

## Misconceptions of the Orientalists about the Characters of the Malays in Malaya

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### Abstract

Majority of the orientalists adhere to the philosophy of logical empirical positivism, which is an understanding that emphasizes on the full use of the intellect as the main approach to obtain an accurate scientific fact based on systematic and thorough research methods. This philosophy rejects the source of revelation as proof to facts because it is considered as irrelevant in providing historical facts. However, the philosophy can be considered bias and dubious in viewing the life of the Malay community. This article focuses on the analysis of the orientalists' misconceptions about the characters of the Malays and their approach in assessing the Malays in Malaya. The authors have used methods of historiography, comparisons and content analysis to analyse the views. Regarding to the overall view of the orientalist on the negative characters of the Malays, the study found that the orientalists had invented up a number of claims based on the needs and interests of the Western colonials. It was aimed to distort the truth and enabled the group to associate the behaviour of the Malays with negative characters. The orientalists had failed to understand the Malay society due to the thinking centralised on Euro-centrism, which propagated the Europeans as a great and civilised people compared to other people in Asia and so on.

**Keywords:** Orientalist, The Characters of the Malays, Malaya, Islam

### Introduction

The term *orientalism* is derived from the word *orient*, with two affixes; *al* and *ism*. The word *orient* came from the vocabulary of French which refers to the east. Geographically, the *orient*

is referred to the eastern world, while ethnologically it is defined as the eastern people (Joesoef, 1985). Meanwhile, the English meaning of the term *oriental* refers to matters related to the east and the affix *ism* refers to an understanding, doctrine, teaching, system, stream or attitude (Umar, 1978).

According to Rahman et al (2017), orientalism is a political ideology that aims to colonize and destroy the Eastern culture, especially Islam, thus highlighting the Western civilization as a great nation, which dominating the whole world. Different from Said (1977), orientalism refers to a method in understanding the Eastern world based on the eyes of the Western society. Said's view includes three different but interrelated points, namely:

- 1) Orientalists are individuals who teach, write a work or do a series of researches about the Eastern world. This group consists of anthropologists, sociologists or philologists.
- 2) Orientalism is a method of thinking based on different ontologies and epistemologies between the Eastern and Western worlds.
- 3) Orientalism is a Western method of dominating, restructuring and dominating the Eastern society. It is important for them to create statements about the Eastern world, especially related to religion; to teach and control the Eastern world and then change them according to their wishes.

Lughod (2001, p. 103) also expressed a similar view regarding to the orientalism, as she mentioned;

*The way in which the Orient has been represented in Europe through an imaginative geography that divides East and West, confirming Western superiority and enabling, if not actually constituting, European domination of those negatively portrayed regions known as East.*

The above three views clearly showed that the Western colonialists aimed to dominate the Eastern world in the aspects of religion, culture and intellectuals, thereby applying the ideology of secularism into the thinking of the colonial society. According to al-Attas (1978), the traditional enmity between Christianity and Islam was originally existed through the mission of territorial expansion and military attacks, now it turned to 'intellectual warfare' which places the knowledge and thinking of Muslims as the main target to be defeated. Al-Attas (1978, p. 99) explained:

*The confrontation between Western culture and civilization and Islam... has now moved on to the intellectual level and we must realize, then, that this confrontation is by nature a historically permanent one. Islam is seen by the West as posing a challenge to its very way of life.*

According to Fadzil (2012), the scientific writing about the history of the Malays was pioneered by the Western travellers and the colonial official cum orientalist after the first colonial occupation during the Malacca Sultanate. The writings were made in the form of reports and observations, not based on scientific research methods. The works of the orientalists about the historiography of the Malay world, especially in Malaya, were flawed at the methodological aspect, loaded with prejudices and biased, which finally failed the

conclusion to meet the reality (Rahman et al., 2019). Among them were the explanation on the negative characters of the Malay community which was derived from the adherence to Islam as well as the underestimation of the role of Islam in the history of the Malay civilization.

