Being Malays and Mohammadans: The Discourse of British Colonials during the Age of Imperialism*

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Abstract

This article analyses how British colonial discourse during the age of imperialism depicted the Malays—frequently labelled as "Mohammadans"—and the lasting influence of such portrayals. A review of existing scholarship reveals limited critical engagement with the origins and functions of these depictions, despite their deep roots in Orientalist and Eurocentric thought. Drawing on colonial writings, administrative records, and literary works, the study employs qualitative textual analysis to trace how such narratives conflated Malay identity with Islam and framed it as a cause of moral and intellectual decline. These stereotypes legitimised political domination, economic exploitation, and cultural hierarchy. While some British authors offered more nuanced portrayals, others perpetuated negative images that persisted post-independence. Malay resistance to "Mohammedan" signified enduring cultural and religious self-definition.

Introduction

Archaeological evidence suggests that the Malay world has been inhabited since antiquity. Over an extended period, various groups migrated to the archipelago, resulting in sustained demographic movement between islands, coasts, and riverine areas. In the early period, these diverse communities shared a worldview rooted in animism, ancestor worship, and the veneration of fertility forces. The Malacca Malay Sultanate, founded around 1400 CE, encompassed much of the Malay Peninsula and the east coast of Sumatra. Under capable rulers and an efficient administration, Malacca rose to prominence as a powerful kingdom. Its strategic position at the crossroads between East Asia and West Asia contributed greatly to its prosperity. Situated along major Southeast Asian trade routes, Malacca developed into a leading commercial hub, particularly for the spice trade. The ruler's conversion to Islam played a pivotal role in the religion's spread among the populace. Although the precise date of Islam's introduction to the Malay world remains uncertain, historical records indicate that Arab traders and Muslim missionaries/preachers were active in the region as early as the ninth century. By the tenth century, they had begun to engage in organised mercantilism. Early Muslim tombs in the region bear inscriptions dated 1082 CE (475 AH) and 1101 CE (495 AH). Malacca's ascendancy was disrupted in 1511 when it fell to the Portuguese, marking the beginning of Malaya's colonial era. The Dutch replaced the Portuguese in 1641, and the British assumed control in 1824. British intervention in Malaya's internal affairs—previously managed by Malay rulers and state officials—generated growing discontent. Central to this was the British policy of administrative centralisation, which bypassed traditional Malay authority structures and curtailed the powers of sultans.

Economic exploitation further fuelled dissatisfaction. British policies prioritised European interests, introducing forced labour and promoting cash crops such as rubber, which brought hardship to many Malays. Cultural and religious suppression accompanied these measures, as Western values were imposed and Malay traditions and Islamic practices were marginalised—perceived by the Malays as an assault on their identity and way of life. Land alienation was another grievance: large tracts were appropriated for European plantations and settlements, causing displacement and social unrest. Political participation was severely limited, with Malays denied meaningful representation or influence in governance, reinforcing their marginalisation. These developments—explored further in the discussion section—collectively nurtured resentment and contributed to the momentum of the Malayan independence movement. Historically, the British intervention in the Malay world was driven by the desire to secure territorial control, exploit economic resources, and bolster imperial strength in competition with other European

powers. Some British officials, however, presented their presence more positively through their writings, which served as "historical witnesses" by documenting events, landscapes, peoples, and personalities. In the case of Hugh Clifford, for instance, his literary work offers insights into the thoughts, attitudes, preconceptions, and motivations of the isolated European administrator in early Malaya. The process of such witnessing, however, is inevitably shaped by the observer's perceptual faculties, personal traits, cultural conditioning, and the intellectual climate of the time—limitations that are evident in the writings of British officers discussed in this paper.

