

Review Article

The Malay Economy and Exploitation: An Insight into the Past

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have discussed the political and economic history of Malaya with an emphasis on British economic exploitation, but with little focus on the economic exploitation of Malay rulers before the colonial era. This paper is a qualitative study exploring the economic exploitation of Malay rulers before the arrival of the British using content analysis of secondary data. The study finds that the exploitation of Malays started during the time of the Malay Sultanates when Arabs, Indians and Chinese arrived as traders and middlemen. The rulers of the pre-colonial era gave preference to foreigners over locals, and this practice confined locals to low-wage activities. The economic isolation was magnified during British rule and economic policy. After independence, the Malay economy improved due to the efforts of the nationalist political parties in implementing the New Economic Policy.

Keywords: Economic exploitation, peasants, Malays, rubber plantation, tin mining

INTRODUCTION

The history of any nation is replete with lessons. These lessons play important roles in plotting the correct growth path of a nation. Although the history of the Malays in Malaysia in terms of exploitation and political revival has been vastly documented (see Alatas, 1977; Husin Ali, 2008; Milner, 2008; Mohamad, 2008), in contrast, the economic history and exploitation of Malays

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has been largely ignored (see Khalid 2014; Maruf 1988; Shamsul 1997). These studies have focussed on the economic exploitation perpetrated by the British while failing to acknowledge the conditions of the Malay economy during the Malay Sultanates. The Malays were economically prosperous (Mohamad, 2008). However, with the arrival of foreigners prior to the colonial period, the Malay rulers side-lined locals from economic activity and showed preference to foreigners (Shamsul, 1997).

In studying this issue, sources from local and foreign authors were reviewed to construct a fair and balanced view of the then state of affairs. Content analysis was applied to test our concept of the economic exploitation of Malays. For this purpose, the research articles, books and blogs were selected carefully so that authentic conclusions could be drawn. Codes were generated to be tested using the data. These codes were tested for consistency with the secondary data used in the study. During the analysis of the data, several codes were generated from which the findings and conclusions were drawn.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND MARGINALISATION OF MALAYS

In this study, “economic marginalisation” refers to the exclusion of Malays from the pre-colonial and colonial economy. The pre-colonial economy was controlled by the Malay rulers, whereas the colonial economy was under British control. The pre-colonial economy was less monetised, and most economic transactions were

based on the barter system. The overall monetisation of the economic system occurred during British rule. However, all the economic developments that occurred during British rule marginalised the Malays from participating in the main economic activities (Shamsul, 1997).

This section examines the exclusion of Malays from the main economic activities in two stages. The first stage highlights the discrimination of Malays perpetrated by their rulers, while the second stage highlights the restriction of Malays to the peasant economy by the British.

Limiting the Economic Freedom of Malays in the Pre-Colonial Era

The real transformation of Malays as a nation can be traced to the arrival of Parameswara in Malacca in 1402 C.E. He and his followers moved from Palembang, Indonesia to Malacca, which he transformed into the main trade hub in the peninsula. When Parameswara and his followers arrived in Malacca, they were able to build an economic hub. Parameswara promoted trade further by building strong relationships with the Chinese ruler of the Ming Dynasty. They promoted the trade of spices, tin and textiles. Arab and Indian traders also started arriving in Malacca, which they found to be a strategic port for trade with China during the reign of Parameswara (Husin Ali, 2008). The traders, who were mostly Arabs, Indians and Chinese, were paying a 10% tax to the ruler. The Chinese arrived in Malacca in a small number at first. When they saw the potential of trade and other opportunities of

earning, bigger numbers of their countrymen began to arrive.

Malacca's economy flourished, and agriculture activities were promoted as they yielded significant tax income. However, these taxes were mostly used for the rulers' benefit (Husin Ali, 2008). There was no benefit from those taxes for the common man as it was not meant to benefit the public. The Rajas then started giving preference to the traders as they were instruments for increasing their profits. They gave them more influence. This was a time of economic boom for Malacca. The arrival of these groups diversified the society in Malacca, which remained under the control and influence of the Malays.