Through this study, the author focuses on two objectives, namely to identify oriental misunderstandings on the character of the Malay community and to study the oriental approach in evaluating the Malay community in Malaya. For the Western colonizers, the period of the development of Islamization in Malaya from the 13th century to the 16th century showed a transformation of humanity such as culture and way of life of society but did not leave a strong influence on the Malay world.

This study is important because it can provide an understanding to the Malays that Islam brings a strong influence in the life of the Malay community, including culture, language, and even a person's character. The history of the development of Islam in Malaya is not displayed with accurate facts by the British but manipulated to highlight the contribution and creativity of the colonialists as the bringer of change to a new modern and civilized era.

### **The Approach of the Orientalists in Assessing the Malay Community in Malaya**

In the days of colonial rule in Malaya, the expertise of the orientalist scholars had been fully utilized in order to colonize and dominate the people of the colony. This group emphasised on importance of abandoning the traditions and religious beliefs by the community they wanted to succeed in life (Rahman et al., 2017). It was applied to the Western colonial thinking through several forms, which were;

First, to study the culture of the Eastern societies in all aspects including the positive and the negative aspects. This study had indirectly become a tool for the Western colonialists, especially the British, in describing the strengths and weaknesses of the Eastern societies. It was further learned to strengthen the dominance of this group towards the colonial society (Hussain, 1984).

Referring to the work of A. Wright and T.H. Reid i.e. *The Malay Peninsula* (Wright & Reid, 1912), T.S. Raffles i.e. *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Stamford Raffles* (Raffles, 1830), L.R. Wheelar i.e. *The Modern Malay* (Wheelar, 1928) and F. Swettenham namely *Perihal Orang Melayu* (Swettenham, 2005), the orientalist had labelled the Malay community with negative characters like laziness, stubbornness, pleasure-loving, living in debt and so on. Aiming to bring changes towards these behaviours, the group of the orientalist claimed the British was able to save the community by introducing a system of general education through the concept of secularism by separating the worldly knowledge from the knowledge of religion (Winstedt, 1988). However, this concept of education was only introduced to the Malay aristocrats (Wheelar, 1928). According to Skeat (1967), the Malay aristocrats were trained to become a dogsbody to the British as a way to expand their power in Malaya. Johan (1979) also argued that these people served as the best medium to triumph over the Malay community who were traditionally respected the feudal class.

Second, the evolutionary approach used by the orientalist consists of self-truth claim and extreme racism, derived from the Eurocentrism. Said (1981) stated that this approach had elevated the Western Civilization as greater and superior compared to the East. Such an

approach was clearly presented by the orientalists through Darwin's theory of evolution which considers Western civilization to be the most advanced civilization based on the level of intelligence and the rejection of religion in all approaches in life. As Swettenham (1893) explained, this great achievement was achieved due to the acceptance of secularism which rejected the importance of religion in human life. The eastern societies which were still adhering to religion were labelled as a country which disfavoured of progression and needed to be civilized through the colonial process.

The orientalists had also characterized the Islamic law as cruel, static and only practical in the Middle East. In fact, Swettenham (2005) added, the overall negative attitude of the Malay community was stemmed from their firm belief on Islam, including believing on fate, did not value times and rejected modernity. Therefore, all these behaviours needed to be changed by introducing the Western thinking systems, especially on the matter of legislation which is more relevant and flexible in present days.

Third, the use of diffusism approach. Kling (1994) justified diffusism as the approach which referred the progress of the Malays to the influence of foreign cultures as selectively copied from the Arabs and Indians, not because it was originally born in nature. This approach denied the ingenuity of the local community (local genius) in building a great civilization. According to Landon (1949), the community did not have a strong foundation on Islam, therefore they were still influenced by animism and Hinduism. Rahman et al (2016) viewed this approach as an anti-Islamic attitude that arose from the experience on the Crusades and the opposition of the Muslim community in the colonies during the previous colonial rule.