Writing about a people, their identity, or aspects of their culture—especially when they are unfamiliar—requires careful observation, immersion, and a genuine effort to grasp deeper meanings. It also demands sensitivity to the subject so that ideas are conveyed with accuracy and respect. The same applies to the study of the Malays. Among the British authors, some acted as relatively successful intermediaries between the colonial administration and the local population. In *Malay Sketches*, Frank Swettenham (1850–1946) proposed an approach to understanding the Malays:

> In order to understand the Malay, one should stay in Malaya, speak the Malay language, and respect the customs and culture of the Malays. One also needs to have an interest in what enthuses the Malay—their jokes, and even help them when they are in grievances or sorrows. Then only can one win the hearts and trust of the Malays.[1]

This view is echoed by Richard James Wilkinson (1867–1941), who observed that the Malays did not discard the cultural elements inherited from earlier historical periods. Rather, these layers accumulated over time to form the fabric of Malay history. In his writings on Malay life and customs, he described this historical stratification as follows:

> ... he [the Malay] keeps the old while adopting the new. He has gone on preserving custom after custom and ceremony after ceremony, till his whole life is a sort of museum of ancient customs—an ill-kept and ill-designed museum in which no exhibit is dated, labelled, or explained.[2]

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1. Frank Swettenham, *Malay Sketches* (London: John Lane, 1895), 1. Frank Swettenham, a prominent British colonial official in Malaya, was instrumental in shaping British administrative policy in the Malay Peninsula.

2. R. J. Wilkinson, *Singapore Settlements* (Singapore: Straits Printing Office, 1895), 7.

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Like Swettenham, who conducted a study to understand Malay customs, he remarked:

> We must work historically. We can best begin by eliminating the modern Moslem elements … of the Hindu elements we cannot speak so positively … But, when we have eliminated these Hindu and Moslem details, we are still far from the bedrock of Indonesian custom; we have to distinguish between essentials and accessories.[3]

Wilkinson thus presented a view of Malay history in which Islamic and Hindu elements were layered upon indigenous traditions—what he termed the "bedrock of Indonesian custom."[4] Another significant contributor to the 19th-century study of the Malays was Hugh Clifford (1866–1941), who documented their history, way of life, character, and social practices. Clifford made deliberate efforts to socialise with the Malays and to study their language and culture in depth. His writings convey a genuine appreciation of the people and often reflect their own perspectives.[5] Alongside Clifford, numerous other British authors offered descriptions of the Malays and their Islamic faith, each from their own vantage point.

Although differing in tone and intent, these literary portrayals collectively contributed to a broader colonial narrative about the Malays and their Islamic identity. Within this framework, the British often depicted the Malays in sweeping terms, attributing perceived negative traits to their adherence to Islam. Such representations drew upon pre-existing currents of anti-Muslim sentiment—targeting so-called "Mohammadans" and the wider Muslim world—that had circulated in European discourse long before British engagement with the Malay world. Once disseminated, these images influenced subsequent perceptions, their historical origins soon forgotten, and they solidified into dominant narratives. The ideologies underpinning these portrayals were typically uncritical and superficial. British depictions of Malay Muslims—framed as "Mohammadans"—were shaped by broad generalisations rather than rigorous scholarship or nuanced engagement. This study examines these colonial portrayals and their ideological foundations through a qualitative analysis of British writings. Relevant materials have been sourced from repositories such as *Founders Online* and the National Archives. Digitisation by these institutions has facilitated access for researchers, enabling a reassessment of these historical narratives in light of contemporary scholarship.

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3. R. J. Wilkinson, *Papers on Malay Subjects, Part I: Malay Religion* (Kuala Lumpur: Federated Malay States Government Press, 1906), 5.

4. Idem, *Singapore Settlements*, 15.

5. G. C. Saw, "The Works of Sir Hugh Clifford: A Literary and Biographical Approach," (Master's Thesis, University of Malaya, 1969), 42.

Findings

British writers most frequently emphasised the Islamic faith as the defining characteristic of the Malays. Prior to the advent of Islam, much of the region was under the rule of the Srivijaya kingdom, which flourished between the seventh and fourteenth centuries and was deeply influenced by Hindu-Buddhist traditions. Indian merchants had been travelling to Southeast Asia as early as the fourth century, maintaining trade with territories under Srivijaya's control until the 14th century. The dissemination of Buddhism and other Indian cultural traditions played a significant role in fostering commerce and trade throughout the Malay world.[6] Consequently, British accounts often characterised Malay civilisation before Islam as fundamentally shaped by Hindu and Buddhist influences.[7] According to Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah—popularly known as Buya HAMKA—Islam first entered the Malay world via Pasai, a state in northern Sumatra, in the 12th century, brought by Arab traders who were also Muslim missionaries from the Arabian Peninsula.[8] While Pasai is generally acknowledged as the first polity in the region to embrace Islam, Malacca is widely recognised as having provided the principal impetus for Islamic leadership and governance among the Malay states. The arrival and expansion of Islamic civilisation from West Asia exerted a profound influence on the region. A key factor in its rapid spread was the religion's emphasis on the equality of all human beings. As HAMKA explains:

