Federated Malay States administration, the Sarawak Museum functioned under the Brooke regime. Both these museums' initial purpose was to serve as 'investigative modalities' for colonial rule.[8] These museums were not merely places of public education; they were tools for the classification, categorisation and documentation of the land's flora, fauna and indigenous peoples, all in service of governing the British acquired territories. Both institutions were central to the maintenance of colonial knowledge through the publication of academic journals that disseminated findings to an international scientific community. The Perak Museum launched the Journal of the Federated Malay States Museums in 1905, which served as a formal repository for research on the peninsula's archaeology and ethnography. Similarly, the Sarawak Museum Journal was established in 1911, focusing on the distinct social structures and biodiversity of Borneo.

Despite these similarities in knowledge production, a historical distinction exists in their foundational motivations. The Perak Museum was primarily a tool of formal British colonial governance aimed at categorising a new territory for administrative efficiency. In contrast, the Sarawak Museum was conceived as a personal project of the Brooke dynasty, intended to provide a sense of legitimacy to their private kingdom Morris (2019, 2020). Consequently, the Perak Museum reflected the rigorous standards of British civil service

science, while the Sarawak Museum represented a unique intersection of Brooke family prestige and professional European scholarship.

The Enduring Colonial Gaze at the Perak Museum

The Perak Museum stands as a testament to the enduring power of colonial museology. While the political administration of Malaysia changed in 1957, Perak Museum, a product of British colonial production, appears to have remained largely intact. Its initial purpose, as an institution for collecting and displaying the "natural specimens and local ethnology in Perak" for the British administration, established a framework that continues to shape its curatorial choices today. The museum's four original galleries; mineralogical, herbarium, zoological and ethnological laid a foundation that, even in its modern iteration, privileges a typological and fragmented approach to culture and history.

Today, the permanent galleries of the Perak Museum, particularly Gallery B (the Nature Gallery) and Gallery C (Culture), reveal a persistent colonial gaze. The focus on taxidermy and zoological specimens, while a strength of the museum, reinforces a narrative rooted in nineteenth century scientific inquiry that saw the natural world as a resource to be catalogued and contained. This approach, which places equal weight on flora and fauna as on human culture, diminishes the civilisational complexity of the region. The cultural exhibits, instead of narrating a coherent and continuous history of the Malay-Islamic civilisation, function more as an ethnographic catalogue. Artefacts like the *keris, songket* and traditional games are displayed without a clear historical timeline, often accompanied by vague labels such as "olden days" or "ancient times."

This curatorial choice is not neutral; it effectively renders Malay history as ahistorical, a timeless and static tradition that existed before the arrival of the British. This aligns with a typical colonial narrative that denied indigenous peoples their own historical agency and framed colonisation as the singular event that brought civilisation and modernity. Furthermore, the museum's lack of mention, let alone to incorporate the rich history of the Perak Sultanate, which can trace its lineage back to the Melaka Sultanate, is a profound omission. The absence of a narrative about pre-colonial kingdoms like Gangga Negara or Beruas and the ahistorical presentation of key Malay artefacts, such as the *keris* and *songket,* misplaces these items from their royal, political and intellectual contexts. The *keris*, a symbol of power and sovereignty in Malay culture, is reduced to a mere "craft," stripped of its symbolic and historical weight in the Perak Museum.

Although the Perak Sultanate continues to exist as a living political and cultural institution in present-day Malaysia, it is largely absent from the Perak Museum's exhibition texts and interpretive frameworks. Instead, the British colonial representation remains persistent, despite the museum emphasises on its taxidermy collections, ethnographic artefacts and representations of indigenous communities. The inclusion of British colonial representation suggests an enduring colonial narrative and storytelling; whereby colonial histories are articulated more explicitly than contemporary indigenous systems of authority. This is clearly reflected in the display of the museum's outdoor exhibition. Several large-sized objects in the museum's collection are displayed in the outdoor exhibition which includes a steamed power engine introduced by Hugh Low in 1877 and a twin coach wagon from the Perak State Railways, designed in 1897 used to transport the highest British officers, Sultan and other important people it stated.

Aside from honouring Hugh Low as the one responsible to establish Perak Museum, the objects in the outdoor display serves to celebrate the colonial past such as the statue of Robert Sandilands Frowd Walker and a memorial stone for J.W.W. Birch (Figure 1). The statue of Walker was to commemorate and honour his 31 years of service in the colonial government.

