AGENTS OF EMPIRE: BRITISH ENGAGEMENT IN THE COLLECTION OF MALAY MANUSCRIPTS IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

(Ejen Empayar: Penglibatan British dalam Pengumpulan Manuskrip Melayu pada Abad ke-18 dan ke-19)

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Abstract

British engagement with Malay manuscripts during the 18th and 19th centuries shaped both the preservation of indigenous literary heritage and the colonial project of knowledge production in the Malay Peninsula. This study employs a historical-qualitative approach to examine how colonial agents—such as Stamford Raffles, William Marsden, and John Leyden—strategically engaged with Malay texts through collection, translation, and cataloguing practices. These engagements were informed by intersecting motives of scholarly inquiry, administrative governance, and imperial ideology. While their efforts contributed to the survival of significant Malay literary works, they also displaced these texts

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from their original socio-cultural contexts and reframed them within Eurocentric interpretive frameworks. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of "travelling theory," the analysis explores how colonial translation practices altered the meanings and functions of indigenous knowledge. The study also highlights indigenous resistance and parallel preservation practices that challenged colonial authority. Ultimately, the article calls for a critical re-evaluation of colonial legacies and advocates for the decolonisation and revitalisation of Malay manuscript traditions within their native intellectual ecosystems.

Keywords: Malay manuscripts, collection, preservation, translation, literary heritage, colonial scholarship

Abstrak

Makalah ini mengkaji aktiviti kolonial British yang melibatkan pengumpulan dan penterjemahan manuskrip Melayu di Semenanjung Tanah Melayu dari abad ke-19 hingga abad ke-20. Kajian ini meletakkan aktiviti-aktiviti tersebut dalam konteks sejarah dan sosiopolitik yang lebih luas, dengan meneliti metodologi, motivasi, dan tokoh-tokoh utama yang terlibat dalam usaha British untuk mengumpul dan menterjemah karya sastera Melayu, menggunakan pendekatan sejarah-kualitatif. Analisis ini meneroka pengaruh aktiviti kolonial tersebut terhadap pemeliharaan dan penyebaran warisan sastera Melayu, dengan menekankan implikasi budaya yang rumit serta sumbangan positif terhadap bidang keilmuan. Makalah ini menyiasat hubungan kuasa, perlambangan dan keaslian yang terkandung dalam proses pengumpulan dan penterjemahan manuskrip kolonial. Hasil kajian memberikan pandangan baharu terhadap warisan penglibatan kolonial British dalam sejarah kesusasteraan Melayu dan, dari sudut pandang dekolonial, menekankan kepentingan menilai semula secara kritis hubungan kuasa yang mempengaruhi pemeliharaan budaya ini.

Kata kunci: Manuskrip Melayu, himpunan, pemuliharaan, terjemahan, khazanah sastera, ilmu kolonial

INTRODUCTION

The British colonial period in the Malay Peninsula, spanning from the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, marked a significant phase in the region's history, characterised by profound socio-political and cultural transformations. Among the most impactful developments was the British engagement in the collection and interpretation of classical Malay manuscripts. These efforts were not simply acts

of preservation; they were embedded in larger imperial strategies that sought to document, classify, and govern through textual authority. Malay manuscripts—rich in historical, literary, and religious content—were primarily written in the Jawi script and encompassed a diverse range of genres, including historical chronicles, epic narratives, legal texts, and religious treatises (Wan Ali Wan Mamat, 1997, p. 103) p. 103). British colonial scholars, recognising their scholarly and administrative value, undertook extensive initiatives to collect these texts. Their engagement included both transliteration—the rendering of Jawi script into Roman letters—and translation, the process of conveying the meaning of the text into English. It is crucial to distinguish between the two. While transliteration preserved the original structure and wording, translation introduced interpretive layers that often reflected Eurocentric assumptions. The issue primarily lies with translation, which frequently reframes indigenous knowledge to align with colonial narratives and intellectual paradigms (Richards, 2021, p.75).

Literary works within these manuscripts reflect the richness of Malay literary traditions, showcasing the language, storytelling techniques, and artistic expressions that are central to Malay culture. The epic tales and poetry found in these manuscripts are not only artistic masterpieces but also convey the moral and cultural values of Malay society (Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, 1997, pp. 22-35). The manuscripts also highlight the interactions and exchanges between the Malay world and other cultures, including Persian, Arab, Chinese, and Indian, enriching the cultural tapestry of the region. The maritime trade along the Melaka Straits has been the primary driver of the interactions between the Malay world and other cultures for centuries. The British colonial activities in the Malay Peninsula had a profound impact on the collection and preservation of Malay manuscripts. By establishing institutions and fostering scholarly research, the British played a crucial role in safeguarding these cultural treasures. However, the colonial context also brought challenges and complexities, particularly in terms of cultural displacement and the imposition of colonial perspectives on local heritage. Understanding this historical context is essential for appreciating the enduring legacy of Malay manuscripts and their significance in the broader narrative of the Malay Archipelago's history.

These efforts ensured the survival of many important documents that might have otherwise been lost. However, the removal of these manuscripts from their native context also led to cultural displacement. Proudfoot (2002, p. 125) noted that while the preservation efforts were valuable, they often overlooked the cultural significance and context of the manuscripts. These manuscripts provide critical insights into the socio-political structures, religious beliefs, as well as the intellectual and literary

traditions of the Malay world. The preservation of these manuscripts is essential for understanding the historical development of Malay society and the transmission of knowledge across generations. These documents have preserved vital information on a wide range of subjects, from theology to science, thus maintaining a continuous thread of Malay knowledge through the ages. The manuscripts also offer detailed accounts of historical events, royal genealogies, legal systems, and social customs, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of Malay society and its evolution. They not only record the historical milestones but also provide a nuanced view of the daily lives and societal norms of the Malay people, thus offering a holistic picture of their social structure and governance.