> *Islam telah mengaruniakan kepada orang kecil rasa harga diri, karena ia menjadi anggota daripada umat Islam. Padahal menurut faham Hindu, orang kecil itu tiadalah lebih, hanyalah makhluk rendah martabatnya daripada golongan kasta yang tinggi. Tetapi di bawah panji Islam, dapatlah ia merasa dirinya sepadan dengan mereka, bahkan dalam persamaannya sebagai seorang Muslim, kadang-kadang lebih utama pula ia daripada mereka yang tiada memeluk Islam, meskipun dalam susunan masyarakat kedudukannya masih juga pada tingkat yang bawah. Namun yang bawah di dalam Islam tiadalah hina, sebab nilai manusia bukanlah pada tinggi rendahnya kasta, bukan pula pada banyak sedikitnya harta, melainkan pada taqwa yang bersarang di dalam hati.[9]*

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6. F. H. van Naerssen, "Some Aspects of the Hindu-Javanese Kraton," *The Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 1, no. 1 (1963): 260.

7. Sir Roland St. John Braddell, "An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Times in the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca," *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 14 (1936): 1–71.

8. Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah (HAMKA), *Empat Bulan di Amerika*, 2 vols. (Jakarta: Tintamas, 1954), 2:65.

9. Ibid. The passage can be translated as follows: "Islam bestowed upon the common man a sense of dignity, for he became a member of the Muslim community. In the Hindu worldview, the commoner was regarded as nothing more than a being of lower status compared to those of the higher castes. But under the banner of Islam, he could feel himself on equal footing with them—even, at times, superior to those who did not embrace the

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Islamic tenets and principles have long served as the primary source of guidance for the Malays. While the core beliefs and practices prescribed in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah have remained unchanged, they have been expressed and elaborated in ways that accord with Malay customary traditions. Central among these practices are the "pillars of Islam" (*arkān al-Islam*), which the Malays have observed with consistency and devotion. During the British colonial period, the Malays were regarded as deeply committed to their religious identity and traditions. Their steadfast adherence to Islamic practice posed a significant challenge to Christian missionaries, who found it difficult to make converts among them. This perception is reflected in colonial writings, where British authors frequently depicted the Malays through cultural and religious stereotypes. Hugh Clifford, for instance, offered the following description of Malay society:

> He is a Muhammadan and a fatalist.
> He never drinks intoxicants; he is rarely an opium smoker.
> He is often studious even, and duly learns to read the Koran in a language he does not understand.[10]

> He is impregnated with the doctrines of Islam. In spite of his sensitive honour and his proneness to revenge, and in spite of his desire to keep his own women (when young and attractive) away from the prying eyes of other men, he yet holds this uncommon faith. He is not a bigot … he has a sublime faith in God. Christian missionaries of all denominations have apparently abandoned the hope of his conversion.[11]

Another figure deserving mention in a similar context is John Crawfurd (1783–1868).[12] Like several of his contemporaries, he was proficient in Malay and served as Resident of Yogyakarta in 1811, though he is better known for his later appointment as the second Resident of Singapore in 1823. Crawfurd authored extensive works on the Malays, viewing Islam as a positive force in their society. He observed that it had encouraged an interest in historical writing and contributed to the development of rational thought—qualities he believed had been absent during the Hindu-Buddhist period. In his own words:

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faith—despite his continued place at the lower rungs of the social order. Yet in Islam, low status is not dishonourable, for human worth is not measured by caste or by wealth, but by God-conscious piety (*taqwā*) that resides in the heart."

10. Hugh Clifford, *Studies in Brown Humanity: Being Scrawls and Smudges in Sepia, White, and Yellow* (London: William Heinemann, 1898), 42.

