



Magazine cover *Inter-Ocean*, *Special British Malaya Number*. Photo title reads: "Friday Prayers at the Mosque in Kuala Lumpur".
Photo Nakajima.

Sandra Khor Manickam

Another Malay World: Dislocation and Dissonance between the past and the present

Assistant Professor Theory and Methodology of History

Half-heartedly browsing the online catalogues of used bookstores in the Netherlands for books on the history of Malaya, my homeland and main topic of research, I stumbled upon a magazine whose listed title announced itself as "Inter-Ocean. A Dutch East Indian Magazine covering Malaysia and Australia. Vol. 6 - August 1925 - Number 8. 'Special British Malay Number'". Since moving to the Netherlands, I noticed that as there was mostly an interest in the Dutch East Indies, books on colonial Malaya, a former British colony instead, were often sold for cheap. What was this magazine and why had I not heard of it? I wondered. Curious, I clicked on the "Bestel Nu!" (Order Now) button.

I was not disappointed as it turned out to be a tourist magazine published in Java by the United Netherlands-American Chambers of Commerce. The special issue was on British Malaya, and the articles that filled the pages were about the many sultanates under protection of the British and crown colonies that made up the term British Malaya. The purpose of the issue was seen as a way to educate people about British Malaya as distinct from Netherlands East Indies, and it is here that I began to understand why it was not familiar to me: I had not, until recently, been very much concerned with how Malaya was looked at from the perspective of those familiar with the other colonised territory from across the Straits of Melaka.

Research projects often begin serendipitously. As a researcher, I have material that I collected consciously from the time I was an undergraduate student which I kept on the off chance that it might come in handy someday. Other material, often the most interesting, and posing intriguing questions, are found by accident, like a piece that does not quite fit the puzzle. The case of this magazine is one

such puzzle to me, and prompted me to think about how colonialisms were compared between colonisers.

The study of colonialism is a study of unequal encounters and as such has continuing relevance to any history programme today. It is essential to understand different colonial pasts, and how they intersect with the present, in order to have an understanding of the world today. It is indeed my colonial past and present, as a Malaysian working in the Netherlands on the history of colonialism, that informs the dissonance in understandings of the part of the world I study. Many people I meet in the Netherlands do not grasp the differences between the Netherlands East Indies which became Indonesia (their understanding of the Malay world), and British Malaya which became Malaysia (the other Malay World). My (dis)location as a stray Malaysian in Dutch academia, becomes a basis for questioning and for my having to explain what colonialism has to do with it. In fact, in the magazine, I found a reflection of my experience, that even in the 1920s people were engaged with explaining this difference to audiences more familiar with Netherlands East Indies. The introduction by the Managing Editor G.G. van der Kop states that publishing special issues like this one was part of their policy to stimulate an interest for Malayan countries abroad as well as to further mutual understanding between Malayan countries. Furthermore,

“the Western Power in Southern Asia are confronted with the same problems and yet there are so many local differences that the mutual knowledge of the same can only tend to broaden our views and give us that priceless possession in this world of man of many races: a better understanding!”

Indeed, the cover typifies what one ought to understand about British Malaya, as explained by the caption “Friday Prayers at the Mosque in Kuala Lumpur”. The picturesque piety of Muslim inhabitants was picked over the industries and railways, over Chinese and Indian migrants ubiquitous in the tin-mining and rubber industries, and the indigenous people displaced by land alienation in the name of development. The articles within highlighted what tourists should know such as how good the railways were and what to expect of the “natives”. As a scholar more familiar with the history of Malaya, I wondered what the readers expected before reading these articles, and how such tourist pamphlets changed their perception of the Malayan world, if at all.

Within History @ Erasmus, we are engaged in research on history and its relation to the present. Often, present circumstances prompt us as researchers to look to history for explanations for how things came to be, and then we discover other aspects of the past that do not

find its place in the general scholarship of the area. Within studies of today’s independent Southeast Asian countries, the links between the territories are often not highlighted for reasons of space or expertise. It is this research that I hope to contribute more towards.

Further reading

Inter-Ocean. Special British Malaya Number 6, 8, (August 1925).

Joseph Chinyong Liow. *The Politics of Indonesia–Malaysia Relations: One kin, two nations*. London, 2005.

Manickam Sandra K. “Wartime imaginings of an archipelagic community: Fajar Asia and the quest for peninsula Malayan and Indonesian unity”. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18 , 3 (2017): 347-363.

Vikør, Lars S. *Perfecting spelling: Spelling discussions and reforms in Indonesia and Malaysia, 1900-1972: with an appendix on old Malay spelling and phonology*. Dordrecht, 1988.