

Two Perspectives, One History: Western Colonialism in Indonesian and Malaysian History Textbooks

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Abstract: This study examines how Western colonialism is narrated in Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks and compares the perspectives embedded in both national textbook traditions. Although Indonesia and Malaysia share historical and cultural links, their textbook narratives differ in their interpretations of colonial rule, its impacts, and its place in national history. This research addresses four main issues: the background of colonial arrival, the characteristics of colonial systems, the impacts of colonial rule, and similarities and differences in colonial state policies as presented in textbooks. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study examines selected secondary school history textbooks from Indonesia and Malaysia, published under different curricular frameworks. The analysis focuses on two main dimensions: how textbooks depict colonialism and how they construct particular perspectives on colonial experience. The findings show that Malaysian textbooks tend to present Western colonialism as a broader geopolitical process shaped by rivalry among imperial powers. British colonialism is described not only as exploitative but also as contributing to administrative modernization, territorial formation, and the development of a plural society. In contrast, Indonesian textbooks emphasize colonial exploitation, coercive policies, and popular resistance, especially under Dutch rule. Colonialism is largely portrayed as an oppressive force that generated suffering and stimulated nationalism. This study demonstrates that textbook narratives are closely related to national identity formation and educational ideology. It contributes to history education by showing that colonialism in textbooks is not merely presented as past events, but also as a value-laden narrative shaped by each nation's political and historiographical priorities.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana kolonialisme Barat dinarasikan dalam buku teks sejarah Indonesia dan Malaysia serta membandingkan perspektif yang dibangun dalam tradisi buku teks kedua negara. Meskipun Indonesia dan Malaysia memiliki keterkaitan historis dan kultural, narasi dalam buku teks keduanya menunjukkan penafsiran yang berbeda mengenai kolonialisme, dampaknya, dan posisinya dalam sejarah nasional. Penelitian ini berfokus pada empat aspek utama, yaitu latar belakang kedatangan kolonialisme, karakteristik sistem kolonial, dampak kekuasaan kolonial, serta persamaan dan perbedaan kebijakan kolonial yang disajikan dalam buku teks. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan analisis isi kualitatif terhadap sejumlah buku teks sejarah tingkat sekolah menengah di Indonesia dan Malaysia yang diterbitkan dalam kerangka kurikulum yang berbeda. Analisis diarahkan pada dua dimensi utama, yaitu cara buku teks menggambarkan kolonialisme dan cara buku teks membangun perspektif tertentu terhadap pengalaman kolonial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa buku teks Malaysia cenderung menampilkan kolonialisme Barat sebagai proses geopolitik yang lebih luas, dipengaruhi oleh persaingan antarkekuatan imperialis. Kolonialisme Inggris digambarkan tidak hanya eksploitatif, tetapi juga berkontribusi pada modernisasi administrasi, pembentukan wilayah, dan lahirnya masyarakat plural. Sebaliknya, buku teks Indonesia lebih menekankan eksploitasi



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia and Malaysia share important historical and cultural roots, particularly in the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Culturally, both are often regarded as sharing the same roots (Wardhani, 1999). Yet their political and historical trajectories diverged because they experienced different colonial powers: Indonesia was colonized by the Dutch and Japanese, whereas Malaysia was colonized by the British (Marzali, 2021; Faisal et al., 2022). This colonial experience is important in history education because it helps students understand differences in ethnicity, culture, and ways of life through the interpretation of past events (Seman et al., 2014). In the pre-colonial period, the two regions were once connected within a broader geopolitical sphere associated with Majapahit (Poesponegoro et al., 2019). Later, the spread of Islam reshaped their political structures through the emergence of Islamic kingdoms and sultanates, which in Malaysia developed largely as Malay Islamic sultanates, while in Indonesia they spread across many islands, including Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, West Nusa Tenggara, and Papua (Samin, 2015; Hadi et al., 2015).

Western expansion into Asia also transformed Southeast Asia, including present-day Indonesia and Malaysia. The Portuguese, British, and Dutch arrived with intertwined political, religious, and economic motives, although control over trade commodities, especially spices, became increasingly central (Bakar et al., 2023). Their arrival brought major geopolitical and economic changes and gradually led to formal colonial rule. In Indonesia, Dutch domination evolved from the VOC into the Dutch East Indies colonial state (Kartodirdjo, 1990), while in Malaysia British colonial authority became the dominant force (Jumadi & Yakoop, 2014).