11. Ibid.

12. Crawfurd was appointed British Resident of Singapore in March 1823. He concluded the final agreement between the East India Company and Sultan Hussein Shah of Johore, along with the Temenggong, on 2 August 1824, formally establishing the British presence in Singapore. He also contributed to the *Singapore Chronicle*, the first local newspaper, on 1 January 1824.

> Previous to the introduction of Mahomedanism (Islam), the Javanese made no attempt to write history, and were as ignorant of chronology as the Hindus, with whom they were so intimately connected. The Mahomedan religion brought with it, as it did in India, a manlier and more sober style of thinking; and since the era of conversion, we are possessed of a tolerably connected and circumstantial narrative, improving in detail and in common sense as we descend.[13]

Crawfurd observed that only minimal traces of Hinduism remained in various Javanese customs and rituals, attributing this reduction—or, more precisely, this process of Islamisation—to the effective proselytising efforts of the early Muslim missionaries. Given the clarity of his prose, it is worth quoting Crawfurd at length:

> In most Mahomedan institutions of the Javanese, we discover marks of Hinduism. The institutions of the latter have been rather modified and built upon than destroyed; and in viewing them, we cannot withhold the tribute of our applause to the discreet and artful conduct of the first Mahomedan teachers, whose temperate zeal is always marked by a politic and wise forbearance.[14]

Yet some writers, notably Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles (1781–1826), offered a markedly different perspective.[15] His views on the religions of the Malays were shaped by bias and prejudiced assumptions, underpinned by the prevailing ideologies and methodologies of his era. Through his prolific writings, Raffles introduced European audiences to various aspects of Hindu-Buddhism among the Malays. Like earlier European Orientalists, he identified elements that were not overtly Hindu yet interpreted them through a Hindu framework, producing a distorted view.[16] One outcome of this interpretive approach was the portrayal of Hindu-Buddhism in the Malay Archipelago as inherently ordered, stable, and far superior to Islam. Raffles's first rhetorical strategy involved casting Hindu-Buddhism, as practised by the Malays, as the binary opposite of Islam. He devoted considerable attention to arguing that Hindu-Buddhism had fostered an ideal social order—encompassing the caste system

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13. John Crawfurd, *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1820; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 2:287.

14. Ibid.

15. Sir Thomas Raffles was a British colonial official who served as Governor of the Dutch East Indies from 1811 to 1816 and founded the port city of Singapore in 1819. He played a central role in the British capture of Java during the Napoleonic Wars and authored The History of Java in 1817. See his work, Thomas Stamford Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1830).

16. James A. Boon, *Affinities and Extremes: Crisscrossing the Bittersweet Ethnology of East Indies History, Hindu-Balinese Culture, and Indo-European Allure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 37–38.

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and notable achievements in the arts and sciences. These accomplishments, he maintained, were evidenced in classical texts and monuments, which he believed had been effaced by the coming of Islam. In his letters and writings, Raffles revealed a pronounced Romanticist impulse to recover the lost grandeur of the Malay world's Hindu-Buddhist civilisation. For him, that era was marked by poetic and literary creativity, in sharp contrast to what he regarded as the unimaginative works produced by Muslims in later periods.[17] Thus, echoing the philological scholarship of earlier Orientalists, he asserted:

> The general character of the language is strongly indicative of a former advanced state of civilisation, and illustrates, in some degree, the present character of the people. It is rich and refined; it abounds in synonyms [sic] and nice distinctions; it is mixed and easily made to bend and suit itself to every occasion; it is, in a high degree, expressive of power and servility.[18]

A comparable tone toward the Malays and Islam appears in certain works of fiction. Anthony Burgess, for instance, underscored what he portrayed as the barren nature of Malay society to convey a deep cynicism toward Islam and its expression in Malay culture and attitudes. In *Time for a Tiger*, Burgess appropriated symbols associated with Islam and Malay identity, only to subvert and repudiate them—an act facilitated by the colonial writer's presumed authority to write, and indeed rewrite, the cultural narrative.[19] Islam and Malay identity were rendered through a series of negative images that inverted their positive associations, with depictions of filth and monstrosity proving especially pervasive. For example, Burgess writes:

> … soon the *bilal* [muezzin] could be heard, calling over the dark. The *bilal*, old and crotchety, had climbed the worm-gnawed minaret, had paused a while at the top, panting, and then intoned his first summons to prayer, the first *waktu* [prayer time] of the long indifferent day. "*Lā ilāha illa'Llāh. Lā ilāha illa'Llāh.*" There is no God but God, but what did anybody care? Below and about him was dark.[20]

He then provided a detailed depiction of another side of the scene:

> And the dark shrouded the bungalow of the District Officer, the two gaudy cinemas, the drinking-shops where the *towkays* snored on their pallets, the *Istana* [palace]—empty now, for the Sultan was in

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17. Raffles, *The History of Java*, 2:371.
18. Ibid.
19. Anthony Burgess, *The Malayan Trilogy: Time for a Tiger* (London: Vintage, 1956), 3.
20. Ibid., 1.

Bangkok with his latest Chinese dance-hostess, the *Raja Perempuan* [the Queen Consort] at Singapore for the race-meetings—and the dirty, drying river. "*Lā ilāha illa'Llāh*." … God knoweth best. *Allāhu a'lam*. The nether fires awaited such—a hot house in naraka [hell]. Not for them the Garden with the river flowing beneath. He looked down on the blackness, trying to pierce it with his thin voice, seeking to irradiate with the Word the opacity of Kuala Hantu.[21]

Burgess's deliberate use of Islamic imagery—such as "a garden with the river flowing beneath," symbolising paradise—stands in stark contrast to his portrayal of the moral depravity of Kuala Hantu. The town is depicted as shrouded in darkness, a metaphor for the spiritual decay he associates with its predominantly Muslim inhabitants. In *Time for a Tiger*, Kuala Hantu is steeped in vice: drinking, womanising, and gambling are portrayed as commonplace, involving figures from the Sultan to the ordinary *haji*. This bleak portrayal reinforces the novel's broader critique of colonial Malaya. Burgess's derision of Muslim Malaya extends beyond its people to its religious symbols. He likens mosque domes to "a clutch of onions" and describes the *Istana* as "the great Hollywood vision of Baghdad, the vast vulgar floodlit Istana."[22] Such exaggerated depictions feed into a wider Orientalist narrative that exoticises and diminishes local culture.

In sum, most of these writers consistently framed Islam as the binary opposite of Hindu-Buddhism. In their view, Islam had brought decline and backwardness to the Malay way of life, casting Muslim societies as savage and in need of complete reform. Frequently, their arguments were vague and unsupported, attributing perceived shortcomings in Malay civilisation to Islam while extolling the virtues of Hindu-Buddhist traditions. These often amateurish interpretations were misleading and steeped in prejudice. Regrettably, the perspectives they offered on the Malays and Muslims became standard references for decades and continue to be cited to this day.

Discussion

The central aim of this article is to examine how the British referred to the Malays as "Mohammedans" and to explore the reasons underlying this designation. The British presence in the Malay world dates back to the 18th century—a period when scholars were beginning, albeit gradually, to study Islam on its own terms rather than treating it solely as an exotic foreign creed or the antithesis of Christianity, as had been the prevailing approach in earlier centuries. As Tolan observes:

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21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 25.

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> …medieval Christian writers did not speak of "Islam" or "Muslims," words unknown (with very few exceptions) in Western languages before the sixteenth century. Instead, Christian writers referred to Muslims by using ethnic terms: Arabs, Turks, Moors, Saracens. Often, they called them "Ishmaelites," descendants of the biblical Ishmael, or "Hagarenes" (from Hagar, Ishmael's mother). Their religion is referred to as the "law of Muhammad" or the "law of the Saracens."[23]