However, the display of the J.W.W. Birch's memorial stone presents a curatorial issue when positioned without sufficient historical or interpretive context for visitors. The English caption on Birch's memorial stone states he was "murdered treacherously," a term laden with colonial bias. Furthermore, the Birch's tenure in Perak was brief, but it was an event closely linked to local opposition to British administrative interference and the restructuring of existing systems of authority. However, the memorial is presented without reference to these broader socio-political circumstances, nor does it acknowledge the organised resistance of local leaders and communities to colonial rule. In the absence of such contextualisation, the display foregrounds a colonial narrative of commemoration that privileges British presence and loss, while obscuring indigenous perspectives, resistance and historical contestation. This act of linguistic framing is not a minor detail; it is a powerful perpetuation of a colonial memory, celebrating the victimhood of the coloniser while erasing the legitimate resistance of the colonised.

Figure 1: The memorial stone was previously located at Kubu Maharajalela, near Sungai Perak in Pasir Salak. The caption of the stone stated that "*British Resident J.W.W. Birch was treacherously murdered on 2nd November 1875*".
Source: Author's Personal Collection.

The lack of any significant representation addressing anti-colonial struggles or the intellectual traditions that sustained Malay resistance leaves the impression that the transition to colonial rule was a smooth and natural process. This selective framing reinforces an enduring colonial narrative and storytelling within the museum space, where colonial actors are memorialised, yet the complexities of local historical response remain underrepresented, such representation can also be found the Muzium Negara (Kamal 2025). The museum's narrative on resistance is equally problematic. In this sense, the Perak Museum remains a space of "inherited memory"

of a colonial project, a museum that serves as a monument to the coloniser's perspective rather than a site for the decolonial re-narration of its own history.

The Borneo Cultures Museum: Progress and Paradox

The Sarawak Museum was opened in 1891, during the reign of Sarawak's second White Rajah, Charles Brooke. On the opening of the Sarawak Museum, some attributed Alfred Russell Wallace as the one who suggested to build a museum in Sarawak, the same person who said that '*the savage Malays are the Dyaks of Borneo,'* and Malays had a deficient intellect and lack energy in acquiring knowledge.[9] It is said that Wallace visited Sarawak in 1855 and suggested to Charles Brooke to create a museum in Kuching,[10] this claim remains contentious, however.[11] Nevertheless, the museum was considered a personal project for Charles Brooke, who used the museum as a symbol of authority to demonstrate his polity after taking over as the second White Rajah of Sarawak.[12] To ensure the museum demonstrates 'modernity' of Kuching, Brooke was closely involved with the museum's building design and its early galleries.[13]

Today, the Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM) has taken over the role of the main museum in Sarawak from the original Sarawak Museum.[14] The BCM represents a more contemporary and, at first glance, more progressive approach to museum practice in a postcolonial setting. Unlike the Perak Museum, the BCM is a new, state-of-the-art institution that has made conscious efforts to engage with decolonial discourse. Its commitment to the repatriation of artefacts and its admirable focus on indigenous cosmologies and cultural traditions mark a significant departure from the practices of its predecessor, the original Sarawak Museum, which was a "personal project" of the Brooke dynasty and served as a symbol of their "freelance imperialism" (Reece 2003).

The BCM demonstrates a strong decolonial effort in its "*In Harmony with Nature*" gallery.[15] The gallery incorporated the cosmological beliefs of various indigenous groups like the Kelabit and Penan, to move beyond a purely scientific, Western-centric view of nature. This curatorial choice embodies the concept of "pluriversality",[16] which is the recognition of multiple ways of knowing and seeing the world. The gallery challenges the singular, Western epistemological framework that has historically dominated museums and instead presents a more holistic and culturally rich understanding of the relationship between indigenous communities and their environment. The gallery's multi-sensory approach, using light, sound and interactive displays, aims to immerse the visitor in indigenous worldviews, rather than simply presenting a static, objective display. This is a significant move towards an ethical and empathetic museology that validates indigenous knowledge systems on their own terms.

However, despite the decolonial effort in the *In Harmony with Nature* gallery, the current exhibition text within the BCM galleries often retains a colonial undertone by framing the history of the state through the lens of European intervention, especially in the "*Time Changes*" gallery. The gallery presents a timeline that moves from Palaeolithic discoveries to the influence of the Sriwijaya and Majapahit empires and directly into the "*Making of Sarawak*" via the arrival of James Brooke. This timeline structure effectively omits the substantial Malay and Islamic presence and governance that preceded the Brooke era. While the museum credits the Sriwijaya and Majapahit empires for bringing Hinduism and Buddhism to Borneo, it omits a similar historical narrative for Islam in Sarawak. The Muslim sultanates of Brunei and Sambas are reduced and only mentioned as trade and economic actors rather than their roles as established political and religious authorities in the region, before the arrival of James Brooke in 1841.