Subsequently, the British colonial authorities used the translation of Malay manuscripts to regulate the narrative of Malay culture. Richards (2021, pp. 59-103) argued that translators played a crucial role in disseminating and adapting knowledge, thereby impacting the Malay world's cultural and intellectual landscape. The advent of print culture transformed the accessibility and distribution of texts, contributing to the standardisation of the Malay language and the spread of literacy. Richards also highlighted the dynamic interactions between different linguistic and cultural spheres, including those influenced by Persian and Indian traditions, which enriched Malay literary and intellectual traditions, ultimately leading to a more cosmopolitan cultural identity. The colonial project, based on Edward Said's "travelling theory," explored how theories and knowledge systems were transferred across regions and reinterpreted within local contexts, which were essential in the formation of a distinct Malay cultural identity.

Additionally, colonial biases influenced selective translations that primarily served administrative purposes, often sidelining other cultural elements (Bastin, 2008, pp. 45-50). The commercialisation of manuscripts disrupted traditional practices of transmission, which were closely tied to social relationships (Gallop, 2002, pp. 27-30). Furthermore, the imposition of Western knowledge systems on Malay texts marginalised indigenous scholarship and devalued local intellectual contributions (Mohd. Zain Musa, 2007, pp. 59-62).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to investigate British colonial activities related to the collection and translation of Malay manuscripts. The objectives are to investigate the motivations and approaches adopted by British agents in the collection of Malay manuscripts; to assess the implications of these practices for the preservation and transmission of Malay literary and cultural heritage; and to critically evaluate the scope and impact of British

engagement in the collection, translation, and interpretation of these texts within the broader context of scholarly inquiry and cross-cultural epistemological frameworks. To achieve these objectives, the study discusses the complex legacy of British colonial involvement in the preservation and interpretation of Malay manuscripts, highlighting the nuanced interplay between colonial power dynamics and the efforts to safeguard and understand the literary heritage of the Malay Peninsula.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with British colonial involvement in the collection of Malay manuscripts has been critically examined through various disciplinary lenses, particularly historiography, philology, translation studies, and postcolonial theory. A foundational study by Proudfoot (2002) examines the shift from oral and performative literary practices to written and static modes of reading during the colonial era. He argues that British cataloguing and archival practices silenced indigenous textual traditions by detaching texts from their oral pedagogical contexts (Proudfoot, 2002, pp. 120-125). His analysis highlights how colonial institutions transformed the meaning and function of manuscripts, thereby disrupting their social and intellectual significance.

Richards (2021) further develops this line of inquiry by applying Said's travelling theory to the study of manuscript translation and print culture in the Malay world. Said (1983) introduced the concept of travelling theory to explain how concepts and systems of thought transform when they move across cultures, especially from the colonial metropole to the periphery. He argues that these ideas often lose their original meaning and are reshaped to fit new ideological contexts (Said, 1983, pp. 226-247). Richards contends that British translators and collectors recontextualised Malay texts to serve colonial epistemologies and bureaucratic governance, reducing complex cultural artefacts to administrative tools (Richards, 2021, pp. 70-75). Similarly, Jedamski (2005) demonstrates how colonial translation practices embedded Western epistemologies into local texts, often distorting indigenous values and systems of thought. However, Clifford (1992) offers a more nuanced view, suggesting that cultural exchange, even under colonial conditions, could be dialogic rather than unidirectional. His idea of "travelling cultures" allows for the possibility that Malay scholars actively negotiated, reinterpreted, or resisted colonial knowledge systems, thereby exercising agency within asymmetrical power relations. This framework is essential to understanding how translation and collection efforts involve not only linguistic transfer but also ideological transformation.

Gallop's extensive scholarship (1991, 2002, 2011) provides invaluable documentation of British archival efforts to collect, preserve, and classify Malay manuscripts. Her detailed studies of the British Library's holdings highlight both the visual richness of manuscript art and the systematic, institutionalised approaches to cataloguing employed by colonial authorities (Gallop, 2011, pp. 48, 73). While her primary focus lies in palaeography and preservation techniques, Gallop's work implicitly reveals the structural exclusion of local scholars in the archival process. This absence of Malay participation not only limited interpretive authenticity but also reflected broader colonial hierarchies that privileged Western epistemologies over indigenous frameworks. Expanding this critique, Hijjas (2022, pp. 42-45) offers a reassessment of William Marsden's manuscript collection, arguing that the British portrayal of their role as neutral custodians of knowledge veiled deeper colonial motives of cultural appropriation and control. Her study exposes the methodological limitations of early catalogues, including a failure to engage with local taxonomies and interpretive systems, thus reinforcing the asymmetry of power embedded in colonial archival practices. In the legal realm, Hooker (1970) explores British translations of Undang-Undang Melaka and adat texts, showing how they were selectively interpreted to legitimise indirect colonial rule (Hooker, 1970, pp. 27-47). His analysis reveals how colonial authorities used legal manuscripts not merely for understanding local customs, but to institutionalise British governance frameworks within Malay societies.

Siti Hawa Salleh (1997, pp. 22-35) offers a literary critique of colonial translation practices, arguing that British renderings of classical Malay texts often diminished their poetic form and obscured their cultural and philosophical significance. In works such as Hikayat Hang Tuah, she highlights how deep moral teachings and nuanced symbolic structures were flattened into mere folklore, thus reinforcing colonial stereotypes of Malay literature as exotic rather than intellectually sophisticated. Complementing this interpretive analysis, Warnk (2009, pp. 6-14) examines the physical and institutional processes through which these texts were acquired. He demonstrates that European manuscript collection efforts were frequently ad hoc and opportunistic—relying on purchases, gifts, or seizures—resulting in archives that disproportionately privileged secular or administratively useful materials while neglecting religious and literary genres such as *syair* and Islamic treatises. Together, these studies underscore the dual impact of colonial engagement: not only were Malay texts reframed through a reductive lens, but the very structure of the collections themselves reflects colonial preferences and power hierarchies in knowledge curation.

