Finding the Ghosts of Malaysian Anti-colonial Resistance: The Archival Afterlives of a Lost Future

Lost futures however do not mean that they are immaterial or unseeable. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore in fact, these lost futures have, even until now, been the subject of mass suppression as the post-colonial is intent in consolidating its hegemony, writes **Armand Azra bin Azlira**

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Doing fieldwork research in Malaysia and Singapore for my PhD thesis brought to attention the often-overlooked challenges, as the context of their formation of these nation-states and the implications for international politics are glossed over in the literature. For the most part, they do not challenge Western hegemony financially or geopolitically and they have largely adhered to the international policies of the West, which allows for a less direct approach by the West to promote its interests. Yet there was a time when the region was of great importance to the Western world. Salient to this discussion is [Donald Mackay](#)'s nickname for Malaysia as 'the domino that stood'. Twenty-five years in Malaysia's history, twelve years before independence of Malaya and thirteen years thereafter, would define the nation-state until the present time, mirroring many Third World nation-states at the time with aspirations of independence turned lost futures. The anti-colonial mass movements that the British thought they had defeated completely occupy what Mark Fisher (2014) calls a hauntological space, in that they haunt Malaysia from a post-colonial world that failed to materialise. Lost futures however do not mean that they are immaterial or unseeable. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore in fact, these lost futures have, even until now, been the subject of mass suppression as the post-colonial is intent in consolidating its hegemony.

In the case of Singapore, the merger with and separation from Malaysia itself played a large role in the historical silencing of anti-colonial mass movements. In Malaya, the national elite, comprising of the local feudal and bourgeois classes allied with the British colonial state in the late 1940s to help carry out the violent colonial war known as the

Malayan Emergency. This paved the way for 'independence' in 1957 where these national ruling classes, with no one to oppose, were able to monopolise political power (Stenson, 2019, pp. 176–180). This monopolised political power was then used to protect the interests of the national bourgeoisie and their Anglo-American allies in creating an 'anti-communist arc' in the region completed with the formation of Malaysia, a merger of Malaya, Singapore, and British Borneo (Ngoei, 2019, pp. 114–115). It is due to this that the subjects of my research, the opposition to this hegemony, is termed 'anti-colonial' in that even though colonialism had officially passed, they were still resisting colonial hegemony. But their defeat had largely silenced them into subalternism in history. The subaltern, the adjective for the 'silent' in history, does not exist as such but is produced and subjectified to be subaltern. To study this history thus requires an understanding of this epistemic violence to undo it and understand the so-called locomotives of history.

To find the remnants of these suppressed movements required a broadening of scope to catch even the glimpses of resistance in the periphery. This included travelling from Kuala Lumpur to Kedah, Penang, Perak, Terengganu, Johor, Sarawak and Singapore. It is during the travel as well that the abstractions of anti-colonial organising become much clearer when imagining the sheer size of the movement in constructing 'imagined communities' especially during the colonial era. Despite a lack of resources and technological inferiority compared to the colonial state apparatus and its private enterprise, labour movements such as the [Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions (PMFTU)](link) relied on their own networks and the resourcefulness of their members to grow. In Kedah, for example, standing on Menara Alor Setar gives only a glimpse of the scale of the city surrounded by *padi* fields and its distance from the various estates that were revolting against the colonial state in 1947. The implications of its international connections as well become even more apparent if we recall that organisations such as the Burma Peasants' Union were aware of peasant unions forming in Malaya well before the colonial state themselves became aware of their existence. Photographs also show the scope of these movements, from rallies of tens of thousands of people before the advent of modern communication capabilities to the inter-cultural exchanges of the highly diverse indigenous tribes in Sarawak and Sabah in the early 1960s in their bid against the formation of Malaysia.

The scope and the subject of the study however meant an engagement with a wide

variety of materials that are largely unindexed, fragments found in a multitude of different files and folders in the archives. In this it was archivists who were often the most knowledgeable and helpful, pointing in the right direction and dedicated to engaging with the materials. Some such as the Johor branch of *Arkib Negara Malaysia* for example stayed after hours to find missing files from the early 1970s which were hidden away and might have been potentially destroyed. Archivists and librarians themselves often have some connection to this lost future, having stories of political missteps since its repression and joking about the demise of the movements from this period. Either way, even more than 50 years on, the image of the lost future lingers in the mind as a collective memory of something that could have been.