The Malay Sultanates of Kedah, Kelantan and Malacca were economically prosperous before the arrival of the colonial powers. There was an established internal and external trade system with a good marketing and transportation system for locally produced goods (Mohamad, 2008). However, the same period marked the beginning of the economic exploitation of Malays by the Malay ruling class in the shape of *corvé* or forced slavery. During the rule of the sultanate before the arrival of the British, three types of slave could be found, namely royal slaves, debt slaves and permanent slaves. Royal slaves were not paid, and only food and clothing were provided to them. In fact, the rulers did not like their people, the *rakyat*, because of their low skills in economic activities and instead of helping them advance in such skills, the rulers neglected the *rakyat* (Gullick, 1958).

The arrival of Arab and Indian traders also transformed the economy by making it more sophisticated. Realising the potential of the market, the traders started marrying locals, a practice that strengthened their market influence. Their behaviour and economic savvy won them the trust of the Sultans and endeared them to the public, who accepted them into Malay society. Their fair dealings won the confidence of the society and made them trusted middlemen who facilitated the exchange of goods and services from the suppliers to the consumers (Mohamad, 2008). The Sultans' trust of the foreign traders over the locals marked the beginning of the decline of the economic strength of the Malays.

The second stage of exploitation of the Malays started when the Rajas began to prefer having the Chinese as trade agents, a trend that was magnified by the European invaders. When the Portuguese and later the Dutch conquered Malacca, the Chinese became their right hand in providing useful information regarding the people, the Rajas and the economy. The Europeans trusted the Chinese more than other groups, and as a reward for their service, the Chinese were allowed to expand their trade activities and more Chinese were permitted residence in Malacca. This marked a long and systematic campaign to marginalise the Malays and reduce their influence. By the time Malacca fell to the British as a result of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty in 1824, the only activity of the Malays was agriculture, while the Chinese and other foreigners were traders and merchants. The British put an end to

slavery, and the economy expanded rapidly. However, it was the British who benefitted from the economic development of Malacca, not the Malays, who benefitted the least.

The British Rule in the Peninsula

British history in Malaya does not start with the leasing of Penang. The British were using Dutch ports in the Malay Archipelago even before 1786. The closest British base to the East was India. However, the Dutch had a number of ports from the Straits of Malacca to the smallest islands in the Far East. This disadvantaged British trade. To gain access to the Eastern market, their trade ships had to use Dutch ports, and in return, the Dutch charged a handsome amount for the services. Due to the high transportation costs, the demand for British products was affected, and it became urgent for the British to have control of the ports in the Malay Archipelago. Francis Light, an ex-naval lieutenant, was in charge of merchant ships travelling to the East. Around 1772, he wrote several letters to his company in Madras, India proposing taking hold of Penang as a port before the Dutch excluded them from trade. However, there was no response from the higher authorities (Li, 1955) until 1786, when the Court of Directors acted upon Francis Light's recommendation. Penang was then obtained from Sultan Abdullah, the Sultan of Kedah, in 1786 (Yaakop, 2010). The Sultan of Kedah leased this piece of land, the island of Penang, to Francis Light, who was acting on behalf of the British East India Company (BEIC). This possession created a stronghold for the British in the

territory to provide a safe route for trade not only for the British India Company (BIC) but also for BEIC.

In 1819, the British influence was extended to Singapore with the help of Sir Stamford Raffles. By supporting the rival claimant in Johore to the throne, he was able to secure an agreement with the Sultan of Johore according to which Singapore was ceded to the British Empire (Li, 1955). During the Napoleonic wars, the British took control of Malacca from the Dutch; however, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, it was returned. Though due to the importance of Singapore for trade, Malacca lost its influence. This prompted the Dutch to exchange Malacca for a small portion of the British colonies in Sumatera as a result of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 (Li, 1955; Mills, 1961).