METHODOLOGY

The article adopts a historical-qualitative methodology to explore the collection, translation, and preservation of Malay manuscripts by British colonial agents. Key British figures whose roles are discussed in this study include Sir Stamford Raffles, who commissioned the acquisition and copying of numerous Malay texts; William Marsden, whose philological work laid a foundation for British Malay studies; John Leyden, known for his translations and literary analyses; James Low, who compiled Kedah's royal chronicles; and Emil Lüring, who built his manuscript collection through a combination of local networks and colonial access. Their activities are contextualised within broader imperial efforts to systematise and reinterpret local knowledge.

Primary sources include original Malay manuscripts, such as *Hikayat Abdullah, Hikayat Hang Tuah, Undang-Undang Melaka, and Hikayat Raja Pasai*, which are accessible through the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia (PNM) manuscript collection. Archival records were examined via the Adam Matthew Digital Archives, particularly colonial correspondences and administrative documents related to British governance and scholarly activities in the Malay Peninsula. These sources provide critical insight into how knowledge of local customs, laws, and texts was instrumentalised for imperial governance.

Further supporting materials were drawn from the Royal Asiatic Society Digital Library, which houses rare manuscripts, field notes, and early translations by British figures such as Raffles, Marsden, and Leyden. Early lexical and grammatical references—including Thomas Bowrey's A Dictionary, English and Malayo (1701) and William Marsden's A Dictionary of the Malayan Language (1812)—were consulted through the Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (SMNA) Library at ISTAC-IIUM. These early linguistic works provide vital context for understanding the philological frameworks employed by British Orientalists in their engagement with Malay texts. This combination of manuscript analysis and archival research allows for a nuanced reading of the power relations, cultural displacement, and reinterpretation of local knowledge systems under colonial rule. The study is further informed by interdisciplinary frameworks—particularly Edward Said's concept of "travelling theory"—to critically assess how British engagement with Malay manuscripts shaped the intellectual history of the region.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Driven by motivations ranging from academic curiosity to administrative needs, the British colonial period in the Malay Peninsula saw extensive efforts to collect Malay manuscripts, which involved a variety of methods. These included direct

purchase, donations from local rulers and scholars, and sometimes even confiscation. Warnk (2009, pp. 6-7) revealed that the collectors acquired these manuscripts in an unsystematic manner, with some being purchased, others through donations, diplomatic exchanges, or confiscation during military campaigns. However, the types of manuscripts that were prioritised reveal implicit patterns: colonial collectors showed particular interest in historical chronicles, royal genealogies (*silsilah*), legal texts, and political treatises—documents that provided insights into local governance, customary law (*adat*), and socio-political structures. These genres were considered valuable for administrative and ethnographic purposes, as they helped British officials understand and manage indigenous institutions. In contrast, Islamic religious texts, and popular poetic genres such as *syair* were generally underrepresented in official colonial collections. This neglect reflected a colonial hierarchy of knowledge that favoured utilitarian texts over those with spiritual, aesthetic, or moral value. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions. British orientalists, such as William Marsden, expressed genuine interest in the literary dimensions of Malay culture and collected poetic works alongside legal and historical manuscripts. His collection, as reassessed by Hijjas (2022, pp. 42-45), included various literary and linguistic materials that contributed to the early philological study of Malay verse forms.

As a result, the corpus of Malay manuscripts preserved in European institutions presented a skewed intellectual portrait of the region—one that privileged secular and state-oriented knowledge while sidelining religious teachings and literary creativity. This selectivity not only distorted external perceptions of Malay intellectual life but also disrupted the continuity of traditional knowledge systems within local communities. The removal of manuscripts from their original cultural and pedagogical contexts further complicated their interpretation and accessibility, both in academic settings and in broader efforts to sustain Malay heritage. This dynamic is exemplified in the everyday interactions between British officials and local scribes. British agents often acquired manuscripts directly from local scholars, scribes, and collectors, highlighting a form of transactional exchange that facilitated both the preservation and displacement of cultural materials. In his autobiography, *Hikayat Abdullah*, the renowned Malay scribe Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir (Abdullah Munsyi) recounts a visit from a fellow scribe, Ibrahim, who relayed that Sir Stamford Raffles was actively seeking skilled Malay scribes and was interested in purchasing old manuscripts and hikayat. This encounter illustrates the emergence of a colonial manuscript economy in which local knowledge became commodified and reoriented to meet imperial interests (*Hikayat Abdullah*, 1932, p. 58):

> "*Maka ada pada suatu hari datang-lah juru-tulis-nya yang bernama Ibrahim itu ka-rumah-ku, dudok berchakap-chakap dari-hal Tuan Raffles itu hendak menchari juru-tulis Malayu yang baik bekas tangan-nya menulis, dan lagi ia hendak membeli surat-surat Malayu dan hikayat-hikayat dahulu kala; maka barang siapa ada menaroh, bawa-lah di-kebun-nya di-Bandar Hilir.*"
>
> [One day, a scribe named Ibrahim came to my house and spoke about how Mr. Raffles was looking for a good Malay scribe who had a skilled hand in writing. Furthermore, he wanted to buy old Malay letters and *hikayat* (traditional stories). So, anyone who had such items should bring them to his garden in Bandar Hilir.]

This passage from *Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdullah Abdul Kadir, 1932) illustrates Raffles' efforts to collect Malay manuscripts and hire skilled scribes for his preservation and translation projects. Thus, created the first public market for Malay manuscript material. Though Malay manuscripts were historically difficult to obtain and rarely circulated, Abdullah Munsyi travelled to Kelantan in 1838 as an interpreter for a diplomatic mission. Due to his connections with a high-ranking official in Kelantan, he was able to access manuscripts for copying purposes. This example illustrates how the acquisition of manuscripts in pre-colonial Malay society often depended on personal relationships and social networks rather than commercial transactions. Abdullah's experience underscores the significance of social ties and the restricted circulation of manuscripts, which were typically the exclusive property of individuals and not freely available for lending or copying (Abdullah Abdul Kadir, 1932).