### **The Orientalists' View on the Characters of the Malay Community**

There are a handful of orientalists such as Isabella Bird, Frank Swettenham, Emily Innes, Hugh Clifford, Tome Pires and Stamford Raffles, who associated the Malay community with negative characters such as laziness, rebellious, frivolous and others. They believed that the Malays didn't have their own intelligence, yet it was said to be borrowed from the foreign people like the Arabs and Indians (Rahim, 2001).

#### **a) The view of Isabella Bird**

Bird (1883) regarded the Malays as lazy and indolent. She observed this attitude of idling and dawdling at the time of planting rice as a source of income. According to Bird, the community preferred to relax and spent time chatting with friends at a coffee shop instead of working hard to improve themselves and their families. Bird also viewed the community as the people who loved entertainment. In her work, *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither*, she mentioned about the habit of the community to watch entertainment in mass gathering, such as the cockfighting which was popular at that time. The cockfighting game involved gambling. It was not only participated by the common people, but the aristocrats too. Bird also had her own perception about the community. She labelled the Malays who were fond of eating the betel leaves as filthy.

#### **b) The View of Emily Innes**

Innes (1885) described Malay men as indolent because she saw the Malay women worked harder than the men. According to Innes, the Malay women were burden with hard works such as the agriculture practices, including working at the paddy field, than men who like

to sit and chatting at the coffee shop for hours and returned home late at night. Innes also added, the Malay man spent most of the time sleeping, woke up when they were hungry and needed to bathe, and then went out loitering with friends, while the women were working so hard. In addition, she also described the Malay Rulers as slackers. From her observation, the royals (*Raja* and *Sultan*) needed to be managed and the matters related to the administration were all-administered by the ministers. They liked to ask the people to fulfil their wishes, which had indirectly made Innes believed that this attitude of total dependence had troubled the people. She also considered the Malays as a filthy community when she saw them using hand to eat, believing that this behaviour was disgusting and outdated.

**c) The View of Frank Swettenham**

Swettenham (1967) argued that the Malays were primitive, indolent, loved fighting and resisted modernization. According to him, the community liked to spend time with unbeneficial activities such as gambling, cockfighting and sleeping. He also felt that the Malay community was a fatalistic religious believers who did not really follow the teachings of Islam, as they believed in superstitious such as the shamanism and others. Swettenham also described the Malay community with negative attitudes, like spending lavishly, running amok, total dependence on fate and quickly gave up.

**d) The View of Hugh Clifford**

According to Clifford (1992), the Malay community was considered as the most indolent people on earth as God has created. He came into this conclusion when he witnessed a group of 26 Malay people continuously rowing boats in the same area to find a way out of the water. Clifford compared the Malays of the West and the East coast by saying that the Malay community at the West Coast were stupid but more civilized than those living at the East Coast. The Malay community residing in Pahang were observed as experts in military, easily to fell in love and involved in cockfighting. Meanwhile, the community living in Terengganu from Clifford's points of view, loved peace, worked hard but lacked of loyalty to the government. Moreover, the attitude of *latah* (a condition in which abnormal behaviours result from a person experiencing a sudden shock, such as screaming, cursing, dance movements, and uncontrollable laughter) among the Malays regarded as an act of irreverence as it would be followed by rude and obscene language.

**e) The View of Tome Pires**

Pires (1990) associated the Malay community with jealousy referring to act of the Malay men who did not expose their wives to the public. He also believed that the community was smart but they often neglected their studies due to the lack of interest in learning. In fact, there was a significant difference between the aristocrats and the common people. The aristocrats liked to involve in gambling and lived in prosperity, meanwhile the people were living in poor and had to work hard to earn for living.