Another problem in conducting this research is the several hegemonies which overlap to create a matrix of coloniality, of capitalism, classism, patriarchy, race, gender, indigeneity, and land. This means that on several levels, the voices of the anti-colonial mass movements are often silenced, which is an added problem even when looking at the files from the anti-colonial mass movements themselves. Class, for example is often a determinant as to whether a person has access to a platform or is even given one as many of the narratives that survive this are from the middle-class leaders of the movement, often lawyers and journalists who still largely monopolise the alternative narratives of history. Even in interviews the divide between the leaders and the masses remain clear with a recurring emphasis on the 'uneducated' membership who, they contend, constituted a barrier to the movement's success. Thus, Ranajit Guha's (1994) method of the 'prose of counterinsurgency' applies not only to state archives but also to private and even internal party files that seek to marginalise these voices in favour of party leaders. Party files preserved in the *Universiti Sains Malaysia*, for example, do much to emphasise the voices of the party leaders who were well aware that their mass base saw them as 'middle-class' and would therefore not wholly align with their interests. Moreover, the subaltern must be actively searched for in the memoirs of the leaders of these movements who themselves often mention them in passing or in the context of internal conflicts within anti-colonial movements.

The Symbolic Killing of Anti-Colonialism: Historical Silencing and Co-option in Malaysia

Methodologies and reading against the grain, however, can do very little in the face of very real material violence. On top of the repression and the destruction of hundreds of documents, with the implicit permission of the then anglophone prime minister, during the British withdrawal Malaysia also passed the Official Secrets Act of 1972, similar to Singapore's Official Secrets Act 1935, both reflecting continuity with British colonial rule (Hampshire, 2013). This means that the availability of documents depends on the whims of the government departments who keep their own archives and hold materials relating to the repression of popular political movements.

Most relevant to this is the Malayan Emergency, a violent colonial war, the extent of which is largely unknown due to the organised censoring and destruction of colonial files (Hampshire, 2013). Even the files that were kept in the Arkib Negara Malaysia and its branches are mostly kept secret, available in analogue catalogues but not for public use. What is available is largely the propaganda given out during this period that shows an intentional use of colonial racial hierarchies and categorisations to terrorise populations and keep them in their specific enclosures, the Malay commoners in their kampungs, Indian labourers in estates, and Chinese squatters in concentration camps known as 'new villages'. The separation of language in this propaganda was aimed at different races and intentionally differentiated to draw on distortions of multi-racial histories and emphasise moments of conflict in a 'divide and rule' tactic. Evident in this as well is the propaganda aimed at the Penghulu Kampungs (village chiefs) found in the different state archives, most notably in Johor, a predominantly Malay state controlled by the political vehicle of the Malay aristocracy, UMNO. UMNO's monopoly of political discourse after the Emergency allowed it to co-opt the liberatory language of anti-colonial movements to paint itself as the sole 'fighter' for independence (Arifin, 2014, p. 7). The implications of these problems with archival research are salient: the historical conjunctures treated these files must always be juxtaposed and contextualised within the frame of domination and co-option. This is especially the case with materials on UMNO's perceived rivals for Malay support, the Malay Nationalist Party in the 1940s and the Parti Rakyat Malaya in the 1960s (Boon-Kheng, 2006).

Decolonization, however, was a global affair with many of these anti-colonial mass movements creating transnational links that remained strong despite the Malayan Emergency. This, however, created international enemies for these movements, especially those who had a vested interest in colonial continuity, namely the West and

particularly the Anglo-American sphere. Therein lies a dilemma, as many of the sources are available due to the mass surveillance of anti-colonial mass movements by Western intelligence agencies. Singapore's status as a colonial outpost, especially after the dismantling of *Barisan Sosialis*, allowed for safer operations for Western intelligence. Alex Josey, who was multiple times accused of being a British spy, had access to a wide range of documents due to his connections and access as a journalist. His private papers, perhaps from the perspective of clandestine operations, preserve anti-colonial mass movements in a particularly static condition. His papers focus on the international links of the Malayan People's Socialist Front of the 1960s, especially at the height of Cold War interference against decolonisation movements, something that would have been of interest for Western governments to monitor. The National Archive of Singapore also holds many US State Department and embassy files monitoring anti-colonial movements and collaborating with local state actors in their suppression. This became all the more important as Singapore ended up as a base for American and British intelligence to support the mass killings in Indonesia as part of its proxy war against Communism (Robinson, 2019, p. 78).

What is the goal of this mass silencing of history? The fragments of the files available on the movement do not tell a story of defeat and hopelessness but of a yearning for a just and egalitarian world order which Adom Getachew (2019) calls anti-colonial 'world-making'. What the colonial and neo-colonial state feared more than insurgencies were these lost futures in which they were rendered obsolete. Glimpses of these lost futures reveal themselves in the archives in which a future that did not include the colonial state were unthinkable. But policies of suppression such as the mass arrests in the mid-1960 60s and the Malayan Emergency were not able to destroy them completely, and they continue to haunt Malaysia today.

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*Banner photo taken from Unsplash.

The views expressed in the blog are those of the authors alone. They do not reflect the position of the Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre, nor that of the London School of Economics and Political Science.