According to Lady Raffles' accounts in the Memoirs of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (Raffles, 1830, pp. 30-31), Stamford Raffles maintained a predominantly respectful, although paternalistic, perspective towards the Malay people. Raffles recognised that the Malay nation was comparatively "rude and uncivilised" by Western standards, yet underscored that its laws, customs, and cultural practices, albeit simplistic, were essential for understanding their character and culture. The collection and translation of these manuscripts were perceived as a means to illuminate the profundity of Malay culture and legal traditions, which had been predominantly neglected or misconstrued. Raffles sought to enhance engagement with the Malays and rectify misconceptions by translating and reorganising Malay legal codes and traditions, simultaneously emphasising the historical and cultural importance of this "extraordinary and peculiar" nation. Nonetheless, the tone also embodies the colonial mentality, which frequently perceived colonised individuals as requiring direction and interpretation from more "civilised" nations.

Apart from Raffles, a noted linguist and scholar, William Marsden made significant contributions to the study of the Malay language and literature. His work in cataloguing and analysing manuscripts was foundational for future research. Marsden benefited from his position as Secretary of the East India Company and his connections within the colonial administration, which provided him with the resources and networks necessary to gather his extensive collection (Hijjas, 2022, pp. 38-72). Similarly, John Leyden was also involved in the collection and translation of Malay manuscripts. His linguistic expertise and dedication to Malay studies were crucial in preserving and interpreting these texts. Leyden's role as a colonial administrator and his involvement with the British East India Company also provided him with opportunities to gather manuscripts from various parts of the Malay Archipelago, including Sumatra, Java, and the Malay Peninsula (Richards, 2021, pp. 59-103). During the same period, Emil Lüring acquired his collection of Malay manuscripts while in the Malay world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through a combination of local networks, colonial connections, fieldwork, and academic exchanges. He relied on local scholars and scribes to identify and interpret manuscripts, used his colonial connections to access regional collections, and personally collected materials during his travels in the Malay Archipelago. His efforts reflect the broader trend among European scholars of the colonial era, who utilised a mix of local collaboration and colonial resources to build their collections of indigenous literature (Warnk, 2009, pp. 99-129).

Traditionally, manuscripts were privately owned, with ownership secured not only by the physical manuscript but also by personal memory, reflecting the teacher-pupil relationship in higher Islamic education. Manuscripts had social functions; for instance, owning a royal genealogy was exclusive to the members of the royal clan, making manuscripts integral to social relations (Proudfoot, 2002, p. 121). Gifting manuscripts, such as the Qur'an presented by the Sultan of Johor to Dutch Admiral Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge in 1606, symbolised high political and diplomatic respect (Gallop, 2007:10-11). Europeans, upon entering the scene, altered the traditional Malay practices of manuscript transmission—often rooted in patronage or oral instruction—by introducing monetary exchange. James Low, for example, paid 50 Spanish dollars to acquire a manuscript of the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, also known as the Kedah Annals. According to Low (1849, p. 2), this manuscript was obtained from the court of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin Halim Shah II of Kedah and given to him by Tunku Putra, a royal family member and intermediary. The payment signified not only economic value but also recognition of British scholarly or administrative status, marking a shift in the

cultural economy of manuscript circulation. In pre-colonial societies within the Malay Archipelago, purchasing manuscripts was uncommon. This changed with the arrival of Europeans, who typically bought manuscripts. This shift in practice was not unique to Malay handwritten books but extended to literatures from other colonised territories as well.

A notable contemporary scholar, Annabel Gallop's work on cataloguing manuscripts in the setting of British colonialism primarily focuses on employing methodical cataloguing techniques to safeguard manuscripts and make them accessible for academic research. Each work's title, author, creation date, physical state, and content summary were carefully recorded and categorised in the right catalogue category. The subjects of documents, such as historical accounts, theological papers, literary works, and court cases, were used to group them. Earlier procedures were less formalised and focused on methodical recording. Later colonial actions had a more structured approach to cataloguing. The British began using preservation methods to protect the texts from environmental damage, keeping them in climate-controlled spaces and covering them with protective materials to prevent them from breaking down (Gallop, 2011, pp. 73).

The British Library houses a small but significant collection of over 120 manuscripts written in the Malay language and the *Jawi* (Arabic) script, originating from throughout the Malay Archipelago. These manuscripts have always, in theory, been available to the public in the reading rooms of the British Museum and the India Office Library, and later in the British Library; however, access was limited to those who could afford to travel to London (Gallop, 2015). The collection highlights the Malay world's rich literary and cultural heritage, with numerous manuscripts originating from the 17th to 20th century and accumulated during the British colonial period (Awang Sariyan & Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2020, pp. 8-9).

The University of Oxford's Bodleian Library received a Malay manuscript in 1633 from William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time. According to the title, this manuscript is the *Kitab Tawarikh*, a book of historical stories. Another Malay text was given to the Bodleian Library by Laud in 1635. In many cases, this manuscript is recognised as *Bustan al-Salatin*, a text that covers many topics of ethics and government, written by Nuruddin al-Raniri. As some of the oldest Malay works in the Bodleian Library, these manuscripts are also among the earliest examples of Malay literature to be brought to Europe (Greentree, 1910, preface). However, Blagden (1912, pp. 287-290) was critical of this catalogue, highlighting the challenges of cataloguing and interpreting Malay manuscripts, particularly the difficulties in ensuring accurate translation and representation of the texts within

the cultural and historical context. His critique underscored the importance of careful and informed scholarship in the study and cataloguing of such important cultural artefacts, and that the responsibility of overseeing the publication was not assigned to a Malay scholar. Incorporating a chronological examination of the cataloguing efforts by British individuals and institutions, beginning with early figures such as Laud and continuing through subsequent cataloguers like Greentree and Nicholson, as well as Blagden, would provide valuable insights into the development of Malay philology. This approach will reveal the evolving methodologies and highlight the implications for representing and understanding Malay literature in a European context.