Malaya's interior was seen as an opportunity for the British due to the inter-state wars between the chiefs of the states. The British played the role of negotiator in the State of Perak, where a war was raging between the claimant and the possessor. The British supported the claimant to the throne and in return, extended their influence to the State by recruiting British officers to assist the ruler. The same transpired in Selangor, and British officers were recruited as advisers to the Selangor ruler. Similarly, British influence was extended to Negri Sembilan in 1874 and Pahang in 1888. These states were later federated, and a Resident-General was appointed to oversee the activities of the four states; the Resident-General reported to the Governor

of the Straits Settlements. All the four states agreed to follow the advice provided by the Resident-General in administrative matters, with the exception of religious matters. Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu and Perlis were vassal states of Siam until 1909. However, these states were given to the British after a series of agreements between both parties. The state of Johore was already under the protection of the British and by 1909 accepted a British adviser to the ruler.

Malaya's Economy

Malaya's economy flourished during British rule as the exports of tin and rubber to Europe made up the major segment of total trade. The data in Table 1 offer an idea of trade expansion in the Federated States of Malaya. Trade recorded an expansionary pattern from 1895 to 1925. Total trade after 1925 decreased due to the economic recession in 1929.

Table 1
Total trade at the time of British rule

Year	Imports (USD)	Exports (USD)	Total Trade (USD)
1895	22,635,271	31,622,805	54,276,076
1900	38,402,581	60,361,045	98,763,626
1905	50,575,455	80,057,654	130,633,109
1910	53,255,151	102,851,990	156,107,141
1915	60,015,935	181,838,118	221,854,053
1920	170,522,123	288,715,698	459,237,821
1925	137,116,207	411,878,610	548,994,817
1930	168,020,418	213,652,044	381,672,976
1935	87,102,149	186,770,827	273,872,976
1938	123,380,927	174,804,222	298,185,149

Source: (Li, 1955)

The beneficiaries of this trade were the British and other European nations supported by the British. Malaya was considered the "dollar arsenal" of the British because of the revenue it generated (Li, 1955). The British drafted several treaties with the Sultans of the different states that effectively gave them control over trade. The power of the ruler of each state faded over time as their control over their internal trade diminished. The produce of these states was eventually

sold to the British because of their control over exports. In the short run, it was an outstanding era for Malaya in terms of economic prosperity, with growth being observed in almost all the states. However, in the long run, this development created a multiracial society in which inequalities were escalated in both the economic and political spheres (Baker, 2008).

The two golden birds of the British economy were tin and rubber. The tin

industry, which was the major source of revenue for the British in the 19th century, started even before the arrival of British (Harris, 1940). The major beneficiary of tin was China, but in the mid-19th century, the demand grew exponentially due to the new uses for tin that were found in the West. Before the industrial revolution in the West, the tin industry was in the hands of the Chinese. However, when the British realised the potential of this industry, they started to encroach on the Chinese share of the market, as can be seen from studying Table 2.

Table 2
The share of the Europeans and the Chinese in tin mining

Year	European Mines	Chinese Mines
1910	22%	78%
1915	28%	72%
1920	36%	64%
1925	44%	56%
1930	63%	37%
1935	66%	34%
1937	68%	32%

Source: (Li 1955)

The British did not use direct force to take away the mining share from the Chinese; instead, they updated their technology, which decreased the cost per *picul* (*picul* is a Chinese weight unit that is approximately equal to 133 pounds). The Chinese were using old technology, which cost them USD63.11 per *picul*, whereas the British cost per *picul* was USD33.34 with the adoption of new technology. This led the Chinese miners to sell their business to the

British because of the ensuing series of losses incurred (Li, 1955).