The term *Mohammedan* arose from the mistaken assumption that, just as Christians worship Christ, Muslims must worship Muḥammad—making *Mohammedan* seem, to outsiders, an appropriate label. This misconception reflected not only a failure of European imagination—in which Muḥammad was often cast as a distorted Christ figure, or even the literal Antichrist—but also deliberate disrespect and wilful ignorance. As one scholar observed when asked about medieval Europeans' knowledge of Islam: "Essentially nothing, as they showed little interest in understanding it."[24] Had Islam truly been what medieval or early modern Christians believed—either a form of paganism or a heretical Christian sect—there would have been little incentive to study it further. On the rare occasions when Arabic and Islam were examined, the terms *Islam* and *Muslim* were often treated merely as Arabic words to be translated. Arabic, the Qur'ān, and Islam more broadly were not studied on their own terms but were approached as tools for Christian missionaries to refine doctrinal arguments, with conversion as the ultimate aim. It was only during the Renaissance and Reformation that *Islam* and *Muslim* began to be recognised as more accurate terms, due largely to the westward expansion of the Ottoman Empire, which brought Islam into Europe's immediate sphere. Even then, widespread adoption of these terms took several centuries.

In the 18th century, Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) referred to "Mahometans."[25] An 1880 British India census report used both *Mohammedan* and *Moslem*: "Nearly 41 million are Mohammedans, so that England is by far the greatest Mohammedan power in the world, so that the Queen reigns over about double as many Moslems as the Khalif himself."[26] The "Mohammedan

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23. John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 45.

24. Ibid., 2.

25. Thomas Jefferson—principal author of the *Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786), governor of Virginia (1779–1781), U.S. minister to France (1784–1789), first secretary of state (1790–1793), vice president (1797–1801), and president for two terms (1801–1809)—holds a central place in American political history. His views on Islam and Muslims reflect both his advocacy for religious liberty and his complex, often contradictory, engagement with issues of race and slavery.

26. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination*, as quoted in Warren Dockter, *Churchill and the Islamic World: Orientalism, Empire and Diplomacy in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 9.

question" persisted into the 20th century in debates over, for example, the fate of Ottoman territories after British and French occupation, or the status of Muslims in British India and China. T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935), a champion of the Arab cause, used both *Mohammedan* and *Moslem*. A notably late example appears in 1971, when Sir Hamilton Gibb (1895–1971) published *Mohammedanism*. While acknowledging that the term was no longer preferred, he argued that "the term Mohammedan is not in itself unjustified, and in a less self-conscious age Muslims were proud to call their community *al-umma al-Muhammadiyya*."[27] By contemporary standards, Gibb's views are now considered outdated—and were already perceived as old-fashioned in 1971. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1935–2003) devoted considerable attention to critiquing Gibb and other Orientalists for their detached and often patronising perspectives.[28]

In the colonial context, the term *Mohammedan* was frequently employed by British authorities in ways that reflected cultural superiority and a lack of respect for the religious practices of colonised peoples. Its use implied that Muslims were misguided or inferior, framing Islam through a distorted lens. Such terminology fostered resentment and alienation among colonised populations while reinforcing a broader, patronising Western attitude—one that persists in some academic and cultural discourses, particularly in depictions of Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies. This discursive framing extended beyond language to the broader representation of Islam and Muslim-majority societies. Colonial and academic uses of *Mohammedan* reflected condescension and distortion, but the same attitude also appeared in the exoticisation or romanticisation of Eastern cultures. These portrayals—treating such societies as static and unchanging—perpetuated harmful stereotypes and hindered genuine understanding. As scholarship evolved, Islam gradually came to be recognised as a distinct and valid religious tradition, a process that began in the 16th century but did not gain wider academic acceptance until the late 20th century.

Beyond its colonial and academic connotations, *Mohammedanism* betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of Islamic theology. Muslims object to the term because it suggests, incorrectly, that they worship the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), as Christians worship Jesus Christ. Historically, the label also functioned within a heresiological framework, classifying Islam as a deviation from orthodoxy—akin to Arianism, Donatism, or Nestorianism, all named after their founders. Naming traditions after individuals is not inherently problematic—*Lutheranism*, for example, is accepted by adherents and outsiders alike—but becomes misleading when it distorts the core beliefs of the faith

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27. H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 2.
28. Ibid.; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 1978), 5.

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in question.[29] In Islam, the veneration of the Prophet is strictly distinct from worship, which is due to God alone. By contrast, Lutheranism does not involve worship of Martin Luther but centres on his theological teachings, especially his emphasis on salvation through faith and grace rather than works and sacraments.