The vast collection of Malay manuscripts, natural history specimens, and other valuable items that Raffles had gathered during his time in Malay world went down with the *Fame*, which was the vessel on which he and his family were traveling to Europe when it caught fire and sank off the southwest coast of Sumatra on February 1, 1824 (Jones, 1999, pp. 97-108). The fire, believed to have originated in the ship's hold, quickly spread, resulting in the loss of these irreplaceable materials. This incident significantly impacted Raffles' efforts to document and preserve the knowledge of the Malay Archipelago, highlighting the dangers faced by scholars during that period (Bastin, 1981, pp. 50-52).

Copying of Collected Malay Manuscripts

The tradition of copying classical Malay manuscripts was a deeply ingrained practice in Malay culture, reflecting the value placed on preserving and disseminating knowledge. This tradition was not merely about duplication but was an essential part of the educational and cultural transmission process. In Malay society, manuscripts were often copied as part of a natural and pedagogical process. Students would copy texts by hand under the guidance of a teacher, a practice that reinforced learning and ensured the accurate transmission of knowledge. This method replicated the teacher-student relationship, where the teacher would read and explain the text while the student diligently transcribed it. The process was integral to Islamic education, where religious, legal, and philosophical texts were meticulously copied to preserve their teachings for future generations (Muhd. Yusof Ibrahim, 1999, pp. 35-37). Likewise, Proudfoot (2002, p. 120) regarded the practice of copying manuscripts, where the main text is interspersed with interlinear translations and annotations, as mimicking the learning experience of studying under a teacher who reads aloud and interprets the text. These were essentially the course materials for the students. Copying the manuscript was itself a meaningful action because the students had direct access to

the course material, they wrote following the instructions of their instructors when they copied, which subsequently enabled them to take notes between lines or in the margins, as well as translate the content into the Malay language and /or interpret in Arabic, and other languages.

In traditional Malay manuscript culture, the idea of authorship was not about personal fame or intellectual ownership. As Norazimah Zakaria (2014, pp. 2-5) explains, many works were written anonymously or attributed to scribes and compilers who served courts, teachers, or religious communities. Writing was seen as an act of service rather than a display of individuality. What mattered most was not who wrote the text, but how faithfully it was passed down. Manuscripts were often copied by students under the careful guidance of teachers, who would check the text for accuracy and clarity. This process was not just about producing a correct copy—it was a way of authenticating the knowledge itself, similar to how *ijazah* (teaching licenses) were granted in Islamic scholarly tradition. In this way, the value of a manuscript lay not in its originality, but in the trust and credibility of the chain through which it was transmitted. This act of copying manuscripts also had significant social implications. Manuscripts, particularly those containing royal genealogies (*silsilah*), were exclusive to certain social groups, such as members of royal clans. This exclusivity underlined the manuscripts' role in cultivating and maintaining social relations. Additionally, the donation of manuscripts by local rulers and scholars to the British colonial administration was a strategic move to gain favour and political advantage (Hijjas, 2002, p. 40).

The British colonial period saw a shift in manuscript copying traditions, driven by scholarly interest and administrative needs. The British conducted extensive collection and translation efforts, often using random methods, to record and control local knowledge. This change in methods reflects the colonial desire for better cataloguing and preservation of important texts (Mohd. Zain Musa, 2007, pp. 59-62). It ensured the preservation and accurate transmission of knowledge, reinforced social hierarchies, and adapted to the changing contexts brought about by colonial influences. Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all copyists were experts in the field of writing. Some of the manuscripts appear to indicate that the copyists were not yet proficient in writing, as evidenced by numerous spelling mistakes, and the handwriting was often illegible. It should also be understood that copying a manuscript was often only a part-time job, even though the task required diligence and patience. A manuscript would require a copyist to spend several months on it; this could lead to feelings of weariness and boredom, which in turn could result in carelessness and mistakes. Professional script writers in religious and royal *organisations*, such as *pondok*, *pesantren*, and *dayah*, were skilled in Arabic calligraphy and helped preserve manuscripts safely, passing them on to future generations (A. Samad Ahmad, 1979, pp. xxx).

Raffles' passion for collecting manuscripts included the preservation of these valuable texts by commissioning the copying of manuscripts. By creating multiple copies, Raffles appeared to safeguard the knowledge within these manuscripts for future generations, considering the fragile nature of the original documents and the harsh tropical climate, which could accelerate their deterioration (Ming, 1987, p. 445). This approach, perhaps for the first time, placed higher value on manuscripts than on traditional context. Even Abdullah Munsyi, a small-scale collector, felt uneasy about the manuscript purchases. Although reluctant to criticise his patron, Raffles, Abdullah Munsyi viewed this as a dangerous development, believing that the community was carelessly disposing of its cultural resources for money. European collectors, led by Raffles, were not antiquarians seeking old manuscripts as art objects but were after raw data. Just as they mastered nature through scientific analysis of collected specimens, they sought to master Malay society by assembling the intellectual life encapsulated in Malay texts (*Hikayat Abdullah*, 1932, p. 61):

> "*Dan lagi pula orang membawa kitab-kitab dan hikayat Malayu pun, entah beberapa ratus jenis, tiada-lah aku teringat; hampir-hampir habis surat-surat Malayu dari-pada beberapa zaman, dari-pada harta nenek-moyang sakalian habis di-jual-kan, di-bawa orang dari mana-mana, sebab mendapat harga baik, habis di-jualkan, tiada-lah sedarkan orang-orang yang di-belakang kelak menjadi bodoh, satu surat pun tiada yang hendak dibacha dalam bahasa-nya sendiri, karna kitab-kitab itu semua-nya tulisan tangan, jikalau kitab di-chap tiada mengapa, maka tiadalah tinggal lagi beneh-nya sampai sekarang. Maka ada-lah kitab-kitab itu sakalian kira-kira tiga-ratus enam-puloh, lain dari-pada jenis-jenis shaer (syair) dan pantun dan ikat-ikatan dan sa-bagai-nya. Dan lagi lain pula di-pinjam-nya, di-suroh-nya salin, ada empat lima orang juru-tulis-nya yang dudok menyalin sahaja*."
>
> [And furthermore, people brought numerous Malay books and *hikayats* (traditional stories), of which I cannot remember the exact number, but it was nearly hundreds. Almost all the Malay letters from various eras, from ancestral heritage, were sold off. People brought them from everywhere because they were fetching good prices, and everything was sold off. They did not realise that future generations would become ignorant, with no letters left to read in their own language. Because all those books were handwritten, if they had been printed, it would not have mattered as much, but now there are no seeds left. The books numbered three hundred and sixty, excluding various types of poetry and *pantun* (a traditional Malay poetic form), and other compositions. Additionally, he (Raffles) borrowed others and had them copied, with four or five of his scribes constantly copying.]