When the demand for rubber was observed in Europe due to the popularisation of rubber bicycle tyres and the evolution brought about by Henry Ford in the automobile industry, the British in Malaya rushed to shift their attention to rubber. For commercial purposes, rubber was first planted in Malacca in 1895 by the Chinese, Tan Chay Yan. After seven years of the first plantation, approximately 16,000 acres of land were cultivated for rubber. The manpower in the rubber estate was mostly Indian as the Malays were confined to producing day-to-day consumable agriculture-based products.

During the first 30 years of British rule, the agricultural activities of the Malays revolved around subsistence paddy and *kampong* cultivation. During that time, for these peasants, the main purpose of paddy cultivation was to fulfil the needs of their family. Hence, they were not focussed on producing a surplus that could be sold in the market. In 1912, when the demand for rubber was high, the need for labour increased. One option for the British was to utilise Malay labour for this purpose. However, it was not feasible as the British wanted to reduce their dependence on importing paddy from neighbouring states. Secondly, the British believed that the Malays would run away from the work if their family in the villages forced them to do so. Such expectations of the Chinese and Indians were minimal as they had nowhere to escape to. That is why the Malays worked

only as temporary waged labour for clearing jungles rather than permanent waged labour in plantations and tin mines. In fact, they wanted to avoid working in the mines and rubber estates, where the labourers were treated inhumanely, and felt that they were better off pursuing agricultural activities (Alatas, 1977).

In order to overcome the shortage of labourers, agents were given the task of recruiting labourers under indenture from South India. Under the indenture, a cash advance was offered to the labourers that required him or her to work for a specific master until the advance amount was paid from his wages (Hagan & Wells, 2005). These labourers were brought to Malaya, where they worked in rubber plantations. However, they quickly realised that the amount they were paid was far below the market price. Hence, most of them ran away from their masters to other states, where they were rewarded with far better wages than those offered by the British. In order to overcome this issue, a proposal was made, according to which the labourers would be paid wages and would be free to leave. Hence, more labourers were hired from South India and brought to the British rubber estates to work in rubber plantations (Hagan & Wells, 2005; Netto, 1961).

In the first decade of the 20th century, the peasants realised the value of producing rubber, and started cultivation. This development was fruitful as it created a number of beneficial spread effects. However, when the British felt that this development may deviate the peasants from

paddy farming, they banned them from rubber production. This ban was carried out for more than 20 years but was partially effective as it was a profitable activity while the peasants were still engaged in it. Malay peasants were confined to 91,000 acres of land that produced low-quality latex (Drabble, 1991). The Malays were planting rubber trees parallel to coffee plantations in order to increase their income. However, due to their minimal knowledge and technology, they were unable to produce quality latex.

In the next 20 years, the plantations expanded to two million acres in Malaya. The production of rubber increased by millions of tonnes and generated millions of dollars of revenue due to the high demand in the West (Sandhu, 1969). The production of rubber in British Malaya was more than half of the rubber produced globally. In 1927, total global rubber production was estimated at 604 million tonnes, of which Malaya was producing 344 million tonnes (Baker, 2008; Li, 1955). The number of foreign coolies then outclassed the local coolies, and by 1929, the rubber companies were employing about 258,000 coolies, of whom about 85% were Indians, a few were Chinese and a significantly low number were Malays. By 1938, the British were holding a large area of land with 1.53 million acres under rubber cultivation. The Chinese were the second, holding 322,641 acres and the Indians, 87,795 acres.

In observing British rule and economy, the British can be seen to have exploited local resources without passing on economic benefits to the Malays. Much of the benefit

was derived by the colonial power and distributed among the foreigners. The locals were confined to paddy farming, where the profit margins were minimal compared with tin mining and rubber cultivation.

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MALAY ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

As discussed earlier, the economic exploitation of the Malays was started by the local rulers. When the Malays transitioned from barter economy to trade economy in the 19th century, the ruling class took maximum advantage of the change. Compared with their subjects, they had money generated from taxes and other commercial activities. The ruling class could have involved the local community in economic activities, and this would have helped the Malays adapt to the new economic environment. However, instead of promoting the locals, the British gave preference to foreigners due to their economic savviness.