Colonial governments in both Indonesia and Malaysia introduced political and economic policies to consolidate their rule, often by intervening in local kingdoms and sultanates that maintained direct ties with the people (Idi, 2019). In both contexts, colonial power sought to control indigenous rulers, and such intervention often generated conflict and resistance from local communities (Herman et al., 2024; Chew, 1998). Colonial rule also reinforced social differentiation through racialized categories and administrative distinctions that separated indigenous populations from other groups, including Europeans (Gabriel, 2021; Manickam, 2014; Surajaya, 2018). These dynamics help explain why colonialism became not only a political

and economic system of domination, but also a source of resistance and collective identity. In both countries, this past was later incorporated into national history and disseminated through school textbooks, which convey ideological values related to nationhood and citizenship. As a result, textbook narratives of colonialism are inherently political because they are closely connected to nation-state formation and identity.

As educational texts, textbooks are designed to guide learning according to students' developmental levels and the goals set by the education system (Sjamsuddin, 2007). The writing of history textbooks is therefore shaped by official educational objectives and curriculum frameworks determined by the state (Saripudin et al., 2022a; Hasan, 2012). Since the curriculum outlines which historical themes and issues should be taught, textbook authors construct their narratives by translating these official priorities into school history content.

The selection of historical content in the curriculum is never neutral. Decisions about which events students should learn, and which should be emphasized or minimized, are shaped by state priorities and official interpretation. In this sense, the history presented in the curriculum and later translated into textbooks reflects what Hasan (2012) calls *official history*. This study is situated within the historiography of history textbooks, understood as the reconstruction of historical material into narrative form for school learning (Fauzi et al., 2019; Saripudin et al., 2022b). As a historiographical product, textbook history involves processes of interpretation, explanation, and presentation, but it differs from academic historiography in its authorship, source base, and pedagogical purpose (Sjamsuddin, 2007). History textbooks are often written not only for scholarly accuracy, but also to meet curricular, educational, and ideological objectives.

Against this background, the main problem addressed in this study is how Western colonialism is narrated in Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks. It asks how textbooks in both countries present the background, mechanisms, impact, and policy dimensions of colonial rule, as well as the similarities and differences in these narratives. This issue is important because textbooks not only present facts but also shape the meaning of the colonial past. Accordingly, this study aims to identify and analyze the differences and similarities in how Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks construct the narrative of Western colonialism.

History textbooks are not neutral records of the past; they are pedagogical instruments through

which states organize collective memory, define legitimate historical interpretations, and cultivate national belonging. Recent scholarship shows that textbooks shape how students understand identity, difference, and the moral meaning of historical experience, making them central not only to historical knowledge but also to the formation of national identity and historical consciousness (Fadlallah & Janmaat, 2024; Lee & Wang, 2023; Sakki, 2025). Over the past decade, international research has increasingly examined how textbook narratives construct, negotiate, or contest national identity. Studies in China and Hong Kong, Lebanon, and South Korea demonstrate that textbooks are not merely instructional materials, but key sites where the nation is narrated, debated, and politically framed (Fadlallah & Janmaat, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2019; Xu, 2024).

At the same time, scholarship on textbook discourse has become more critical and methodologically refined. In Indonesia, Purwanta (2018) shows that colonial discourse in secondary history textbooks is shaped by political context and shifting official historiography, while more recent studies highlight how textbook narratives continue to influence collective memory, identity formation, and the moral framing of the colonial past (Purwanta, 2018; Sakki, 2025). In a similar vein, Darmawan et al. (2025) demonstrate that textbook narratives are not static but evolve in response to political dynamics and changing international relations, particularly in the representation of Indonesia–Australia relations across different periods. However, comparative research remains uneven and is still dominated by single-country or conflict-centered cases. This article addresses that gap by comparing how Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks construct the background, operation, impact, and legacy of Western colonialism. Its novelty lies not only in its cross-national perspective, but also in its focus on colonialism as a textbook narrative through which national identity, political memory, and educational values are differently organized in two closely related postcolonial societies (Fadlallah & Janmaat, 2024; Kim & Kim, 2019; Purwanta, 2018; Xu, 2024). Theoretically, this study contributes to comparative textbook historiography by showing that colonialism is selectively interpreted through national lenses and identity projects.

Practically, it offers a basis for more critical, comparative, and reflective approaches to teaching colonialism in Southeast Asia (Fadlallah & Janmaat, 2024; Sakki, 2025). Against this background, this study examines how Indonesian and Malaysian his-

tory textbooks narrate Western colonialism and how these narratives reflect different understandings of power, resistance, identity, and nationhood in school history.