This passage from *Hikayat Abdullah* (Abdullah Abdul Kadir, 1932, p. 61) highlights the extensive collection efforts of Raffles in acquiring Malay manuscripts. The local community, enticed by the monetary value offered, sold off their ancestral manuscripts. This passage reflects a sense of loss and lamentation by Abdullah Munsyi over the cultural heritage that was sold off, leading to a future where Malays might lack access to their own literary history. It appears that Raffles was dedicated to preserving these manuscripts, as he employed multiple scribes to copy them, ensuring that even borrowed manuscripts were documented, marking a transitional phase in the development of print capitalism. Unfortunately, this effort also removed cultural artefacts from their original context, creating a potential cultural void that could be filled by future scholarship influenced by Orientalism.

Abdullah Abdul Kadir (1960, p. 62) further described how Raffles established and strengthened diplomatic relationships with Malay rulers from the careful study of his collection of Malay correspondence and manuscripts. By sending letters accompanied by gifts and kind words, Raffles sought to foster goodwill and alliances with the local rulers. This strategy of using flattery and gifts proved effective, as it led to positive responses from the Malay rulers, who reciprocated with their own letters and gifts. Moreover, these exchanges facilitated the flow of more Malay manuscripts and *hikayats* to Raffles, enriching his collection and furthering his goal. The passage highlights the combination of diplomacy and cultural exchange as a means to achieve Raffles' objectives during his tenure in the Malay Peninsula. This is where understanding the local customs, laws, and social structures proved essential for the British to govern effectively and maintain control over the region.

Translation and Interpretation of Malay Manuscripts

The tradition of translating classical Malay manuscripts played a vital role in preserving and disseminating the rich literary and cultural heritage of the Malay world. Though not all Malay texts were translated, this tradition has evolved over centuries, reflecting both the internal dynamics of Malay society and external influences, particularly during the colonial period. The practice of translating Malay manuscripts dates back to when these texts first began to be produced. Initially, translations were primarily oral, with teachers and scholars interpreting Arabic religious texts into the Malay language for their students. As literacy and manuscript culture flourished, written translations became more common. These translations were often interlinear, where the original text was accompanied by a line-by-line translation, aiding students in understanding complex religious and philosophical concepts (Gallop, 2002, pp. 21-23).

Raffles recognised the value of these manuscripts and initiated translation efforts to preserve the knowledge within them, as well as to utilise it for better administration and control (Bastin, 2008, pp. 45-50). This marked a significant shift in the translation of Malay manuscripts. Raffles' efforts went beyond mere translation; he actively engaged in the study and interpretation of Malay texts. He collaborated with other scholars, both local and European, to ensure that the translations were accurate and comprehensive. Raffles was instrumental in translating Malay manuscripts into English, thereby making these texts accessible to a broader audience, including British officials, scholars, and the general public (Jedamski, 2005, p. 212). Through translation, he sought to bridge the cultural gap between the Malay world and the British Empire. His translations included not only the literal text but also annotations and commentaries that provided context and explanations for readers unfamiliar with Malay culture and history.

This use of translation as a vehicle for cultural interpretation and colonial knowledge production is further explored by Richards (2021, p. 70), who examines the role of translators in shaping the dissemination and reception of ideas in the Malay world. Print culture transformed the methods by which individuals accessed and disseminated written works. The standardisation of the Malay language facilitated increased literacy among the population. Richards noted that languages and cultures from regions such as Persian and Indian consistently influenced and enhanced Malay literature and thought, contributing to a more globalised culture. He examined Edward Said's concept of "travelling theory" to analyse the dynamics of the "colonial project", specifically how ideas and knowledge systems transitioned between locations and transformed. Edward Said's concept of "travelling theory" examines the transformation of theories and ideas as they traverse different geographical contexts, particularly in regions impacted by colonialism. This movement induces changes and shifts in response to the new circumstances individuals encounter, often resulting in new meanings and applications. Understanding the context and power dynamics of knowledge transmission in postcolonial studies is crucial, particularly at the intersection of Western ideas and non-Western experiences and histories (Said, 1983, pp. 226-247). This theory demonstrates the modification and adaptation of Western ideas and models within the context of colonial and postcolonial Malaysia, specifically in relation to the Malay world.

The British colonial government translated and interpreted Malay texts through Western intellectual frameworks, leading to significant cultural misunderstandings that altered the representation of Malay culture and history. Ahmad Murad Merican (2011, pp. 95–97) offers a compelling reflection on how British colonial authorities did more

than translate Malay texts—they reinterpreted them through a Western intellectual lens, often distorting the cultural meanings embedded within. This marginalised local knowledge systems and promoted Western ideas, resulting in intellectual dominance. Furthermore, local scholars adapted these Western concepts, resulting in a novel intellectual practice that incorporates elements from both traditions (Hijjas, 2002, p. 44).

Edward Said's theory of the travelling of ideas further contextualises this phenomenon. Said examined how theories and ideas, initially developed within specific cultural and historical contexts, transform as they move across different regions, particularly those impacted by colonialism. Said (1983, pp. 226-247) argued that this movement leads to adaptations and reinterpretations, influenced by the new contexts they encounter, often resulting in altered meanings and applications. This concept is vital in postcolonial studies, where Western theories intersect with non-Western experiences and histories, highlighting the importance of contextual understanding and the power dynamics involved in the dissemination of knowledge. This theory applies to the Malay world, illustrating how Western ideas and frameworks were adapted and transformed within the context of colonial and postcolonial Malaysia. The British colonial administration's translation and interpretation of Malay manuscripts often led to cultural misinterpretations due to the imposition of Western intellectual frameworks, resulting in distorted representations of Malay culture and history. This imposition marginalised local knowledge systems and favoured Western theories, creating a form of intellectual domination. Additionally, local scholars adapted these Western ideas, creating a hybrid intellectual tradition that incorporated both local and Western elements (Hijjas, 2002, p. 44).