Furthermore, Islam's foundational role in shaping the political and social structures is largely sidelined. For instance, the history of Sultan Tengah, the first Sultan of Sarawak, is relegated to a minor info panel rather than being presented as a central pillar of the state's

historical identity before the arrival of the European colonisers, effectively minimising the existence of a formal, pre-Brooke Malay-Islamic state. This omission is particularly jarring given the museum's display of historical Jawi scripts, which are presented simply as a writing system used "before the Europeans introduced to Roman script," stripping them of their immense cultural, religious, and intellectual significance in the Malay-Islamic civilisation.[17] This curatorial choice contrasts sharply with the museum's in-depth exploration of indigenous cosmologies, which are presented with a clear reverence for their intellectual depth and complexity. This imbalance risks creating a new kind of fragmentation, where one set of indigenous knowledges is celebrated, while another, the Malay-Islamic tradition is sidelined. This is particularly problematic given that the spread of Islam in the region was not solely a process of trade but a complex network of intellectual, political, and spiritual exchange that fundamentally shaped the social and cultural landscape. To reduce this history to a footnote is a significant oversight.

The exhibition texts continue an enduring colonial narrative by delegitimising local resistance, identifying figures such as Aji, Rentap, Sharif Masahor and Tieu-Te merely as "opponents" or "anti-Brooke figures" rather than local freedom fighters. Those who resisted the Brooke rule are described as being involved in "rebellion" or "plotting a rebellion," and the "Anti-cession Movement" is associated with the "assassination" of the British Governor by Rosli Dhobie, rather than being presented as a struggle for independence. The framing of anti-colonial figures like Sharif Masahor, who is categorised as a "rebel" rather than a legitimate governor in Rajang from an existing administrative system that functioned before the intrusion of James Brooke. The portrayal of resistance movements in the BCM also warrants further critique. Similarly, Rosli Dhobie is framed as a murderer of the British Governor, Duncan Stewart in 1949 in the info panel titled ‘Anti-cession Movement’ rather than a fighter against colonialism. Rosli Dhobie is labelled as an "assassinator" rather than a freedom fighter, a curatorial choice that aligns with a colonial perspective that criminalised such acts of resistance. By labelling Rosli Dhobie as an "assassinator," the museum fails to provide the historical context that would frame his action as a political act of anti-colonial resistance, rather than a criminal one. Such framing contributes to a "broken mirror" representation of the past, where the complex archipelagic histories of pre-Brooke Sarawak are silenced in favour of a sanitised narrative of white governorship.

In the context of criminalisation, the exhibition minimises or altogether omits the violence perpetrated during the Brooke regime, portraying a sanitised colonial propaganda. Although the museum makes brief reference to punitive raids and presents events such as the Battle of Beting Maru (1849) as controversial military engagements, it avoids detailing the large-scale destruction of native villages and the systematic plunder and looting that underpinned the Brooke regime’s violent beginnings. In relation to violence, the exhibition actively obscures the forceful nature of Brooke’s intervention by presenting Sarawak as having been voluntarily offered to James Brooke in recognition of his assistance (Figure 2). This framing suppresses critical historical realities, including Brooke’s deployment of a private armed force to attack the compound of Rajah Muda Hassim and compel the surrender of territory.[18] Such narrative suppression produces a distorted historical account, one that systematically replaces episodes of violent conquest with a legitimising discourse of stability, order, and progress. By positioning the Brooke administration as the catalyst for change and order, the exhibition text closely mirrors nineteenth-century colonial propaganda that framed indigenous and Malay polities as stagnant, disorderly or in decline.

Nevertheless, James Brooke takes the centre stage in the overall narrative in BCM, especially in the historical perspective. However, an info panel in the ‘Changes’ Gallery reveals a probing point when an info panel, titled “Colonial Era” (Figure 3) states that Sarawak was a British colony for 17 years, implying that Sarawak under Brooke dynasty was not colonisation.

