

BOOK REVIEW/ ULASAN BUKU

***Pembandaran Kolonial dan Penghapusan Bangsa Melayu di Malaysia* by Norsaleha Mohd Salleh, Mohd Zul Fahmi Md Bahrudin & Nur Hanis Mohamad Noor (eds.). 2021.**

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1.0 Introduction

This essay is a personal review of the book *Pembandaran Kolonial dan Penghapusan Bangsa Melayu di Malaysia* edited by Norsaleha Mohd Salleh, Mohd Zul Fahmi Md Bahrudin and Nur Hanis Mohamad Noor. The book in question is published by the Interdisciplinary Research and International Strategy (IRIS) Institute based in Malaysia. The institute seems to be a body dedicated to the reinstatement of the Malay people in the future development of Malaysia as a nation of multicultural presence. The book in question is one of the attempts at resetting the narrative of history towards charting a more focused approach in helping the Malays in national development.

2.0 The Methodology of History

Before embarking on my comments and opinion about the book, I wish to state my personal stand on the purpose, method and limitation of the historical methodology. The study of history is indispensable to any society in the world. Only human beings make it an effort to document, interpret and narrate past events to find meaning in race, cultures, religion or political positions so that the rules and norms of the day be set in some order and that the future may be addressed in some way for certain people. The power of history lies not just in interpretations that vary from historian to historian but the making of a narrative from historical interpretations may create peace or total annihilation of a group of people. Such is the power of history. Of all history, religion is the most powerful form of historical narrative that forms the most destructive political force in humanity. Racial supremacy is the second while economic agendas as well as the ego of monarchs, presidents and Chairmans comes third and fourth. All will require an interpretation and a narrative made to move people towards a particular agenda.

Thus, for me, the best definition of history is the one given by E.H. Carr, a noted historian, when he said that history is the view that a historian takes while standing on a boat sailing in a river while looking backwards. Thus, the view that the historian takes is always in the present, but the perspective of history is the changing scenery when the boat follows the curves of the river. The essential message of Carr was that the historian is NEVER separated from the concerns of his time and his perspective of the

future. In one sense, history is not a window to the past but a reality of the present and a window to the future.

3.0 The Political Purpose of History

Again, before embarking on my comments of the book, I would like to make clear that all historical works have an agenda to grind. Whether this is accidental or intentional makes no difference. The IRIS Institute has a clear political agenda and the book in question also clearly shows that agenda. This is an acceptable fact in academia. The idea that academia must be free of any outward or external forces of personal faiths, values and concerns is not so most of the time and therefore forms part of any historical analysis. Historical commentaries cannot and should never be devoid of the particular concern of the historian at the time and his or her perception of what might be good for the future of his or her people or nation. I have therefore decided to embrace such limitations and assumptions in any academic works.

4.0 Nation building and Narrative Construction

Finally, one more issue before my commentary of the book is the issue of building a nation's narrative. I make no excuses that I, too, have an agenda of nation building in my academic work whether I am talking about Islamic Architecture, mosque design, university education and the writing of Friday Sermons, my intention is to create a society that accepts all people and give dignity to all faiths and heritage. There are those in Malaysia who views that this nation can only survive with the idea of the supremacy of one race and one religion only. For me, that is unfortunate, but I accept that particular view and take note of its concerns. Democracy is predicated on the idea that the voters will decide the direction and narrative of the nation. Thus, if the majority voters of one race feels inclined to support the 'Ketuanan' concept, then so be it, but that still does not change my stand on nation building.

5.0 Developing New Township instead of Strengthening Existing Ones

The book in question proposes the idea that the colonialists had a clear agenda of purposely ignoring the infrastructure development of the traditional Malay towns or 'bandar'. Traditional 'cities' of the Malays are located at the river pathways as the main transportation route as well as at the coastal areas for seafaring activities. There is hardly any serious settlement in the jungle interiors where no big rivers pass through in a calm meandering manner so as to facilitate the ships and other naval vessels bringing goods, people and warfare. The researchers produced their arguments in various documents and opinions of scholars.

The book does not elaborate on the alternative possible explanation of why the colonialists acted this way. One, I assume, is the development of the new towns and cities are predicated on a connection of roadways and train lines. The advance of motor vehicles with lorries and trains are the new means of transporting products, people and warfare. The construction of roads from modern materials, bridges of iron and train lines makes the siting of towns to be wherever the economy and budget as well as manpower, and machinery can be moved to. The rivers and coastal areas are no longer the limitation. Secondly, the choice of foregoing the traditional cities may have been to avoid clashing the non-Malay cultures with that of other 'kafir' faiths and cultures. The requirement of permission from the Raja was also probably needed and political as well as monetary concession may be too complex to develop the traditional existing settlements.