Translations and interpretations significantly influenced several notable Malay manuscripts during the British colonial period. These manuscripts, integral to Malay culture and history, were often reinterpreted through a Western lens, resulting in alterations to their original meanings and contexts. The *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) is one of the most important historical texts in Malay literature, which chronicles the history of the Malacca Sultanate and provides insights into the political, cultural, and social structures of Malay society. The British translation by John Leyden in the early 19th century introduced Western historiographical methods that influenced how the text was understood and interpreted. Leyden's translation emphasised the legendary aspects of the text, often downplaying the historical and cultural significance that the original manuscript held within the Malay society. This reinterpretation contributed to a perception of Malay history that aligned with

colonial narratives, emphasising exoticism and feudalism over the sophisticated and complex society it originally described (Proudfoot, 2003, pp. 3-4).

The *Undang-Undang Melaka* is another significant legal manuscript that outlines the laws and governance practices of the Melaka Sultanate. British colonial administrators translated these laws as part of their efforts to understand and govern the local population. However, these translations often imposed British legal concepts and frameworks onto the text, leading to a reinterpretation that aligned more closely with British legal traditions than with the original Malay context. This process not only altered the understanding of Malay legal traditions but also contributed to the marginalisation of indigenous legal systems in favour of British law (Hooker, 1970, pp. 45-47).

The *Hikayat Hang Tuah* is another key manuscript that narrates the legendary tales of Hang Tuah, a warrior who exemplified loyalty, bravery, and service to the ruler. The British translations and interpretations of this text often focused on its literary and folkloric elements, sometimes overlooking its deeper cultural and ethical significance. They are often focused on the literary qualities of the text, sometimes at the expense of its cultural and ethical dimensions. In the book *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, Winstedt discusses *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, which provided clues regarding his perception as an Orientalist. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* exhibited a profound narrative structure, political insight, and complex creativity that challenged Winstedt's colonial framework of Malay culture as primitive or lower in the evolutionary hierarchy. Nevertheless, Winstedt was unable to acknowledge or advocate for the text's genuine intellectual value. Fortunately, with access to original Malay works such as the *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Malay texts can now be appreciated without the limitations of Orientalist interpretations (Winstedt, 1921, pp. 110-122). Similarly, the British translation of *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, which is an early Malay text that recounts the history of the kingdom of Pasai, is often interpreted through a colonial lens that emphasised the kingdom's exoticism and decline. This approach overshadowed the manuscript's value as a historical source that documented the early spread of Islam in the Malay world and its role in shaping regional politics and culture (Winstedt, 1938, pp. 24-30).

Indigenous Resistance and Alternative Preservation Practices

While British colonial actors dominated the formal collection, cataloguing, and translation of Malay manuscripts, indigenous actors were far from passive. Numerous examples indicate a form of cultural resistance and agency among local

scholars, religious leaders, and scribes who continued to safeguard their intellectual traditions despite colonial interference. In *pondok* (Islamic boarding schools in rural areas), *pesantren* (traditional Islamic religious schools, particularly in Java), and *dayah* (Islamic seminaries in Aceh), for example, Islamic scholars maintained manuscript traditions through teacher-student oral transmission, hand-copying, and communal readings (*halaqah*) that resisted the need for institutional archiving in colonial libraries (Mohd. Zain Musa, 2007, pp. 59-62; Muhd. Yusof Ibrahim, 1999, pp. 35-37). These practices helped sustain an epistemological continuity that remained rooted in *adat* (custom) and Islamic learning frameworks, separate from British interpretative systems.

In areas less influenced by British rule, local courts and aristocratic families also played crucial roles in preserving manuscript traditions, often keeping *silsilah* (royal genealogies) and legal documents within kinship networks rather than donating or selling them (Hijjas, 2002). This form of "silent archiving" emphasised manuscripts as both sacred and symbolic capital—an implicit resistance to their objectification by colonial institutions. Such indigenous efforts reflect a parallel system of manuscript preservation—rooted not in cataloguing or public display, but in cultural intimacy, spiritual authority, and kinship loyalty. Recognising these non-Western preservation logics challenges the assumption that British interventions were the sole reason Malay manuscripts survived. Instead, it emphasises a coexistence of preservation traditions, some of which actively resisted colonial control.

The Impact of Translation and Interpretation on Malay Manuscripts

The British translation of Malay manuscripts aimed to preserve knowledge and facilitate governance, but it had profound effects on local scholarship and indigenous knowledge systems. British translations often became the dominant interpretations, overshadowing local scholarship and contributing to the marginalisation of traditional Malay intellectual practices. With their superior resources and institutional backing, the British were able to disseminate their translations widely, making them the primary reference points for understanding Malay culture and history (Bastin, 1981, pp. 45-50). These translations were produced with little regard for the cultural and historical contexts in which the original manuscripts were written, resulting in distortions of the meanings and significance of the texts and the imposition of Western intellectual frameworks onto indigenous knowledge systems. One notable example is the English translation of *Hikayat Abdullah* by Thomson (1874), which selectively omitted moral reflections and spiritual commentary central to Abdullah's original

narrative. Thomson restructured the text to suit European literary expectations, framing it as an "autobiography" in the Enlightenment sense, thereby obscuring the work's rhetorical and didactic Malay style. Similarly, William Marsden's treatment of *Hikayat Raja Pasai* in The History of Sumatra (1811) reflects a tendency to prioritise factual historicity over symbolic and religious meaning, portraying sacred narratives as mythic folklore rather than recognising their cosmological significance in the Malay worldview.