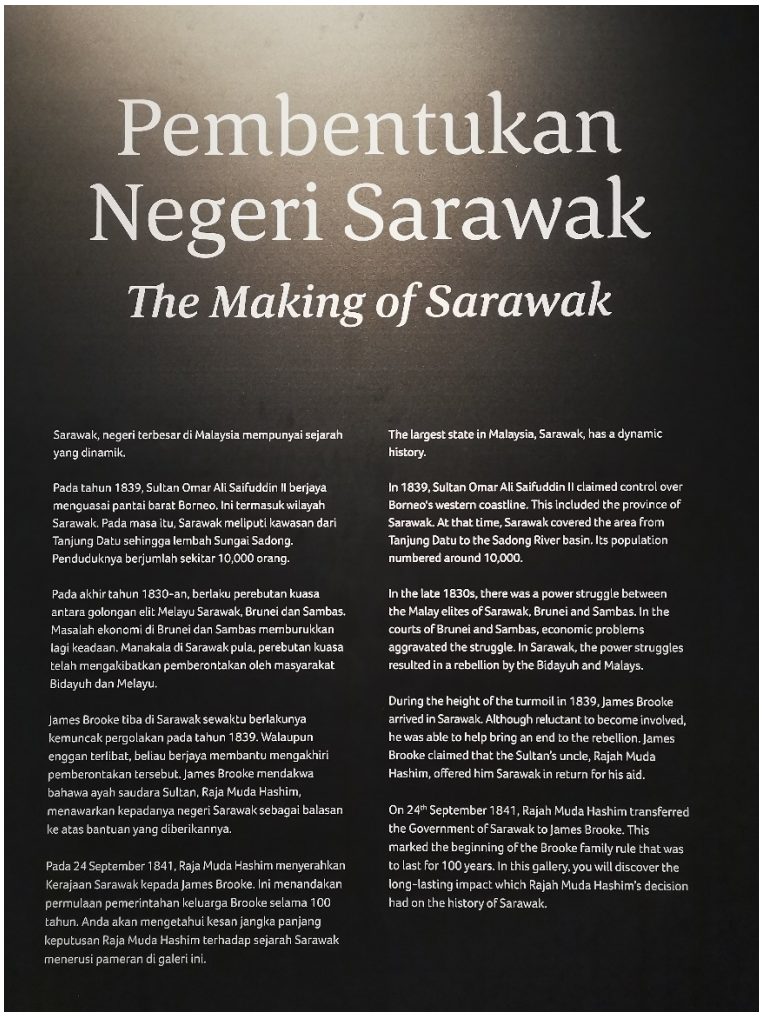

Figure 2: In the info panel title, "The Making of Sarawak", the third paragraph suggested James Brooke arrived in 1839 during a turmoil in Sarawak.
Source: Author's Personal Collection.