Due to the trade control of the foreigners of the economic resources of the rulers, the locals were left to work for daily wages rather than to work as traders. The income they generated in the form of wages was only enough for their daily consumption. It could not produce a sufficient surplus that they could sell in the market to generate revenue. The lack of trust among the local chiefs towards the Malays prevented them from providing financial assistance for surplus generating activities. According to the ruling class, the locals were not good at managing money and were unaware of the new economic market. This resulted in the

dominance of foreigners and the ruling class in the business sector, while the locals were left in the vicious circle of poverty.

Economic transition started in the second half of the 19th century when the West invented new uses for rubber. With the increase in the demand for rubber and tin in the West, the British started to take charge of these markets. As discussed earlier, the British preferred to have Indians working in the rubber plantation as they wanted to limit the Malay peasants to paddy cultivation. However, tin mining was under the control of the Chinese due to previous treaties with the rulers. Later, the British took control of the majority of tin production along with its supply chain.

In order to promote paddy cultivation among the Malay peasants, a number of loan schemes were started by the governments of the respective states in the late 19th and early 20th century. However, they did not initially attract the Malay peasants due to the strict terms and conditions of these schemes. Also, the loan amount was quite small. The majority of those who availed themselves of the facility failed to repay the loans. However, the majority of the Malay peasants preferred to take loans from non-conventional money lenders. These money lenders disbursed large amounts of loans, for which many had to mortgage their land as collateral. Many of the Malay peasants lost their property as they were unable to repay their loans due to damage to crops or other financial difficulties.

The situation of the Malay peasants remained the same until the Second World

War. Help from the rulers could not be expected, and the rulers of both the federated and un-federated states in Malaya were acting upon the advice of the British government and were not interested in changing the economic situation of the Malays. They remained in the cycle of poverty for a long time due to little effort from the rulers and the British to lift them of the vicious cycle. In this situation, the need for political parties began to be seen to provide a voice for the Malays, the majority of whom were vulnerable, and to win them their rights.

THE REVIVAL OF MALAY POLITICAL ECONOMY

Before the Japanese occupation, the Malays were deprived of establishing a political party or organisation on a pan-Malayan magnitude. However, the events that occurred in the early 1940s pushed the British to galvanise the Malays into forming political organisations in order to gain support *in lieu* of the Malayan Union initiative of 1945. The creation of the Malayan Union was the first step in amalgamating the federated and unfederated states along with the Straits Settlements (except Singapore) into one union (Noh, 2010). Secondly, the proposal aimed to provide a stronghold for the British over Malaya's economy. Thirdly, and most importantly, it aimed to provide equal partnership arrangement between the British and the Malays. However, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) succeeded in replacing the Malaya Union initiative

with a form of a Malayan Federation by pressuring the Malay rulers (Noh, 2010). Another challenge of the pro-Malay political party was to strengthen Malay economy because the Malays were the poorest of all other races in Malaya. There were severe economic inequalities among the races both at intra-group and inter-group levels that needed to be addressed (Baker, 2008). The Malays were mostly linked with agriculture; hence, urgent attention was needed to establish institutions that could assist the rural Malays.

In order to answer these issues, the Chief Ministers of Johor, Kelantan and Selangor pressured the British government to help the rural Malay community. In response to their efforts, RIDA (Rural Industrial Development Authority) was established by the British government in 1950 and was legally incorporated as a government body in 1953. The sole purpose of RIDA was to provide help for the neglected rural small and medium Malay entrepreneurs to attain capital and skills in order to expand their business or to be a part of the buying and trading shares business (Gomez, 1997; Shamsul, 1997). RIDA was provided with a lot of funds and responsibility for promoting Malays. However, the efforts were mostly unsuccessful (Gomez, 1997). Golay (1969) noted that of the loans provided to the newly initiated enterprises and repayments, the performance of RIDA was the most modest. On the other hand, the capital loans that served as revolving credit fund ended up immobilised in illiquid loans.