Another case is Stamford Raffles' use of *Undang-Undang Melaka* in his *History of Java* (1817), in which he selectively quoted Malay legal texts to highlight supposed inconsistencies, using them to support the colonial claim that British legal systems were more rational and just. This reductionist reading dismissed the layered nature of *adat* and Islamic jurisprudence in the Malay legal imagination. Such translations not only altered textual meanings but also reinforced the colonial project of classifying and subordinating indigenous knowledge within Eurocentric hierarchies of rationality, legality, and literature. This process reshaped local knowledge to fit Western ideals, often distorting the original meanings. Thus, serving colonial interests by simplifying complex Malay intellectual traditions and using translation as a tool to understand and control the local population, ultimately marginalising indigenous knowledge systems (Ahmad Murad Merican, 2011, pp. 95–97).

The dominance of British translations had a significant impact on Malay scholarship, forcing local scholars to engage with their own cultural heritage through the lens of British interpretations. These translations—often framed within colonial ideologies—became the primary references for Malay texts in institutional, legal, and academic contexts. For instance, William Marsden's Grammar of the Malayan Language (1812) and History of Sumatra (1811) were widely circulated and cited, shaping how Malay language and literature were classified and understood, even by local scholars who sought validation within colonial or missionary-run schools. Similarly, the *Undang-Undang Melaka* was translated and analysed by British scholars such as Hooker (1970), whose work continued to serve as the standard reference for Malay legal codes throughout the 20th century. As Hijjas (2022) notes, Marsden's and Raffles' collections not only defined what was preserved but also shaped scholarly discourse on Malay texts, sidelining local interpretive traditions. The effect was such that even postcolonial scholars often relied on these colonial-era translations and frameworks due to their institutional dominance and the absence of widely accessible indigenous editions. This dependency entrenched colonial epistemologies in Malay literary and legal scholarship, complicating efforts to reclaim and reframe indigenous knowledge systems on their own terms.

This not only marginalised indigenous scholarship but also created a dependency on Western knowledge systems. Malay scholars who wished to contribute to the intellectual discourse of their time had to do so within the framework established by British colonial scholars, effectively limiting their ability to produce original and independent scholarship. This issue persists in contemporary academic research, where scholars often feel pressured to adhere to Western academic standards and methodologies (Mohd. Zain Musa, 2007, pp. 59-62). The marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems during the colonial period contributed to a sense of cultural inferiority that persisted even after independence. The reliance on British interpretations of Malay texts became ingrained in the educational and intellectual institutions of the region, further entrenching the marginalisation of traditional Malay scholarship. Addressing this legacy requires a re-engagement with indigenous knowledge systems and a critical reassessment of the colonial interpretations that have shaped our understanding of Malay culture and history.

The British introduced Western theories to Malay intellectual discourse, particularly in the fields of law, governance, education, and the social sciences. However, Malay scholars did not adopt these ideas uncritically; instead, they engaged with them, adapting, and integrating them with their own knowledge and cultural practices. This led to the emergence of a hybrid scholarly tradition that combined elements of both Western and Malay intellectual frameworks. For Malay scholars, the introduction of Western theories presented both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, they faced the risk of cultural and intellectual domination, where their indigenous knowledge systems could be marginalised or dismissed as inferior. On the other hand, the engagement with Western theories provided new tools and frameworks for understanding and analysing their own society. This duality shaped the way Malay scholars interacted with Western intellectual traditions, leading to a process of adaptation and hybridisation. Malay intellectuals approached Western theories not as rigid doctrines to be followed but as ideas that could be adapted and integrated into their own cultural context. This process of adaptation often involved critically assessing Western theories and modifying them to fit local realities (Hooker, 1970, pp. 27-30). Malay manuscripts are far more than relics of the past—they are living testaments to the rich intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Malay world. These manuscripts reflect a profound and locally rooted wisdom that remains relevant today. To fully appreciate and benefit from this heritage, there must be a collective commitment to preserving, studying, and making these texts more accessible, especially through digital means. Only by doing so can we ensure

that this cultural legacy remains a meaningful part of contemporary scholarship and identity (Mashitah Sulaiman et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore British colonial activities related to the collection and translation of Malay manuscripts, with a particular focus on their motivations, methodologies, and long-term implications for Malay literary and cultural heritage. Through a historical-qualitative analysis of archival sources, scholarly literature, and primary manuscripts, the research has demonstrated that while British colonial actors such as Stamford Raffles, William Marsden, and John Leyden contributed significantly to the preservation and dissemination of Malay texts, their efforts were deeply embedded in broader imperial strategies of control, representation, and intellectual dominance. The findings confirm that British involvement in Malay manuscript collection was driven not only by scholarly curiosity but also by administrative utility and cultural hegemony. Manuscripts were often removed from their original socio-cultural contexts, reinterpreted through Eurocentric lenses, and embedded into institutional frameworks that marginalised local epistemologies. Translation efforts, though facilitating the survival and international recognition of Malay literary works, often distorted indigenous meanings, and subordinated them to colonial narratives.

The long-term impact of these colonial engagements has been a dual legacy: the preservation of an invaluable literary corpus on one hand, and the erosion of indigenous modes of knowledge production on the other. British cataloguing and archiving systems became dominant frames of reference, sidelining traditional Malay pedagogical and interpretive practices, and contributing to the intellectual dependency on Western paradigms that continues to shape postcolonial scholarship. To reclaim and revitalise the Malay literary heritage, future efforts must include critical re-evaluation of colonial translations, re-contextualisation of manuscripts within their original cultural frameworks, and active collaboration with local scholars, linguists, and cultural institutions. Digitisation initiatives, decolonial scholarship, and the restoration of oral traditions must be central to this process. By reasserting the value of indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems, a more balanced and authentic understanding of Malay literary history can be achieved—one that honours both the richness of its past and its relevance to future generations.

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Norazlina Mohd Noor: Conceptualisation of the study, literature review, data collection from Malay sources, initial manuscript drafting, and revisions; Mehmet Ozay: Theoretical framing, refinement of the research design, and critical review of the manuscript.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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