

## Countering the Western Perspective of the 'Lazy and Stupid Malay' Based on Malay Humorous Tales

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### Abstract

The Western colonization of the Malay world, especially around the 19th century, invited various perspectives with regard to the native community. In accordance with the 'white supremacy' belief, colonial scholars viewed the natives as people who had to be guided and led because of their inherent weaknesses and poor practices in life. Thus, in an effort to consolidate their hegemonic power in the colonies, there emerged a string of various negative stigmas towards the colonized communities, such as the 'lazy and stupid Malays', to reflect that they were people who loved to indulge themselves and waste their time. People such as Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford were among the Western scholars and administrators who were responsible for assigning negative connotations to the Malay community. The question is: did the opinions of these Western colonialists represent their perception of a handful of Malays or the entire community? Was their perspective independent of their bias as the colonizing power? What were their reasons for labelling the Malays as 'lazy or stupid'? With this in mind, the objective of this study is to identify the Western perspective of the 'lazy Malay' and to analyse that perspective according to Malay humorous tales. Using the method of text analysis, the study used four Malay humorous tales (Cerita Jenaka Melayu); Pak Pandir, Pak Kaduk, Pak Belalang and Si Luncai. The findings of the study clearly showed that the West was biased in their perspective of the communities that were colonised by them. Thus, this study was able to prove that the Western perspective of the 'lazy and stupid Malays' was only intended to undermine the dignity and self-respect of the colonized community. In conclusion, through the literary works alone as a medium to capture the image of the community, all the negative perceptions with regard to the native peoples can be dealt with and explained rationally.

**Keywords:** 'Lazy Malays', 'Stupid Malays', West, Malay Humorous Tales.

## Introduction

The rapid expansion of the Western colonialization of the Malay world, especially in the 19th century, basically aimed to dominate raw materials (Leur, 1955; Vlekke, 1965; Bastin, 1965; Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Darwish et al 2018). With this objective, the British colonials attempted to boost their economic interests in Malaya. The same goes for the Dutch colonials in Sumatra, Java Island and its surroundings. In this context, what is interesting is the strategy adopted by the two colonial powers in realizing their colonial goals. The colonial powers at that time were of the view that the goal of mastering raw materials could be achieved easily and effectively, if they also controlled politics and society, especially of the indigenous culture that was colonized (Al-Attas, 1969; Milner, 1995; Cohn, 1996; Ungku, 2009). This stance later spawned colonial strategies aimed at supporting the goals of obtaining raw materials (Milner, 1982; Gullick, 1995; Tiwon, 1999). In other words, the occupations by British and Dutch colonials in Malaya were strategically and systematically addressed such that indigenous people themselves considered it as a good thing that occupation should happen to them (Alatas, 1972; Stockwell, 1982). In the context of this strategy, the colonial powers propagated the slogan "the white man's burden" which reflected the idea of colonial supremacy and indigenous inferiority. With that idea, colonization was portrayed as a colonial "holy mission" to civilize the natives (Stockwell, 1982; Loomba, 1998; Noriah, 2016). This so-called "holy mission" was based on the perspective that the colonized society needed to be guided so as not to continue to inherit the weaknesses of their ancestors (Wilkinson, 1907; Milner, 1995; Cohn, 1996; Ungku, 2009).

Observations by Western colonial scholars of the Malay community had concluded two negative responses that they think were significant to them, 'the lazy Malays' and 'the stupid Malays' (Alatas, 1972; Ungku, 2009). Accordingly, local scholars such as Alatas (1972) have disputed this with the view that this perspective, as stated by John Crawfurd, Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham, Hugh Clifford, Isabella Bird, Emiley Innes and several others, was done recklessly without being proven by critical research. Furthermore, several other local scholars have also expressed their opinions on the Western perspective regarding its tendency to colonize society (Nik, 2000; Ismail & Muhammad, 2000; Ahmad, 2008; Abdul, 2012; Azmi, 2012). According to these scholars, this Western colonial perspective is more 'euro-centric' which subtly highlighted the weaknesses of the colonized society and obscured the greatness of indigenous civilizations to relegate their presence in the colonial regions.

Starting from this point, several questions need to be answered, firstly, whether the perspective of the colonial masters represents the true reality of life in the community. Is the primary motive of Malay's humorous tales to entertain audiences only by simply telling the story that 'Malays are lazy' and 'stupid Malays'? This led to the construction of two objectives as below:

- i. To identify a Western perspective on 'Malays are lazy' and 'stupid Malays'; and
- ii. To analyse the perspective that truth is based on the Malay humorous tales.