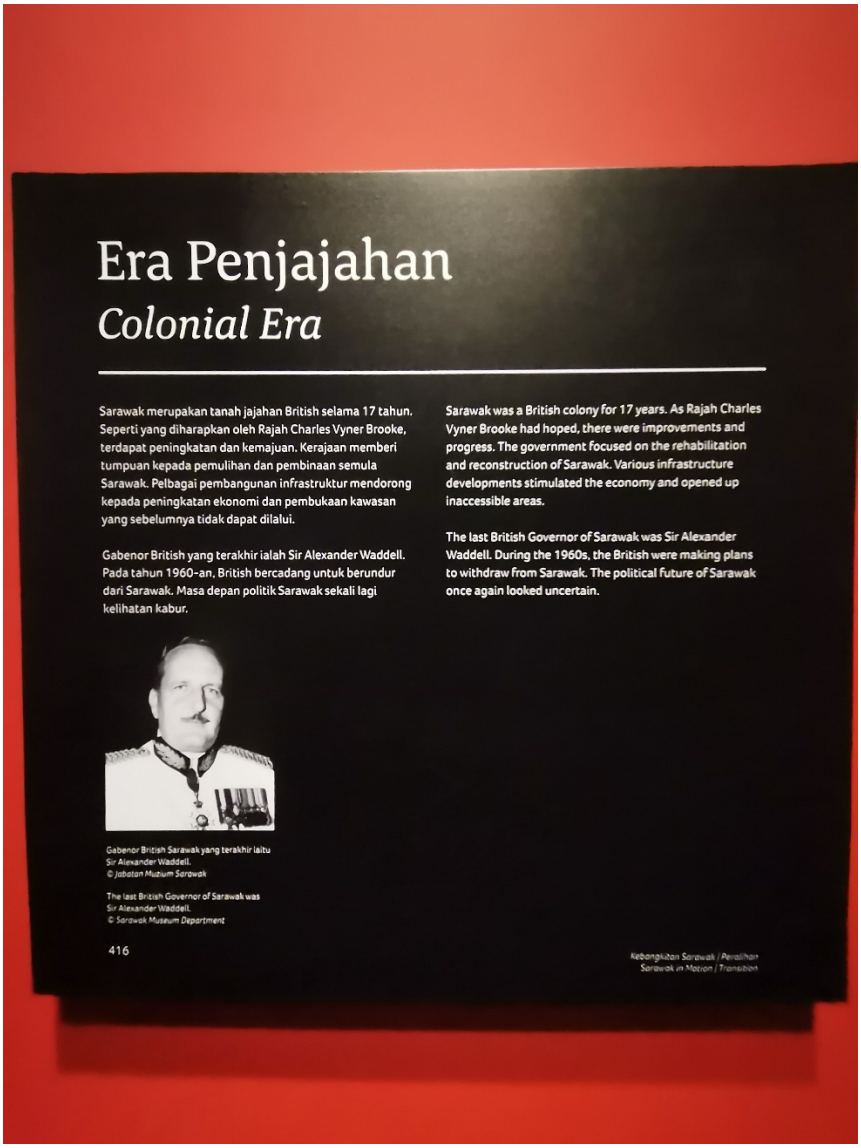

Figure 3: The info panel credited the colonial rule had improvements and progress, as Rajah Charles Vyner Brooke had hoped for.
Source: Author's Personal Collection.

Conclusion

The scholarly discourse surrounding museum decolonisation has evolved significantly over the past few decades, moving from a focus on repatriation and restitution to a broader critique of institutional power structures and epistemological frameworks. Museums are now understood as deeply political spaces that have historically participated in the colonial project. While Abu Talib Ahmad (2015; 2018) posits that Malaysian museums serve as vehicles for asserting Malay cultural and political dominance within a nationalist framework, findings from the Borneo Cultures Museum and the Perak Museum demonstrate the persistent endurance of colonial perspectives that override indigenous and Malay-Islamic narratives

The Perak Museum, by its very design, remains a product of nineteenth century colonial museology, presenting history as a series of disconnected ethnographic types and scientific specimens. It fails to offer a coherent narrative of the Malay-Islamic civilisation, instead

rendering it ahistorical and fragmented. This colonial framework is further entrenched at the Perak Museum's through its exterior display, with its commemoration of British administrators and the use of biased terminology, which privileges colonial victimhood while erasing the socio-political context of legitimate indigenous resistance, serves as a powerful reminder of whose story is being told and whose is being erased. Ultimately, the curatorial landscape remains a site where colonial representations continue to override the recognition of Malay and indigenous systems as established civilisations, suggesting that the museum's original function as a colonial tool of state "imagining" remains remarkably resilient until today.

The Borneo Cultures Museum, while making commendable progress in its decolonial efforts through repatriation and a focus on indigenous cosmologies, paradoxically falls short in its historical narrative. The celebration of Brooke era as the moment of "the making of Sarawak" and not considering it as an era when Sarawak was colonised, the museum inadvertently reinforces the idea that history and modernity began with the coloniser's arrival, thereby diminishing the significant pre-colonial polities and struggles for sovereignty. While the Borneo Cultures Museum's decision to include figures like Sharif Masahor and Rosli Dhobie is a positive step away from the colonial silence on such matters, their framing remains problematic. This terminology, which reflects a colonial judgement, subtly delegitimises the resistance movement and its historical significance. This presents an opportunity to re-appropriate this language, but for now, it remains a site of contested memory.

This points to the urgent necessity of shifting the focus in museum decolonisation efforts from merely repatriating artefacts to interrogating and reformulating the very language used in exhibitions. Exhibition texts are not passive; they actively shape visitor understanding and can either reproduce colonialist stereotypes or provide space for counter-narratives and indigenous voice. By analysing and revising the language of museum texts, museums can dismantle legacy colonial frameworks that degrade colonised peoples beyond the colonial gaze.

The persistence of epistemic arrest reveals how colonial curatorial frameworks marginalise indigenous and Malay-Islamic histories within narratives of stagnation and disorder. To dismantle this legacy, museums must embrace Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for linguistic decolonisation, rejecting terminologies that delegitimise resistance and valorise colonial authority. Drawing on Amy Lonetree's model of indigenous storytelling, museums can move beyond colonial glorifications and restore suppressed accounts of sovereignty and struggle. Only through such transformation can the Malaysian museum landscape become a decolonised space that affirms Malay and indigenous civilisations.