METHOD

This study examines how Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks narrate the colonial period in their respective national contexts. To address this problem, the study uses qualitative content analysis of textbook narratives and textual descriptions as its main data source. Because history textbooks function as documentary texts, they were treated as primary materials of analysis. Content analysis was employed to identify how colonialism is described, emphasized, and interpreted in the textbooks, following the view that communication content can reveal broader social meanings and perspectives (Bungin, 2011; Eriyanto, 2015). The researcher closely read the relevant textbook sections, identified passages related to colonialism, and then classified and compared them across the two national contexts.

The comparison focused on two main aspects: how the textbooks portray the colonial period and how they interpret its historical meaning. The selection and classification of data were guided by the conceptual framework of the Western colonial system. In this sense, the analysis treats textbook narratives as constructed representations rather than neutral reproductions of the past. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, qualitative data are socially constructed, while historical narratives themselves are shaped through interpretation, explanation, and arrangement. This perspective is also consistent with McCullagh's (1998) view that historical truth is mediated through narrative construction and language. Accordingly, this study analyzes textbook narratives not only as descriptions of past events, but also as interpretive texts that reflect particular historical meanings.

The Indonesian textbooks analyzed in this study were selected from several curriculum periods, including the 2006 Curriculum, the 2013 Curriculum, and the *Merdeka* Curriculum, and were published by ESIS (2006), Grafindo Media Pratama (2006, 2007), the Ministry of Education and Culture (2013, 2014, 2015), Erlangga (2013, 2024), and Yrama Widya (2014). The Malaysian textbooks used as research materials consisted of official secondary-level history textbooks for Forms 1, 2, 3, and 5, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka under the Ministry of Education Malaysia. These included the Form 1 textbook by Mohd bin Sam-

sudin, Azharudin bin Mohamed Dali, and Sharifah Afidah bint Syed Hamid (2018); the Form 2 textbook by Suffian bin Mansor, Mardiana bint Nordin, Ahmad Salehee bin Abdul, and Ishak bin Saidoo (2017); the Form 3 textbook by Azharudin bin Mohamed Dali, Ridzuan bin Hassan, and Muslimin bin Fadzil (2018); and the Form 5 textbook by Ramlah bint Adam, Shakila Parween bint Yacob, Abdul Hakim bin Samuri, and Muslimin bin Fadzil (2010).

The data in this study consisted of historical narratives, paragraphs, and subchapters related to the arrival of Western powers, colonial policies, exploitation, resistance, education, and the legacy of colonialism. These data were collected through close reading and document analysis (Eriyanto, 2013). Relevant sections in each textbook were first identified, then classified into recurring themes, and finally compared across the Indonesian and Malaysian cases. The analysis focused on two main aspects, how the textbooks describe the colonial period and how they interpret its meaning and impact.

To ensure methodological rigor, the analysis used coding categories derived from the research questions and conceptual framework, including the background of colonialism, forms of colonial rule, exploitation, resistance, the role of local rulers, social and cultural change, education, and colonial legacy. These categories were refined during the reading process as new patterns emerged. Validity was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing textbooks from different publishers, grade levels, and curriculum periods, while reliability was maintained through consistent coding and category-based comparison so that the interpretation remained systematic and grounded in the text.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of history textbooks narratives in Indonesia and Malaysia focuses on comparing how the textbooks describe colonialism, exploitation, resistance, the formation of a plural society, the expansion of colonialism and the existence of kingdoms, and the relationship between Britain and the Netherlands.

General Description of Colonialism, Exploitation, And Resistance to the Colonial Government

Indonesian history textbooks generally present colonialism through a relatively consistent narrative sequence: the rise of Western colonialism and imperialism, Portuguese expansion, the VOC, French and British interludes, Dutch colonial rule, the Cultivation System, the post-1870 period, and re-

sistance to colonial domination (Hapsari & Adil, 2013; Hapsari & Adil, 2021). The early twentieth century is usually treated separately as the period of the national movement, marked by ethical policy, modern organizations, and intellectual struggle for independence, while the Japanese occupation is also discussed in a distinct chapter. A recurring feature of Indonesian textbooks is the use of the fall of Malacca in 1511 as a symbolic starting point for the spread of Western influence in the Nusantara region, even though Malacca is now part of Malaysia.

In Malaysian textbooks, especially at Form 3 level, the narrative begins with the arrival of Western influence in the Malay world and then traces British intervention across the Straits Settlements, the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States, as well as Sabah and Sarawak (Azharudin et al., 2018). The discussion ends with resistance to British rule and its political, social, and economic consequences. Compared with Indonesian textbooks, Malaysian textbooks place greater emphasis on the role of the sultanates and their relations with British authorities, making local rulers and selected colonial actors more central to the narrative.