6.0 Military purpose of New Township

The planning of a colonial city as a military garrison is understandable. When a colonialist takes possession of a present city or is building a new one, military garrison architecture is paramount in defense against the locals who might instigate a revolt or the march and siege of an alien army. In the present day, missiles, drones and airplanes destroy the fortress architecture of old cities and thus these human settlements are no longer designed as military garrisons. Thus, the displacement of settlers is part of the military strategy to defend the city from internal and external forces. Therefore, the allegation that displacement of the Malays for political purposes ignores some of the military strategy that was required.

7.0 Preference of Non-Malay Leadership in Colonial Towns

The book also mentions with convincing arguments that the colonialists had chosen the immigrant people especially the Chinese to fill in critical positions in the governance of the new colonial towns. The book does not mention the population proportion that may have been the deciding factor in the choices made by the British. It would be understandable that the Malays were underrepresented simply because the Malays already owns lands for agriculture and sustain themselves well in the settlements. The Malays are also not familiar with a modern city governance as with other immigrants who came from China or India as developed entities of urbanization.

8.0 Displacement of People for Economic Development-Munshi

The researchers of the book also suggested that the displacement of people was part of isolating the Malays from economic development. That is certainly a perspective to be noted. However, Abdullah Munshi once noted in his writing that when he asked Stamford Raffles in Singapore what he was measuring, Raffles answered that it was for houses in the new town or city. Abdullah commented why is the land measurement so small such that one cannot plant anything or rear fish. Clearly Abdullah does not understand the new modern economy based on a new lifestyle and the services and retail industry. I assume, like most Malays who have land to build a house and ample place to plant paddy or other food plants as well as rear chicken, cows and goats, the Malays would have no need for small compact living in the new bandar or towns. This aspect of attitude about not understanding the modern future of towns and compact living were mostly misunderstood and thus the Malays never made many bids to buy property in the colonial towns.

9.0 Ethnic Cleansing Reference to Bosnia Tragedy

The most disturbing chapter to me is the one related to the suggestion that what happened in Serbia and Bosnia in relation to ethnic cleansing also applies to the cleansing of the Malay ethnic group from the new towns. Making this comparing and justifying the concept to what happened in history of Malaysia is a dangerous and politically volatile assumption. There are too many variables involved in a social construct such as ethnic cleansing in order to make a clean comparison and suggestion of similarity. For me this is the weakest part of the book and also the most dangerous as well as toxic ideas that would hinder nation building. I would propose that this chapter be taken out for the sake of harmony in the country. This kind of comparison is highly popular to opportunity politicians to gain votes by a toxic narrative of ethnic genocide.

10.0 Sources from One Race Mostly

I have noticed that the sources used to argue the points in the book come mainly from Malay sources and Western ones. Non-Malay Malaysian academics seem to shun away from this topic. The Chinese and Indian sources or citation are mostly those that do not contradict the researchers' race-based narrative. No interviews with academic historians of high caliber who are not Malays were attempted and this aspect of the research weakens the book in question. At the same time, I have never heard any debates on this issue of colonialists attempting a social engineering effort in the formation of towns in any academic institution or in the public realm.

11.0 Value of the Book for City planning, Urban Design and Nation Building

Having said all that, I still value the book for two important reasons. Firstly, it places a focused perspective of one race and that is an important alternate history that we must consider. I have often said in my talks and writings that historians of nation building must write a narrative of the nation that gives equal as well as complimentary responsibilities and acknowledgement to all the races if we want a heritage that is upheld by all citizens.

Secondly, the book in question should also be used as a platform to reengineer certain cities in Malaysia so that a more balanced presence of all races be included. At the present time, the city authorities are almost all made up of one ethnic group and they oversee most non-Malays living in these places. Such imbalance may recreate the toxic situation of May 13th and will restrict nation building among communities in the future.

12.0 Conclusion

In my final words to this review or commentary, I would like to emphasize two main points. Firstly, research with the eye of focusing on a single race narrative construct is academically acceptable providing the usage of such findings be carefully considered and tampered within a political scenario of total development and not some half thought sentimental affirmative action. Malaysia should be matured enough to accept the realities of history and the changes in the world without having academia succumb to some form of superiority complex concerning one race.

Secondly, the idea of nation building should take precedent in all research seeking justice for a particular community, be it the Dayak, Orang Asli or even the majority Malays. The role of the academic in this sense cannot be just to argue a point or place a narrative that is selfish in objective and self-serving in intention. The world of academia can make any argument for any situation under the guise of false scholarship or even 'excellent scholarship'. There are no peer reviews in this aspect of research, only mature individuals with a wider perspective of human co-existence within different and diverse societies towards a common goal of peace, prosperity and sustainable development.