When the first Five Year Malaya Plan 1956-60 was launched, another semi-government body, FELDA (Federal Land Development Authority), was set up in order to help poor Malays farmers by providing them with land for cultivating cash crops, mainly rubber and palm oil (Gomez, 1997). To achieve this goal, 250,000 hectares of land were given to the people in almost 150 FELDA schemes. However, many families were neglected. For instance, only 20,700 families were settled under this scheme from 1956 to 1970 (Kasper, 1974).

The Malay-orientated policies were not only limited to these two schemes. For instance, in the 1960s, the quota system was introduced for Malays in issuing business licences, employment and education. Furthermore, steps were taken to increase the ownership of Malays in the corporate sector. For this purpose, a special investment company, Syarikat Permodalan Kebangsaan (SPK), was set up in 1961 to act on behalf of the Malays. However, the share acquisition in the corporate sector remained insignificant, while in the public sector only a few of the shares reserved for the Malays were acquired due to the lack of funds (Horii, 1991).

In the mid-1960s, Malay entrepreneurs voiced their economic interest and succeeded in attracting government attraction. As a result, the first Bumiputera Conference was held in 1965, followed by the second Bumiputera Conference in 1968. Both conferences ended with strategies for establishing the institutional structure for the enhancement of Malay capitalist

enterprise (Shamsul, 1997). The racial riots of 1969 were a blessing in disguise for the nationalists. It provided them with a platform for developing pro-Malay economic agenda as it was necessary to minimise the income gap and poverty between the races. For instance, poverty incidence in 1970 was quite high among the Malays, nearly 90% of whom were earning less than RM100, and no Malays were earning above RM3,000 (Khalid, 2014; Khoo, 2005).

In response, an affirmative action policy, namely the New Economic Policy (NEP), was introduced in 1971. The main aim was to restructure society and alleviate poverty. The policy focussed on creating a successful Bumiputera economy and a period of almost two decades was set for achieving the goals of the NEP (i.e. 1971-1990). After the completion of the policy, many goals were achieved i.e. poverty had been alleviated, employment opportunities had been created and importantly, a new middle and rich income class were created among the Malays (Shamsul, 1997). The policy also created some problems such as the creation of a politically strong middle-class who used their links to secure government projects to benefit themselves rather than the poor.

CONCLUSION

The history of Malaysia is incomplete without mentioning the past economic prosperity of Malacca. The Arab and Indian traders were first to stop at Malacca before making their way to China, bringing tax duties to the economy. However, this

economic prosperity was limited to the ruling class, while the *rakyat* was economically suppressed. This suppression was magnified by the Portuguese, Dutch and later British, who used the land for their own benefit by exploiting the local population. The major economic activities were in the hands of the colonial powers and the Chinese, whereas the locals were concentrated in the agricultural sector. Tin mining was the first big-scale economic activity that was availed by the Chinese from the local rulers and politicians. The revenue was enjoyed by these two parties without benefitting the local population. The misery of the Malays multiplied when the British arrived and arrested control of tin mining as well as rubber estates and employed more Chinese and Indian manpower. The Malays were not only side-lined from the main activities but also confined to agricultural activities through a ban by the British on cultivating rubber.

Malay prosperity started after independence when different schemes were introduced to help rural Malays. The major positive impact on the Malay economy was observed after the implementation of the NEP, which provided special quotas for the Bumiputera community not only in the economic sector but also in the education sector. A new rich and middle class of Malays arose as the product of the policy, and they are currently playing a major role in the economy. This study has opened the doors for further research into the lessons that Malays learnt from their past

exploitation so that such exploitation can be avoided in the future.

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