Then four stories of *Si Luncai*, *Pak Pandir*, *Pak Kaduk* and *Pak Belalang* of *Cerita Jenaka Melayu* (Hassan, 2007) as the initial recording of a society were used as research material. Finally, the selection of study materials can be justified as per the opinion of Liaw (1978, p.8) on the 'hidden intelligence' in the genre of folk literature (joke stories), as follows:

"Joke stories are a famous form of literature. The characters depicted sometimes cause misunderstandings to bring trouble to others. At times, this figure, despite his people's jokes, has extraordinary intelligence. It is this intelligence that helps him escape from adversity".

### **Methodology**

This study used textual analysis of the works of four (4) Malay humorous tales by focusing on a number of activities to accomplish two objectives of this study. To complete the first objective of identifying a Western perspective on 'Malays are lazy' and 'stupid Malays', the activities identified three perspectives by three (3) elected Western colonial masters that Malays are lazy and stupid.

For the second objective of analysing the complete truth of these perspectives based on Malay humorous tales, the activities carried out were:

- i. Analysing the perspective of 'lazy' and 'stupid' in Malay humorous tales; and
- ii. Assessing the truth of the perspective based on Malay humorous tales.

At the end of the study, the Western colonial perspective that can be duly justified by Malay folklore is the earliest evidence of thought and values held by society before the foreign occupation began.

### **Analyses and Discussion**

#### **i) Colonial Perspective of 'Lazy Malay' and 'Stupid Malay'**

Western colonialists used education as one of the means to prepare for their arrival in the region (Putten, 2006). This element had enabled the missionaries to spread Christianity subtly and meticulously designed for the Malay community. The accusations that the Malay community did not advance in science because they inherited their ancestors' thoughts, and that religion did not lead them to civilization and scientific thinking, were the justification for the colonialists to assume the role as counsellors to the advancement of the colonized society. Putten (2006, p. 427) stated it as follows:

"Malays should therefore forsake their blind trust in the old traditions and adapt 'the new knowledge of narratives'. So, they will become as clever as Europeans."

'Orientalism' is a type of colonial scholarship which refers to "a research activity of orientalists in the West on the religions of the East; especially on Islam" (Joesoef, 1985, p. 1-2). Meanwhile, according to Said (1977, p. 1-4), 'orientalism' is a method of understanding the Eastern world by 'orientalists' based on the observations of the Western society, which includes the following:

- i. Research on the Eastern world by Western anthropologists, sociologists or philologists.
- ii. Study the differences of thoughts based on ontologism and epistemology between the Eastern and Western worlds.
- iii. Dominate and structure Eastern society through statements about the Eastern world; especially related to religion, culture adapted to their wishes.

This colonization was carried out according to the meticulous planning arranged by several Western colonial powers, such as the Portuguese (1511-1641), the Dutch (1641-1824) and the British (1824-1957) who openly introduced capitalism through its trading companies, such as the East India Company. The development of the Theory of Evolution by Charles Darwin had shaped the perspective of the 'white man's burden' as the dogma of the height of civilization of the Caucasian society towards the world. This led to belief that this group had the social responsibility to civilize other communities through their colonial mission. What is interesting is how the functionalist colonial scholars emphasized the importance of every member of society to dare to abandon traditional practices and religious beliefs if they want to succeed in life (Rahimah & Arbaie, 2018)

The study of Malay culture and literature, which consideration and common sense' Malays has led to some positive elements and negative conclusions by the public. Among them was the revelation that the community liked to laze around, was not interested in science, which led to their ignorance, causing issues like debt, and multiple perspectives mostly to show that the community was "weak" and required guidance. Furthermore, the West attempted to separate 'Islam' and the community gradually with the introduction of realism that emphasizes the logical and proper framework of Western literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This had led to the diminishing of the main elements that made up the Malay identity.

The next step of this study was to choose the perspectives of three (3) prominent Western colonial masters who were directly involved in the administration of the colonies in the states of Malaya. The perspectives selected were that of Stamford Raffles, Frank Swettenham and Hugh Clifford. The justification of this choice was that all three figures were the highest officials in the British administration whose opinions were significant to the colonized society.