In Indonesian textbooks, colonial narratives focus more strongly on Western policies and their social, political, and economic effects, with colonial actors such as the VOC, Daendels, Raffles, and Van den Bosch occupying a central role. By contrast, Malaysian textbooks place greater emphasis on the Malay sultanates and their interactions with British authorities, making local rulers, together with selected colonial figures, the main actors in the narrative. Structurally, Indonesian textbooks tend to follow a more chronological pattern, moving from the rise of Western colonialism to successive phases of colonial rule, resistance, ethical policy, and national awakening. Malaysian textbooks, meanwhile, are more organized around British intervention in different sultanates and territories, including the Straits Settlements, the Federated and Unfederated Malay States, as well as Sabah and Sarawak.

This difference also shapes how resistance is presented. Indonesian textbooks make resistance to colonialism one of the central themes and give it greater narrative weight than the background or administrative aspects of colonial rule, thereby highlighting nationalism and patriotism as key historical values (Hapsari & Adil, 2021). Malaysian textbooks also discuss resistance, but usually in closer relation to the political, social, and economic consequences of British rule, especially in terms of how the sultanates responded to colonial intervention. At the same time, Malaysian textbooks devote

more attention to colonial strategies, inter-imperial rivalry, and developments associated with modernization, whereas Indonesian textbooks place stronger emphasis on exploitation and anti-colonial struggle (Azharudin et al., 2018; Hapsari & Adil, 2021).

Malaysian textbooks highlight how British authorities and private companies used technology to expand mining and agricultural exploitation, whereas Indonesian textbooks place much greater emphasis on the oppressive consequences of colonialism, including widespread resistance to the Portuguese, Spanish, British, VOC, and Dutch, with only limited attention to scientific or technological developments under colonial rule (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 140–143; Supriatna, 2007, pp. 112–122). Even so, some Indonesian textbooks do acknowledge selected technological developments, such as the introduction of Kodak and its connection to Indonesian history (Hapsari & Adil, 2017, p. 79).

The narrative of resistance also differs in emphasis. Malaysian textbooks explain resistance to British rule in relation to the incompatibility between colonial and indigenous values, and they describe various forms of resistance, including armed struggle, as efforts to defend the rights of the sultanates, restore traditional authority, and oppose colonial policies that brought hardship to the people (Ramlah et al., 2010, pp. 31–44; Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 172). In Indonesian textbooks, resistance is more often presented as a response to colonial policies such as monopoly, forced cultivation, political interference, and the spread of Christianity, rather than as an explicit effort to preserve the sultanate system itself (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 36–38). This difference suggests that Malaysian textbooks frame resistance more directly in relation to the defense of indigenous political order, whereas Indonesian textbooks emphasize resistance as a broader reaction to colonial oppression.

Malaysian textbooks identify three main strategies of resistance to Western colonialism: armed struggle, diplomacy, and legislation. Although diplomatic efforts by Malay rulers were often violated by the British, the narrative still presents them as an important part of anti-colonial response, alongside armed resistance in several regions and legislative action in Terengganu during 1925–1928 (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 172; Ramlah et al., 2010, pp. 31–44). In contrast, Indonesian textbooks do not present resistance through such a clear strategic typology. Instead, resistance is generally portrayed as local, leader-centered, and heavily dependent on armed struggle, making it fragment-

ed and vulnerable to division (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 38–40). More organized and ideological forms of resistance are discussed separately in the chapter on the national movement, while resistance to the Japanese occupation is also treated in a different chapter with its own strategies, including armed struggle, cooperation, and underground movements (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 145–161).

A similar contrast appears in the treatment of colonial impact. Malaysian textbooks emphasize that British rule introduced a Western economic system designed to facilitate exploitation in agriculture and mining, but they also connect these changes to developments in transportation, telecommunications, and the growth of a plural society (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 136, 154). Indonesian textbooks, by contrast, place stronger emphasis on exploitation itself, presenting colonialism as a system of monopoly, oppression, division, and suffering that ultimately generated resistance (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 2–36).

The general narrative of colonialism in Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks shows that textbooks do more than recount past events; they shape how students understand oppression, resistance, and the meaning of colonial experience for the nation. In Indonesian textbooks, colonialism is framed mainly as domination, economic exploitation, and popular resistance, linking the colonial past closely to the rise of nationalism through suffering and anti-colonial struggle. This pattern supports Purwanta's argument that colonial discourse in Indonesian history textbooks has been shaped by official historiography and political context, particularly in presenting Dutch rule as a central source of national awakening (Purwanta, 2018). It also supports Sakki's view that textbooks are key instruments in shaping collective memory and social identity (Sakki, 2025). From this perspective, the strong emphasis on exploitation and resistance in Indonesian textbooks reflects not only a historical interpretation, but also an educational effort to reinforce anti-colonial national identity.