A minority group within Islam, the Qur'ānists, reject the incorporation of *ḥadīth* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet) and Sunnah (his actions) into religious belief and practice. They also oppose including the Prophet's name in the *shahādah* (Islamic declaration of faith). In some cases, Qur'ānists have adopted *Mohammedanism* as a polemical term for orthodox Muslims, implying that they venerate Muḥammad excessively. This reflects an attempt to discredit traditional Islamic scholarship and assert the Qur'ān as the sole source of religious authority.[30]

During the British colonial period in Malaya, *Mohammedan* appeared frequently in official records and academic writings to describe Muslims, reflecting the British approach to classifying and governing local populations. For instance, William Girdlestone Shellabear (1862–1947) used *Mohammedanism* to denote Malay religious beliefs and practices.[31] While his writings sought to analyse Islam's influence on Malay society, they often did so through a colonial lens that oversimplified or misrepresented local customs and religious life. Other colonial officers likewise adopted this terminology to categorise Malays as Muslims and to distinguish religious and ethnic groups within the Malay Peninsula. This classificatory language formed part of a wider administrative strategy for managing the region's plural society.

Western scholarship has often essentialised Eastern cultures as static, backward, and unchanging—constructing a simplified "Orient" that can be studied, categorised, and reproduced. This framing implicitly positions the West as rational, progressive, and superior. The "Orient" becomes a symbolic stage on which the entire East is confined, allowing Western observers to domesticate what they perceive as foreign or threatening. Such Orientalist perspectives legitimised colonial domination and cultural hegemony. As European powers expanded and encountered Eastern cultures, they cultivated a perceived need to understand, classify, and control these societies. Orientalism provided the framework for this endeavour, though it was grounded more in stereotypes, reductive assumptions, and preconceptions than in genuine understanding. Closely related is the concept of Eurocentrism—a worldview that interprets

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29. Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a German theologian and religious reformer who initiated the 16th-century Protestant Reformation, leading to a major division within Western Christianity between Roman Catholicism and emerging Protestant traditions.

30. Daniel W. Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam*, 3rd ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 95–96.

31. Shellabear was a British missionary and scholar in colonial Malaya, known for his engagement with Muslim society and for translating the Bible into Malay.

all societies through European norms and values. As Edward Said argued, this perspective assumes the West's inherent superiority and casts non-European peoples as backward or irrational.[32] It further claims that white Europeans bear a moral obligation to "civilise" those deemed unfit for modernity unless they adopt Western ways. This ideology is underpinned by the "*White Man's Burden*" slogan, used to justify colonisation and annexation during European and American imperialism. Frequently linked to missionary activity among so-called pagans or unbelievers—including *Mohammedans*—it provided ideological cover for imperial rule.[33] The British applied similar reasoning in the Malay world. Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden* encapsulated this justification for colonial rule.[34] Over time, the notion became deeply embedded in British literature and intellectual life, reinforcing the belief that the empire had both the right and the duty to "civilise" its colonies. It fostered a self-image of the British as an exceptional people, entitled—indeed obliged—to explore lands beyond their own and "uplift" those they considered inferior.

This imperial ideology extended beyond poetry and fiction into the colonial press. Newspapers such as the *Singapore Free Press* helped shape public opinion by consistently promoting narratives aligned with British interests. This dynamic calls into question the Enlightenment ideal that rational inquiry can uncover universal truths. In practice, repetition and prominence in the media can elevate certain narratives to the status of "truth," regardless of their factual basis. Publications like the *Singapore Free Press* often suppressed or distorted facts to serve political ends, employing selective language and literary devices to reinforce colonial authority. Such discourse contributed to entrenched power hierarchies in colonial territories. In the Malay world, British influence expanded from the 16th century through trade, territorial acquisition, and imperial ambition. Despite rhetoric about uplifting native societies, British aims were driven by strategic rivalry with other European powers and the desire for economic monopolies. Malays—often labelled *Mohammadans*—were routinely portrayed as violent, irrational, unclean, and morally suspect. These portrayals justified domination and were part of a larger imperial strategy predating formal colonisation.