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Notes

1. Edward Said's seminal work Orientalism (1978) famously theorised by Orientalism where according to Said, Western imperial powers constructed the binary of "Occident" versus "Orient" not as an objective geopolitical distinction, but as a deliberate ideological framework designed to legitimise Western dominance.
2. The colonial knowledge production through their writings premised around the 'level of civilisation' that ranked nations and positioned 'primitive savages' at one extreme of a scale with the 'polished' European at the other extreme (Marsden 1811, 204).

3. See *41 prehistoric remains to return to Malaysia from the Netherlands*, Straits Times, 23 September 2023; (https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/41-prehistoric-remains-to-return-to-malaysia-from-the-netherlands), accessed on 23 April 2025.
4. Diponegoro (1785-1855) was a Javanese prince who opposed the Dutch colonial rule, involved in the Java War against the Dutch between 1825 and 1830. See *Return of Diponegoro Kris Holds Historical Significance for Indonesia*, Antara News, 13 March 2020; (https://en.antaranews.com/news/143618/return-of-diponegoro-kris-holds-historical-significance-for-indonesia), accessed on 21 April 2025
5. The "Lombok treasure" was looted by Dutch soldiers from the Tjakranegara Palace and the surrounding villages after the end of the Lombok War in 1894. While the 132 Pita Maha collection, which was not looted but part of an art exhibition in the Netherlands since 1948. Upon the handover of the artefacts, in October 2024, Indonesia has also been moving in this direction with measures such as repatriation and the successful restitutions of its objects. The latest measure taken by Indonesia is the reopening of its Museum Nasional and introducing their decolonisation policy. See Indonesia's National Museum Reopens After Devastating Fire, The Art Newspaper, 15 October 2024; (https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/10/15/indonesias-national-museum-reopens-after-devastating-fire), accessed on 23 April 2025.
6. France returns Omar Tall's sword to Senegal, 18 November 2019; (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50458081) Accessed on 23 April 2025.
7. The Sarawak Museum is the oldest museum in Borneo that was opened by Charles Brooke, is temporarily closed to the public since 23 October 2017 and will only be open to public until further notice. The Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM) and the Sarawak Museum are both under the authority of the Sarawak Museum Department. The department has 11 museums under its purview. The BCM holds the collection that was under the Sarawak Museum, while the original Sarawak Museum remains closed. Therefore, BCM is the focus of this paper as the newest museum in Malaysia, and at the same time having the collection of the oldest museum in Borneo.
8. A term coined by Bernard Cohn (2020) to describe the processes through which the British Empire systematised its knowledge of the colonised and their environment.
9. Alfred Russel Wallace in his exploration book, The Malay Archipelago, published in 1869 said that the Malays “had a deficient intellect and were incapable of anything beyond the simplest combinations of ideas, and have little taste or energy for the acquirement of knowledge”. (Wallace 1869, 447-457).
10. See (Banks 1983, 59-60).
11. Although both James Brooke and Charles Brooke were close acquaintances of Wallace, there is nothing in the preserved record to support that the Sarawak Museum was the brainchild of Alfred Russel Wallace. See (Drawhorn 2018, 1-34)
12. See (Morris 2019)
13. See (Morris 2019) and (Ting 2011)
14. The Sarawak Museum is the oldest museum in Borneo that was opened by Charles Brooke, is temporarily closed to the public since 23 October 2017 and will only be open to public until further notice. The Borneo Cultures Museum (BCM) and the Sarawak Museum are both under the authority of the Sarawak Museum Department. The department has 11 museums under its purview. The BCM holds the collection that was under the Sarawak Museum, while the original Sarawak Museum remains closed.

15. The BCM is a five-level museum with its second floor dedicated to young visitors with the Children's Gallery to provide a hands-on experience with interactive activities, while the first floor provides the space for a temporary exhibition gallery, including an auditorium. The remaining three floors are dedicated to their permanent galleries: In Harmony with Nature (level 3), Time Changes (level 4) and the Objects of Desire (level 5).
16. Scholars such as a Walter Mignolo (2009), Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007), Ramon Grosfoguel (2007), Anibal Quijano (2000), Rolando Vazquez (2020), have been advocating for pluriversality (many worlds, many ways of knowing), including epistemic justice, and decolonial options in politics, education, and culture.
17. Although deeply rooted in Malay-Islamic civilisation, Jawi script historically crossed religious and cultural boundaries. This broader use is evidenced in the gallery by Jawi inscriptions on a door and a Book of Common Prayer translated and written in Jawi.
18. See (Knapman 2016).

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