**f) The View of Stamford Raffles**

According to Raffles (1830), the Malay community was not developed in thinking as they did not have a good and organised system of education. It had become the reason of the Malays' laziness and the unorganised attitude because there were not motivated and encouraged to work. In addition, he also described the community with rancorous

attitude and refused to reconcile with the colonial authorities. In fact, he had insulted Islam with the label of 'banditry religion' when he was sentencing a Muslim thief.

### **The Causes of the Orientalists' Misunderstanding about the Characters of the Malays**

During the orientalist's involvement in Malaya, the invaders had brought a number of approaches to minimize and marginalize the role of religion in all aspects of life, including in the business transactions. Rahman et al (2019) explained that they believed that if the indigenous community were still depending on religion as a guidance towards developing faith, especially the Muslims, this society would continue to be at a lower level, considered as rejecting modernization, and even labelled as uncivilized because they believed in the teachings brought by the Prophet Muhammad SAW.

The British colonial authorities realized that Islam was placed at the highest position in the community and any insults towards the religion would lead to resistance against them (Abdullah, 2005). According to Abdullah (2005), despite of being anti-Islamic, the British colonialists had never committed any act of provocation against Islam. On the other hand, the British slyly lowered the standard of Islam by holding the Pangkor Agreement in 1874. As a result, Islam was isolated from politics; Malay was appointed as the head of the Islamic law however, it was limited to matters of marriage and *furū'* only. According to Wilkinson (1922), the Islamic law did not provide a profound impact on the community, yet it was used as additional laws to the customary laws. Wilkinson (1922, p. 48) mentioned:

*Notwithstanding the influence of Muslim law in Malaya, it had not supplanted the local adat in its entirety. It was accepted in the religious matters, in family law and the law of succession, but in order matters the adat prevailed with only some Muslim additions incorporated in it in the course of centuries.*

From the view of the authors, the explanation of Wilkinson can be considered as a proof on how the Islamic law was viewed by the orientalist, the view that Islam did not strongly influence the life of the community in Malaya. To strengthen the above argument, the authors referred to Elias's views. Elias justified that the reason for the colonial negative assessment on Islam including its legislation was due to:

*Pengalaman beragama yang pahit dalam sejarah kebudayaan Barat serta pertembungan dengan agama serta kebudayaan Islam dalam sejarah dunia telah mencorakkan penilaian umum orientalis terhadap agama Islam. Keraguan yang terbit akibat dari sifat dan pembawaan agama mereka sendiri serta prasangka yang menebal terhadap hakikat risalah Islam serta pembawanya, akhirnya menjadikan kebenaran semua agama dilihat tidak lebih dari kebenaran falsafah. Agama yang ditanggapi dalam telaah sejarah penulis orientalis ini adalah agama yang mesti berubah mengikut peredaran zaman hingga mampu menjadi batu loncatan mencapai cita-cita pembangunan atau sebaliknya, agama yang jumud, yang layak dicerca sebagai batu penghalang. [The unpleasant religious experience in the history of Western culture as well as the clash with*

religion and the Islamic culture in the history of the world has shaped the general oriental assessment on Islam. The doubts that arose as a result of the nature and the practice of their own religion as well as the thickening prejudice against the fact of the Islamic scriptures and its messenger, ultimately made the truth of all religions seen as no more than a philosophical truth. The religion as perceived in the study of the history from the orientalist writers was a religion that must have changed according to the movement of time until it was able to be a stepping stone to achieve development or vice versa, a stagnant religion; which deserved to be ridiculed as a stumbling block.]

(Elias, 2012, p. 612)

Elias's view has clearly shown that the views of the orientalists were influenced by the act of prejudice as a result of the clash between religions and cultures of two great civilizations until Islam was condemned as unable to meet the needs of the society because it failed to fit the changes of time and situations.