By contrast, Malaysian textbooks place colonialism within a broader geopolitical and administrative framework. Although exploitation remains visible, the narrative gives greater emphasis to political change, the role of the sultanates, and the emergence of a plural society under colonial rule. This difference suggests that colonialism is not understood uniformly across Southeast Asia, but is narrated according to each country's historical memory and nation-building priorities. Recent studies likewise show that textbook representations

of colonialism are shaped by national identity projects and curricular priorities, especially in the selective emphasis placed on conflict, modernization, and moral interpretation of the past (Hennessey, 2024; Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2026). The contrast between Indonesian and Malaysian textbooks, therefore, is not merely one of content, but of how each nation teaches the meaning of colonialism to younger generations.

Colonialism as a Shaper of Indonesian and Malaysian Diversity

Malaysian textbooks explain cultural diversity in the Malay world mainly through colonial labor migration and the broader social changes introduced under British rule. They show that the demand for labor in mining and plantations brought Chinese, Indian, and other migrant communities into the region, while colonial economic development also reshaped social, cultural, political, and legal life (Suffian et al., 2017, p. 17). Chinese workers were brought into mining areas in Sarawak and Sabah, Indians into plantation labor, and other migrant groups, including Javanese communities, were incorporated into colonial economic expansion (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 144–147). In this narrative, multiculturalism is presented as a product of colonial economic policy, although some textbooks also note that migration created competition between immigrants and indigenous communities (Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 46).

Western colonialism is presented in Malaysian textbooks as a major force behind social, cultural, economic, and political change, including the emergence of multicultural Malaysia (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 21; Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 12). The Straits Settlements are described as key entry points for migrant labor brought in to support colonial economic expansion, while urban growth in places such as Kuching, Sibul, and Kota Kinabalu is associated with the formation of a more diverse society under British rule (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 155).

Indonesian textbooks likewise present colonialism as a major source of economic, demographic, and socio-cultural transformation (Supriatna, 2007, p. 87). They emphasize changes linked to forced cultivation, the Agrarian Law of 1870, commercialization, education, population mobility, religion, and shifting gender roles (Supriatna, 2007, pp. 100–113). In the more recent curriculum, these effects are also connected to the national movement period, with Portuguese influence discussed in relation to religion, language, and cultural forms, and Dutch influence described through education, law,

economic change, technology, communication, and the lasting effects of colonial mentality (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 113–118).

Colonialism is also presented in the textbooks as an important force in shaping social diversity in both Indonesia and Malaysia, but the meaning of that diversity is framed differently in each case. In the Malaysian textbooks, colonial rule is closely linked to the formation of a plural society through labor migration, urban growth, and the reorganization of social life under British administration, while in the Indonesian textbooks, diversity is discussed more through the wider social and cultural consequences of colonialism, including demographic change, education, religion, language, and the spread of new forms of social mobility. This difference is analytically important because it shows that textbooks do not simply describe diversity as a historical outcome; they interpret it through national priorities and particular understandings of the past.

Recent scholarship similarly argues that history textbooks shape collective memory and social identity by selecting which aspects of the colonial past should be remembered, emphasized, or normalized, and that representations of colonialism in textbooks often reveal broader nation-building agendas rather than neutral historical description (Purwanta, 2018; Sakki, 2025; Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2026). In this context, the Indonesian and Malaysian textbooks suggest two related but distinct lessons for students, in Malaysia, colonialism is more explicitly connected to the making of a plural social order, whereas in Indonesia, colonialism is more often framed as a disruptive force that transformed society while also deepening the conditions that later shaped national consciousness and postcolonial identity.

Colonial Era Education

Malaysian textbooks describe pluralism largely as a product of the British vernacular education system, which separated Malay, Chinese, and Tamil students into different schools and, in doing so, hindered the formation of an integrated society (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 159, 163). This system reflected colonial priorities by organizing education along ethnic lines and by linking schooling to the social and economic needs of colonial rule. The textbooks also note the establishment of Malay, Chinese, religious, and English-medium schools in different regions, showing how colonial education contributed to long-term social fragmentation.

Indonesian textbooks present a comparable

but more complex picture. Colonial education is described as segregative, divided between Western and non-Western systems, yet it also produced important linguistic, cultural, and political effects (Alfian, 2006; Badrika, 2006; Farid, 2014; Hapsari & Adil, 2021; Sardiman, 2014). In addition to Dutch schools, Indonesia retained older non-Western institutions such as Islamic boarding schools, while nationalist organizations later established alternative schools of their own. Textbooks also highlight the use of multiple languages in colonial education and, more importantly, emphasize that education played a major role in shaping national consciousness and contributing to the rise of the national movement (Supriatna, 2007, pp. 104–105, 123–174).