Scholars, like Raffles (1830), argued that the Malay community was a nation of lazy people and did not have a high intellectual level. Furthermore, according to him, there was nothing in their legal system that could change that attitude. Links to the Malay proverb that 'living will not be a handful' was said to have caused the Malays' lack of motivation to do more for their success or their wealth, and continued to be satisfied with what they already had, as quoted in the following passage:

"In reviewing the train of circumstances that have conducted to the present state of the country and people, we are forced to admit there has been much misgovernment; and if we now find the people poor, lazy, avaricious, and intractable, we must pause to consider how much of those vices may not be owing to the circumstances in which they have been placed, and the treatment they have experienced."

(Raffles, 1830, p. 474).

Raffles also expressed his opinion about the 'Malays' stupidity' who accepted religion and inherited ignorance from that religion. Raffles (1830) opinion is extreme against Islam, but as an Orientalist, he must advocate this understanding to the community in order to separate their lives from religion as held by the West after the industrial revolution in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Raffles' opinion (1830, p. 144) was presented as follows:

“Those subjected to the Mahomedans appear to be mostly tractable and mild disposition, but wretchedly sunk in barbarous stupidity as to submit to every indignity without resistance, while those who still retain their independence, and who are to be considered as the bulk of the original population, form innumerable ferocious tribes, constantly at variance with each other, and individually rejecting internal government and control.”

Meanwhile, Swettenham (1895), in the *'Malay Sketches'*, opined that the Malay community was a primitive society; lazy, rebellious and opposed to modernization. He also said that the Malays liked to do things that do not bring benefits, such as gambling, cock fighting and spending time to sleep. Swettenham (1895) also noted that the Malays had refused to work and their nature was difficult to change. In addition, the community was also wasteful and did not like austerity. The following passage (Swettenham, 1895, p. 3) is an example of his statement:

“He is however lazy to the degree is without a method or order of any kind, knows no regularity even in the hours of meals, and considers time as no importance. His house is untidy, dirty but he bathes twice a day, and is very fond of personal adornment in the shape of smart clothes.”

Malays was described as 'stupid' when Western colonial opinion was given on issues concerning Islam. For example, when Swettenham expressed his opinion on the issue of early marriage in the community that limited women's to choice in their future husbands. In fact, women had to accept it without objection, because they were promised a life of happiness with their husband as described below:

“Thus, some stupids persuade her that his worship and passion, she will find the World's Desire, and it is only after perhaps a long-varied experience that she realizes that having started for a voyage on the ocean, she finds herself seated at the bottom of a dry well”.

(Swettenham, 1895, p. 11)

Master colonial Clifford (1897) described Malays as 'lazy' and less concerned about cleanliness. This was illustrated by the dirty and irregular condition of the house, coupled with the lazy nature of work and the stupidity of those who liked cock-fighting. The game was not just about free time hobbies but more of gambling and business deals. This is illustrated in the statements as follows:

“The Pahang Malay, in his unregenerate state, thinks chiefly of deeds of arms, illicit love intrigues, and the sports which his religion holds to be sinful. He is a cock-fighter, a gambler, and a brawler; he has an overweening opinion of himself, his country, and his race; he is at once ignorant, irreligious, and unintellectual; and his arrogance has passed into a proverb.”

(Clifford, 1897a, p. 13)

“The Slim Valley lies across the hills which divide Pahang from Pêrak. It is peopled by Malays of various races. Râwas and Měngkâbaus from Sumatra, men with

high-sounding titles and vain boasts, wherewith to carry off their squalid, dirty; poverty; Pêrak men from the fair Kinta valley, prospecting for tin, or trading skilfully; fugitives from Pahang, long settled in the district; and the sweepings of Sumatra, Java, and the Peninsula.”

(Clifford, 1897a, p. 39)

The three (3) perspectives of the famous British (Western) scholars above represent the general colonial view on the attitude of the Malay community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century based on their observations as colonial officials. They labelled the Malay as poor and less educated, and, as a result, did not love science and consequently caused laziness to change their fate. The Malays were described as living in a filthy home environment, could not think to progress forward due to the constraints of religion and culture held so long. Therefore, they came to the region to deliver education to the community and change the natives' lives so that they could be as successful as European nations (Putten, 2006). Therefore, four (4) Malay folklores were selected to explain the truth of the Western perspective by taking into account various factors accordingly.