Language was a central instrument of this strategy. Through selective representation, the British reassured both themselves and the public at home that their imperial rule was morally justified. Such rhetoric cast the colonised as impoverished and dependent, in need of guidance, thereby legitimising British governance. Once colonised, the Malays were categorised as a "subject

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32. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 1978), 1 and 3.
33. Rudyard Kipling, *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling: Volume 2: 1890–99*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), 281.
34. Patrick Brantlinger, "Kipling's 'The White Man's Burden' and Its Afterlives," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 50, no. 2 (2007): 172–191, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/209518.

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race," reinforcing racial hierarchies. These classifications, embedded in colonial discourse, shaped perceptions of Malay identity for generations, fostering an enduring sense of inferiority and dependency well into the post-colonial era.[35] By consistently depicting the Malays as weak and backward, the colonial narrative facilitated resource extraction for the benefit of the metropole, while silencing the colonised in the telling of their own history.

An additional dimension to this discussion is the academic codification of Orientalism—the patronising Western stance toward Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies. Shellabear himself noted that the West tended to essentialise these societies as static and undeveloped, thereby constructing a fabricated "Orient" for study and classification.[36] Implicit in this framework was the belief that Western society was advanced, rational, adaptable, and inherently superior.[37] The "Orient" thus became a symbolic construct designed, in his words, "to make the Eastern world less fearsome to the West." This ideological stance played a key role in enabling and justifying colonial expansion. Despite the widespread official use of *Mohammedan*, many Malays resisted the term, preferring to describe their faith and practices using their own religious vocabulary. This rejection was not merely semantic but part of a broader effort to preserve cultural and religious identity under colonial rule. Refusing imposed nomenclature allowed Malays to assert agency and resist being defined by inaccurate or foreign perceptions. This rejection was particularly significant given the Malays' strong Islamic devotion, which contrasted sharply with the Christian frameworks implicit in colonial discourse. Their resistance also extended to Christian missionary efforts: many Malays avoided missionary schools, resulting in low enrolment among Malay children. Such resistance— both linguistic and institutional—was a conscious act of cultural defiance, reflecting their determination to safeguard their heritage and beliefs under the pressures of imperial rule.

Conclusion

This study has explored how British colonial discourse during the age of imperialism constructed and disseminated depictions of the Malays—frequently labelled as *Mohammadans*. Drawing on the works of administrators, scholars, and novelists, it has shown how these portrayals emerged from entrenched Orientalist and Eurocentric perspectives, reinforced by long-standing European misconceptions about Islam. British writers often conflated Malay identity with

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35. Said, *Orientalism*, 102.
36. W. G. Shellabear, *Mohammedanism as Revealed in Its Literature* (Singapore: Methodist Publishing House, 1915), 1.
37. M. Thomas, "Eurocentrism," in *Encyclopedia of the Developing World*, ed. Thomas M. Leonard (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 3.

Islam, framing the religion as the source of moral and intellectual decline, in contrast to an idealised Hindu-Buddhist past or the presumed rationality of the West. While not uniform, these representations shared a tendency to generalise and stereotype. Some figures, such as Swettenham, Wilkinson, and Clifford, attempted to engage more deeply with Malay language, customs, and religious life, producing more nuanced—though still culturally conditioned—accounts. Others, notably Raffles and later Anthony Burgess, reinforced negative interpretations, portraying Malays as indolent, morally suspect, and resistant to "civilisation." Such depictions were not merely descriptive; they served the broader imperial project by legitimising British political control, facilitating economic exploitation, and reinforcing racial hierarchies.

These narratives were disseminated through administrative reports, scholarly works, missionary tracts, and fiction, becoming embedded in both colonial policy and public imagination. Once established, they persisted well beyond independence, influencing educational discourse, shaping social perceptions, and contributing to national self-conceptions. Malay resistance to the imposed label *Mohammedan*, along with opposition to missionary schooling, reflected a deliberate effort to safeguard religious faith and cultural identity against imperial pressures. By embedding such negative portrayals into popular and academic narratives, the colonial enterprise was ideologically justified and the economic exploitation of the Malay world rendered acceptable—ultimately enabling the extraction of its wealth for the benefit of the British Empire. These harmful images, grounded in prejudice rather than genuine cultural understanding, left a legacy that endures in modern perceptions and underscores the need for continued critical engagement with the colonial archive.

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