Colonial-era education in the Indonesian and Malaysian textbooks is presented not merely as a school system introduced under colonial rule, but as a powerful instrument that reshaped society, social relations, and future national development. In the Malaysian textbooks, colonial education is mainly described through the vernacular system, which separated Malay, Chinese, and Tamil communities and thus reinforced social division under British rule, whereas in the Indonesian textbooks, colonial education is portrayed in a broader and more ambivalent way: it was segregative and unequal, yet it also opened limited access to new knowledge, language, and political awareness that later contributed to the rise of nationalist organizations and anti-colonial consciousness. This contrast is important because it shows that textbooks frame colonial education according to different national historical priorities: Malaysia emphasizes its role in producing plural but fragmented society, while Indonesia places greater weight on its unintended contribution to national awakening. Such a reading is in line with recent scholarship arguing that textbook narratives do not simply describe colonial institutions, but interpret them through the lenses of collective memory, identity formation, and nation-building, often highlighting those aspects of the past that remain most meaningful for present educational and political purposes (Sakki, 2025; Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2026; Fadlallah & Janmaat, 2024).

The Expansion of Colonialism and the Existence Of Empires

Malaysian history textbooks place strong emphasis on the integration and continuity of the Malay sultanates, especially through the legacy of the Melaka Sultanate. They present the sultanates of Pahang,

Perak, Terengganu, and Selangor as political successors of Melaka, linked through systems of government, Islam, law, customs, writing, and economic life, and even extend this narrative to a broader idea of *Tanah Melayu* (Suffian et al., 2017, pp. 114, 121). The textbooks also note variations in political systems across the Malay Peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak, but the overall emphasis remains on continuity and interconnectedness among Malay polities (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 4–5).

Indonesian textbooks, by contrast, tend to emphasize the diversity of kingdoms across the archipelago and the role of external forces, especially colonialism, in reshaping their political and social trajectories (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 36–38). Rather than highlighting continuity between kingdoms, they more often focus on fragmentation, conflict, and resistance, as well as on how colonial intervention eventually gave rise to nationalist unity (Alfian, 2006; Badrika, 2006; Farid, 2014; Hapsari & Adil, 2021; Sardiman, 2014). In this way, Malaysian textbooks frame kingdoms as part of an enduring political inheritance, whereas Indonesian textbooks more often present them as part of a broader historical process that culminated in anti-colonial struggle and national integration.

Malaysian textbooks stress that the Malay kingdoms had well-established political systems, economic strength, and intellectual traditions long before the arrival of Western colonialism. They emphasize the richness of natural resources, the development of education and governance, and the important role of the Malay language and Jawi writing as vehicles of trade, religion, and knowledge, thereby presenting the Malay world as a highly developed civilization before colonial intervention (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 4–9). This narrative serves to affirm that colonialism did not create civilization in the region, but entered an already organized and culturally advanced political order.

The same textbooks then describe British expansion into Perak, Selangor, and Negeri Sembilan through the politics of tin, succession disputes, and intervention in local conflicts, which later led to the formation of the Federated Malay States (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 56; Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 93). Tin wealth is portrayed as both an economic asset and a factor that intensified foreign involvement, especially as trade drew in Chinese communities and accelerated urban growth in places such as Kuala Lumpur. In this way, British colonial expansion is presented not simply as military conquest, but as a process of political intervention and economic control built upon existing local vulnera-

bilities.

Malaysian textbooks describe British expansion into Pahang, Perak, Negeri Sembilan, and other Malay states largely through agreements, interventions, and the establishment of the Resident system. In Pahang, for example, British intervention is justified in the textbook through the claim that local authority was unable to maintain order, while the Pangkor Agreement of 1874 and later agreements in Negeri Sembilan are presented as key steps in extending British rule (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 69, 76). Although the sultanates formally retained authority over Islam and Malay customs, political power increasingly shifted to British Residents and the Resident General under the Federated Malay States system. This narrative suggests that colonial control operated not only through force, but also through legal and administrative mechanisms that reduced the effective power of Malay rulers while preserving the appearance of sovereignty.

A similar pattern is described for the Unfederated Malay States, including Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Johor. Here, British expansion is linked not only to strategic trade routes, but also to wider imperial competition involving other Western powers, and is formalized through the Bangkok Agreement of 1909 (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 90, 99). By emphasizing treaties, external threats, and administrative distinctions, the textbooks portray British colonialism as a gradual process of political reorganization rather than straightforward conquest.