#### **ii) Malay Humorous Tales's Perspectives of The 'Malay Lazy' and 'Stupid Malay' Myth**

Researching Malay humorous tales, as shown by the story of *Pak Kaduk*, where the Pak Kaduk character liked to indulge in cockfight and gambling activities. Western scholars regarded this game as a waste of time and associated it with the 'laziness' of an individual. Through *Pak Kaduk's* story, this game was described as very popular activity in Kampung Cempaka Seri, which is described by the following passage:

‘So, one day, Pak Kaduk said to his wife, “Mak Siti, I would like to go to the cockfight arena, because I like to watch people with their cocks fighting in large numbers there. Let's get Si Kunani our cock to fight, because it is a very lucky chicken’.

(Hassan, 2007, p. 45)

The cockfight game in Malay society not only involved the commoners but also the royals. This proves that cockfighting involved all hierarchies in the community and was not just for a certain group of the people. It indirectly describes how, through this game, each group of people would leave their status and rank upon entering the arena to enjoy the game. Furthermore, as per the opinion of Ismail (2008, p. 42), the game is considered to be an escapism for the traditional Malay society. Through this game, they could relieve the stress of life or forget the hardships of poverty experienced. The reward for the winner was to further promote themselves to the Malay community. From the perspective of Western colonial masters, this activity was linked with 'laziness' and 'ignorance' of the Malays, but was too superficial without trying to explore the ability of people to have fun despite life's constraints and deprivation. In addition, 'ignorance' cannot be associated with this game because the community did not get into cockfighting without specific animal science that was developed over time. For example, as noted in the Malay manuscripts *Petua Menjaga Lembu, Anjing, Burung dan Kucing (The Preliminary Tips of Cows, Dogs, Birds and Cats-MSS2151)*, there were rules used by the community in selecting animals for the pet owner to have higher chance of success. For example, as shown in the manuscript which stated the tips for choosing chickens and birds, namely:

' [...] has full hair all over his body; this bird is well cared for because of its great luck; birds that have yellow skin (like *borek* chicken skin), these birds are well kept because they are very lucky; [...] His master is kept away by Allah from all dangers and if kept at home will get lasting wealth'.

Through *Pak Belalang's* story, Pak Belalang and his son were portrayed as astrologers who practised it for a living. For example:

'So, one day, Pak Belalang said to his son, Si Belalang, "O my son, what is this for us? There is nothing that can be used as food for our children. [...] So, they stopped at Pak Belalang's house, and brought many gifts, from rice, tobacco, gambir, fish and others; worth fifty dirhams.'

(Hassan, 2007, p. 88-89)

If seen superficially, it appears that Pak Belalang is too 'lazy' to find a job that is beneficial to his family. The fact is that the poverty experienced by the community had resulted in a lack of initiative and effort to change lives. This is explained in *Pak Belalang's* story of how this character uses 'lies' to get rewards from the government (king) coupled with 'survival' tactics to escape being killed by the king due to the misconception of divination. Indirectly, this reflects that the 'stupid Malay' perspective by colonial masters is not accurate because the character Pak Belalang was able to think outside of the box to change his life and escape being ill-treated by the government (king). As a result, Pak Belalang was successfully appointed as a Royal Astrologer, which directly raised his status and prestige to the highest level in the strata of society due to his initial 'lie'. This illustrates how the community was not 'lazy' and 'stupid', because the character can adapt to the environment. Individual rights of 'survival' that are supposed to be a positive inspiration to the present generation are sustained by allegations of life's challenges.

The story of *Si Luncai* reflects the situation of the Malay community who were skilled in agriculture and trade, and had made this activity to establish their lives as follows:

'As for the life of Si Luncai, he took the wages of pounding and drying rice and selling firewood; That is all that matters.'

(Hassan, 2007, p. 107)

The quoted sentence above shows that the main occupation of Si Luncai was pounding, drying rice and selling firewood. The society at that time was known as a traditional society which focused on employment in the agricultural sector. This is compounded by the environment at that time, which was filled with forest greenery where relevant agricultural and forestry activities were performed. So, accusations of 'stupid Malay' were not based on reality, as the community tried to use available resources as much as possible. Furthermore, according to Hassan (2007), the background of the *Si Luncai* story was far from the village of Malaya and was geographically isolated. Thus, Si Luncai's ability to interact with nature and used it for a living is something that should be admired and emulated.