### **The View of Syed Hussein Alatas on the Orientalists' Misunderstanding about the Characters of the Malays**

Syed Hussein Alatas is a renowned academic scholar who has produced significant writings on the history, culture, social and politics of the community. The studies produced by Alatas had a significant impact especially on the characters of the community such as *The Myth of the Lazy Native*. According to Arifin (2012, p. 21):

*Beliau mewakili sarjana 'dunia ketiga' yang mempelopori kajian yang begitu mendalam dan berani khususnya yang menyentuh tentang watak dan pemikiran tertawan, bebalisme dan feudalisme. [He represents the 'third world' scholars who pioneered such an in-depth and bold study especially one that discussed on captive characters and thoughts, bebalism and feudalism.]*

Alatas (2009, p. xvi) rejected the 'lazy' title given to the Malays, as he mentioned:

*Dalam perwujudan sejarah yang empiris, ideologi kolonial memanfaatkan gagasan tentang peribumi malas untuk membenarkan amalan penindasan dan ketidakadilan dalam mobilisasi tenaga kerja di negeri jajahannya. Ia menggambarkan citra negatif tentang peribumi dan masyarakat mereka untuk membenarkan dan mencari alasan penaklukan dan penguasaan Eropah terhadap wilayah tersebut. Ia juga memesongkan unsur-unsur kenyataan sosial dan manusia ini untuk menjamin bentuk ideologi yang sesuai dengan keperluan mereka. [In the embodiment of empirical history, the colonial ideology utilized the idea of lazy natives to justify the practice of oppression and injustice in the mobilization of labour in the colonies. It reflected the negative image of the natives and their society to justify and find reasons for European conquest and domination over the territory. It also distorted the elements of these*

social and human statements to ensure an ideological form that suited their needs.]

The authors believe that, based on the above statement, the lazy character was only designed to suit personal interests of the colonials in the form of colonising the mind of the Malays, making it easier for them to occupy Malaya. Alatas (2009) also described the approach of Western secularism which was rooted from the total use of reasoning, led to the birth of scepticism and biased against the Muslim Malay community. Alatas clearly rejected the ideology of Western colonialism which accused Islam as the cause towards the formation of negative characters among the Malay community, especially the lazy character. According to Fadzil (2012, p. 2):

*Karya-karya orientalis tentang persejarahan rantau ini juga memperlihatkan banyak kelemahan metodologikal di samping sarat dengan prasangka sehingga rumusan-rumusannya tidak menepati realiti. Antara yang paling menonjol ialah kesengajaan mengecil-kecilkan peranan Islam dalam sejarah dan tamadun Melayu. Zaman kepesatan Islamisasi (abad 13-16M) yang ditandai oleh transformasi kemanusiaan dan revolusi kebudayaan terbesar di rantau ini tidak diakui sebagai suatu babak sejarah "in its own right". [The orientalists' works on the history of the region have also shown many methodological weaknesses as well as laden with prejudice which have made the formulas failed to fit the reality. Among the most prominent was the purposely act of belittling the role of Islam in the Malay history and civilization. The rapid period of Islamization (13-16th century) which was marked as the greatest human transformation and cultural revolution in the region was not recognized as a historical scene in its own right.]*

Fadzil also added:

*Pengislaman telah mentransformasikan Melayu dari bangsa yang terkurung dalam kekarutan tahyul dan dongeng menjadi bangsa rasional yang responsif terhadap rangsangan al-Quran agar berfikir dan merenung. [The Islamization of the Malays has transformed the people, from those who were locked in ridiculous superstition and myth to rational people, to those who were responsive towards the stimulation of the Quran in order to think and reflect.]*

(Fadzil, 2012, p. 9)

The disorders in labelling the whole character of the community with negative characters were resulted from the weaknesses of the Western orientalists, especially in understanding the community, even became bias in explaining the questions regarding to the role of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Alatas (2009, p. 149) explained:

*Jenis penyimpangan dalam revolusi mental tentang watak Melayu tersebut dapat dijelaskan dengan kemiskinan intelektual para penulisnya... Penyimpangan tersebut merupakan hasil daripada penalaran yang keliru. Tiga puluh atau lebih ciri-ciri negatif yang*