Malaysian textbooks describe the expansion of colonialism in Sabah and Sarawak as a process shaped by local political structures and indirect forms of control. Before Western intervention, Sarawak was strongly influenced by Brunei, while Sabah was divided between Brunei on the west coast and the Sultan of Sulu on the east coast. The textbooks explain that Sarawak came under the Brooke Dynasty through a combination of intervention and internal conflict, while Sabah was administered by the British North Borneo Company and later through a residency system (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 128). They also emphasize that colonial rule categorized local communities into distinct social roles, with Malays, Chinese, and Iban assigned different functions in administration, economy, and security. This narrative suggests that colonialism in Sabah and Sarawak operated not only through territorial control, but also through the reorganization of indigenous society.

At the same time, Malaysian textbooks connect colonial expansion to a broader narrative of

political unification and imperial rivalry. The image of the first Durbar meeting in 1897 is used to symbolize the desire for unity among the Malay states, while the textbooks also stress that the victims of British and Japanese colonialism included not only Malays but also Chinese communities (Samsudin et al., 2018, pp. 3, 21). British control over Penang, Malacca, and Singapore is explained in relation to their strategic location, and the broader expansion of colonialism is placed within competition among multiple imperial powers, including Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and the United States (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 16). In this way, the textbooks frame colonialism as both a regional geopolitical struggle and a process that reshaped the political map of the Malay world.

Malaysian textbooks describe British expansion as a process driven by diplomacy, threats, manipulation, and selective use of force. British control over key territories such as Singapore, Perak, Selangor, Pahang, Malacca, and Kedah is presented as the result of intervention in local conflicts, political agreements, and strategic competition with other powers, especially the Dutch (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 18–19). This narrative highlights that British colonialism in the Malay world often operated through indirect political methods rather than open conquest alone.

The Grade 5 textbook further emphasizes that the modern political system in Malaysia emerged through a long transition from the older sultanate order to a new state structure under colonial and postcolonial conditions (Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 66). It also explains that the Malayan Union was widely viewed as reducing the authority of the Malay sultanates, while the formation of Malaysia followed different historical processes in the peninsula, Sabah, and Sarawak (Ramlah et al., 2010, pp. 99, 110). In this way, the textbooks frame colonialism not only as domination, but also as part of the political transformation that shaped the modern Malaysian state.

In contrast to Malaysian textbooks, the expansion of colonialism in Indonesia is narrated as the end of the existence of many kingdoms because the Dutch destroyed and abolished these kingdoms (Alfian, 2006; Badrika, 2006; Farid, 2014; Hapsari & Adil, 2021; Sardiman, 2014). Examples include the Banjar Sultanate abolished by the Dutch on June 11, 1860, the abolition of kingdoms in the Bengkulu area, namely the Sungai Lemau, Sungai Itam, Silebar, and Anak Sungai Kingdoms, which began in 1870 and continued until 1881, the Loloda Kingdom in North Halmahera in 1915, the Islamic

Mataram kingdom was divided through the Giyanti and Salatiga agreements. The Aceh Sultanate was destroyed in 1873. The expansion of VOC and Dutch power from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries was carried out through the monopoly of the spice trade, interference in the internal problems of the Sultanate, territorial expansion, arrogance, discriminatory practices, and the implementation of various policies (Forced cultivation, Land rent, Open door policy) (Hapsari & Adil, 2021, pp. 37-42).

In Chapter 2, the Malaysian textbook describes British and Dutch efforts to avoid conflict through agreement. The cooperation between the two colonizers was motivated by the geographical proximity of the British and Dutch, the strategic position of the Dutch in their national security in Europe, and their experience of cooperation during the Napoleonic wars (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 40). This cooperation was realized with the London Agreement of 1824. The agreement is described as the cause of the division of the Malay world into British and Dutch colonies. The agreement made the British withdraw from Sumatra, and the Dutch handed over control of Malacca to the British and agreed to refrain from expanding colonial activities in the Malay world (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 43). The agreement also caused the Johor Riau Sultanate to split into Johor, Pahang, Singapore, and the Riau Lingga Islands. In the textbook, the agreement is presented as having a major long-term impact, namely the division of the Malay world into the two modern states of Indonesia and Malaysia (Azharudin et al., 2018, p. 45).