The same situation happened to Pak Pandir, because he subsisted without working for the benefit of certain parties. Among the jobs featured in the humorous story were fishing and planting rice. According to Mohd (2015), the community around the 19<sup>th</sup> century defined the form of the economy as inherently self-sufficient, and traditional, less competitive with small-scale production at a low level of productivity. Thus, it is evident that the Malays still maintained the effort and enthusiasm in carrying out their work independently. The Western perspective that associated Malay with a 'lazy' attitude is directly rejected. The perspective of 'stupid Malay' should also be rejected because any agricultural activity run by Pak Pandir requires certain skills such as making fish traps to catch fish, which cannot be done by ordinary people. The passages below prove that catching and smoking fish were the skills present at that time and directly reject the perspective of 'Malay stupid' thrown by colonials as follows:

'Then, Pak Pandir lifted up the *limbat* fish on the cliff and knocked it down with his machete. He lit the fire, and he arranged the fish on the ignite and smoked it'.  
(Hassan, 2007, p. 75)

The story of *Pak Kaduk* also described the placement of the community which were mostly located on the river shore. This reflects the thinking prowess of the Malay community in understanding the concept of the river ecosystem as well as taking advantage of the surroundings. In addition to the river as a medium of transportation, it was also used to earn a living and was a source of water for survival. As stated by Metzger (2002, p. 43); the life of the community was organized so that they did not have to make a living outside of their place of origin. They depended on paddy, forests, rivers and the sea. It is clear that the community used their discretion to take advantage of their surrounding, which was also the main source of their income. They did not have to leave the 'comfort zone' to change lives. However, the Western scholars were incapable of understanding the thoughts and values held by the Malays. Excerpts from *Pak Kaduk's* story below proves this situation as follows:

'After the next day, in the morning, Pak Kaduk got up ready to put on his clothes, then went down to carry the paddler, and walked towards the jetty.'  
(Hassan, 2007, p. 49)

'Even then, the next day, in the morning, Pak Kaduk got up to unload his anchor while paddling slowly daily, until the evening when he reached his friend's house, while lifting all his belongings up there'.  
(Hassan, 2007, p. 51)

Malay humorous tales's function is to entertain through acts of stupidity and stupid characters. However, researching the story of *Pak Pandir* found the perspective of 'stupid Malay' revealed in these humorous tales as untrue. This is because the reality behind 'stupidity' is the presence extraordinary 'intelligence'. The example can be seen in the story of *Pak Pandir* against a giant who wanted to kill him. Through the wisdom of Pak Pandir by giving suggestions to two giants to cross the river using large jars and yam leaves (*birah*) to cover the water that enters the jug. Finally the jars were flooded with water and the two giants drowned. Thus, this story has defied the myth that the Malay community had no scientific knowledge. It is proven that they could still use common sense and logic to save themselves for the sake of 'survival'. As opined by Hashim et al. (2012), Malays are reliable,



intelligent and agile, because they have a strong heart and great discretion. It is clear that, despite the entertainment present in the Malay community based on the tales, the reality of life is clearly stated in the following passage:

'So, the giant was about to dive into the river. Pak Pandir said, "Don't let the giant cross here; go and get a big pot at the grandson's house and one by one, the giants can make a boat to cross here." So, Pak Pandir said, "Let one giant enter the jar. Then cover with birah leaves so that water does not get inside." Then, Mr. Pandir said, "Fight, giant!" Then, the two giants pounded the birah leaves on the lid of the jar. After the leaves were broken, the water got into the jar. So, the giants immediately wanted to get out of the jar, but his nose was full of water. He drowned and the jar was sinking into the water; and immediately sank into the deep. Then the second giant died'.

(Hassan, 2007, p. 70-71)

The above passage clearly demonstrates the ability of the Malays to think despite not having a formal education and living in deprivation. They were still able to think critically for their survival. Malay humorous tales reveal that at an early stage, the public rebuts the Western perspective.

### Conclusion

This study can answer both objectives of the study, which aims to examine the early life of society, the genre of folk literature (such as jokes) as the most appropriate medium used as a research basis. The Western perspective must be corrected so that every justification for the colonized society needs to be judged accordingly. In conclusion, through post-colonial studies in the future, it is hoped that the rights of the indigenous people who are oppressed or repressed by the orientalist can be restored.

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