*dituduh itu, yang secara kuat membentuk watak Melayu merupakan kesimpulan yang diambil daripada dasar fikiran yang salah. Semuanya itu tidak didasari penelitian atau pengamatan yang bijaksana. [The type of aberrations in mental revolution on the Malays characters can be explained through the intellectual poverty of the authors ... The deviations were resulted from faulty reasoning. From the thirty or more negative characteristics accused, the one which strongly formed the characters of the Malays was drawn from false conclusion. All were not based on wise research or observation.]*

The authors did not deny the truth that some of the negative traits exist within the community, however it was improper to label a group of people as lazy based on a number of groups within the community. Alatas (2009, p. 124) explained:

*Gambaran tentang masyarakat peribumi dan para penguasanya yang dicipta oleh ahli sejarah dan pengkaji kolonial dapat dianggap kezaliman, ketidakstabilan, anarki, keterbelakangan dan ketiadaan undang-undang. Ada suatu unsur kebenaran di dalamnya, tetapi tidak mewakili seluruh gambaran. [The descriptions about the indigenous people and their rulers created by historians and the colonial scholars could be considered as tyranny, instability, anarchy, backwardness and lawless. There was an element of truth in it, but it did not represent the whole picture.]*

Alatas also added:

*Kekeliruan Revolusi Mental adalah menyamaratakan berbagai-bagai peristiwa khusus yang dijelaskan oleh para penulisnya. Ada orang Melayu tanpa inisiatif, kaum Melayu yang malas, masyarakat Melayu yang tidak serius, dan yang tidak memikirkan masa hadapan. Semua sifat negatif yang didaftar oleh Revolusi Melayu memang ada dalam kalangan beberapa orang Melayu, tetapi agak tidak kena pada tempatnya untuk menyamaratakannya. [The confusion of the Mental Revolution refers to the generalization of various special events described by its authors. Some Malays had no initiatives, some Malays were lazy, the Malays were not serious, and did not think of the future. All negative properties labelled by the Malay Revolution did not exist among some Malays, but somewhat happened to generalize.]*

(Alatas, 2009, p. 167)

## Conclusion

As a result of this study, the writing of this article is important in explaining the orientalist have applied dubious and biased thinking approaches when they were labeling the entire Malay community with negative characteristics such as laziness. This point of view, which was made based on the paradigm of evolution and diffusion found in their approach has utilized the total use of reasoning which finally questioned the truth of all traditions, cultures, personalities, scientific procedures, and Islamic law. Researchers should not use a skeptical point of view in evaluating a race if they want to produce an authentic study and make its guidance for other researchers.

It is impossible to fight a race that is perfect in all aspects of life, even to find one without assimilation with negative characteristics such as laziness, ego, and so on. It is also improper to easily label a group of people with negative characters, for example, the lazy character. It is obvious that the orientalists, with their biased and doubtful thinking, have shown the weakness of the Western colonials in assessing the Malay community. They were not transparent in their studies, which can be considered contradictory to the nature of knowledge.

The authors also viewed that the failure of the orientalists to understand the community was caused by the background of their thinking which was Euro-centrism, the notion of making Europe a great and civilized nation. To wash away the weakness of the Malay civilization, the British were considered the "ambassador of civilization," the savior of the Malay world. When the orientalists hold firm to this Euro-centric approach as a yardstick to assess the history of Malaya, it turned out that these people failed to fully understand the community, and even became biased in explaining the questions on Islam in the Malay Archipelago.

The authors encourage all researchers who plan to study the Malay community to become more critical of the influence and thinking of the colonials. Researchers should become meticulous and more attentive in evaluating each impression made by the orientalists about the Malay community by studying them beforehand. The study will provide a clear explanation to the Malay community about the history of the nation itself.

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