Malaysian Grade 5 history textbooks discuss Indonesia quite extensively within the broader narrative of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia. This includes references to forced cultivation, the emergence of the *priyayi* class, the Indonesian national movement, and major nationalist figures such as Kartini and Soekarno (Ramlah et al., 2010, pp. 15-20). The same textbook also connects the Japanese occupation period to Ibrahim Haji Yaakob's vision of a shared Indonesia-Malaysia independence through the idea of *Melayu Raya* or *Indonesia Raya* (Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 59). It further addresses the Indonesia-Malaysia conflict during the formation of Malaysia, presenting Indonesia's opposition as a response to what was seen as a form of neocolonialism (Ramlah et al., 2010, p. 146). This shows that Malaysian textbooks situate Indonesian history within a wider regional and geopolitical framework rather than treating it as a separate national case.

A similar regional perspective appears in the treatment of the Treaty of London of 1824. Malaysian textbooks portray the treaty as a decisive moment that divided the Malay world into British and Dutch colonial spheres and eventually contributed to the emergence of modern Indonesia and Malaysia, particularly through the fragmentation of the Johor-Riau Sultanate (Azharudin et al., 2018, pp. 43-45). Indonesian textbooks, by contrast, give less attention to the treaty itself and focus more on the immediate realities of colonial exploitation, such as the *cultuurstelsel* and anti-colonial resistance. In this sense, Malaysian textbooks tend to frame colonialism and Indonesia-Malaysia relations within a broader story of regional reorganization, while Indonesian textbooks place stronger emphasis on colonial oppression and the struggle for independence.

The expansion of colonialism and the changing position of indigenous kingdoms in Indonesian and Malaysian textbooks reveal that colonialism is narrated not only as foreign domination, but also as a process that reorganized political legitimacy, territorial order, and the meaning of sovereignty. In the Malaysian textbooks, the expansion of British power is often presented through treaties, diplomatic pressure, intervention in succession disputes, and the gradual incorporation of sultanates into new political arrangements, which allows the narrative to stress both colonial intrusion and the continuity of Malay political institutions. In the Indonesian textbooks, by contrast, colonial expansion is more often described as a destructive force that weakened, divided, or abolished local kingdoms, thereby reinforcing a stronger narrative of loss, domination, and anti-colonial struggle. This contrast is important because it shows that textbooks do not simply describe the fate of empires and kingdoms; they interpret imperial expansion in ways that support different national understandings of political continuity and rupture. Recent scholarship similarly argues that history textbooks shape collective memory by organizing the past into narratives that define political identity and moral meaning, while comparative studies of empire in school history show that imperial pasts are often reframed according to contemporary educational priorities rather than presented as neutral historical accounts (McDermid & Foster, 2024; Sakki, 2025; Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2026). In this sense, the Indonesian and Malaysian textbooks teach two different lessons about empire: one highlights colonial expansion as the destruction of indigenous sovereignty, while the other more often presents it as a process of political

restructuring that eventually became part of the historical foundations of the modern state (McDermid & Foster, 2024; Sakki, 2025; Van Nieuwenhuyse et al., 2026).

The comparison between Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks shows that colonialism is not narrated as a single or uniform Southeast Asian experience, but is selectively interpreted through different frameworks of national memory, identity, and nation-building. Theoretically, this study contributes to comparative textbook historiography by demonstrating that textbook narratives of colonialism are shaped not only by historical events, but also by political priorities and educational purposes. The findings confirm that school history functions as a site where the past is organized into meaningful narratives that support particular understandings of nationhood. Practically, this study contributes to history education by providing an empirical basis for more critical, comparative, and multiperspectival approaches to teaching colonialism in Southeast Asia. These findings may help curriculum developers, textbook writers, and teachers move beyond single national narratives and encourage students to see colonial history as a contested and interpretive field rather than a fixed body of facts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks construct Western colonialism through different narrative frameworks shaped by national memory and nation-building priorities. Indonesian textbooks predominantly emphasize oppression, exploitation, and anti-colonial resistance, whereas Malaysian textbooks more often frame colonialism within broader processes of political reorganization, administrative change, and the formation of a plural society. These differences confirm that history textbooks do not merely present the past, but actively shape how colonialism and national identity are understood. Theoretically, this study contributes to comparative textbook historiography by showing that colonialism in school history is selectively interpreted through different national frameworks of memory, identity, and political meaning. Practically, it provides a basis for developing more critical, comparative, and reflective approaches to history teaching in Southeast Asia. For this reason, teachers, curriculum developers, and textbook authors should consider introducing broader regional and multiperspectival approaches so that students can better understand colonialism as a complex and contested historical

experience. Future research may extend this discussion by examining classroom practice, visual materials, curriculum documents, and wider Southeast Asian comparisons.

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