

Malay Migration and Its Role in Rice Cultivation Development in Kerian, Perak: Contribution and Challenges, 1874–1940

Siti Noor Hafizah Mohamed Sharif

Universiti Sains Malaysia, ✉ snhafizah@usm.my

Article history

Received : 2024-11-23

Accepted : 2026-09-18

Published : 2026-10-24

Keywords

Malay migration;
rice cultivation;
Kerian, Perak, Tanah
Melayu;
British colonization;
lazy

Abstract: During British colonisation, the Malays were often described as 'lazy,' a label frequently blamed for their perceived economic backwardness, despite the country's rapid growth. This stereotype led to the belief that the Malays made little contribution to the country's economic development. This study challenges that notion by examining the migration of Malays to Kerian, where their involvement in padi cultivation significantly contributed to the area's development as the 'rice bowl' of Perak and the Federated Malay States. By focusing on Kerian as a case study, this paper argues that the Malays played a pivotal role in the region's economic growth, thus disproving the colonial-era stereotype. This research contributes to the ongoing debate on the economic contributions of the Malays during the colonial period. It provides new insights into the dynamics of Malay migration and agricultural development.

Abstrak: Selama masa kolonial Inggris, orang Melayu sering digambarkan sebagai kelompok yang "malas", suatu label yang kerap dijadikan penyebab bagi anggapan keterbelakangan ekonomi mereka, meskipun negara mengalami pertumbuhan ekonomi yang pesat. Stereotip ini melahirkan keyakinan bahwa orang Melayu memberikan kontribusi yang kecil terhadap pembangunan ekonomi negara. Penelitian ini menantang anggapan tersebut dengan mengkaji migrasi orang Melayu ke Kerian, di mana keterlibatan mereka dalam budidaya padi memberikan kontribusi yang signifikan terhadap perkembangan wilayah tersebut sebagai "lumbung padi" Perak dan Negeri-Negeri Melayu Bersekutu (Federated Malay States). Dengan menjadikan Kerian sebagai studi kasus, artikel ini berargumen bahwa orang Melayu memainkan peranan penting dalam pertumbuhan ekonomi kawasan tersebut, sehingga mematahkan stereotip yang berkembang pada masa kolonial. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada perdebatan yang terus berlangsung mengenai kontribusi ekonomi orang Melayu selama periode kolonial serta memberikan wawasan baru mengenai dinamika migrasi orang Melayu dan perkembangan pertanian.

INTRODUCTION

During British colonisation, a significant issue accompanying rapid economic growth and modernisation was the pervasive economic decline and poverty among the rural Malays. British administrators, along with some subsequent scholars, commonly attributed the economic underdevelopment and lag of the Malays to their traditional and social aspects, which exhibited a reluctance to change (Parkinson, 1967). These cultural backgrounds caused their refusal to be involved in labour-intensive sectors such as mining, plantation estates, whereby these operations were beyond daily routines. They preferred routine work within their respective village environments, which they were more familiar with. Although better economic opportunities were readily available elsewhere, the Malays were not ready to leave their villages. Instead, they were happier and more content living permanently in their villages, maintaining their status quo without seeking to improve their economic situation (Chai, 1967; Snodgrass, 1980). Since the majority of Malays were not involved in mining activities or with rubber estates, they were considered insignificant to the country's development (Chai, 1967). However, new



Available online at
<https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/paramita>

perspectives in literature refuted these negative claims about their attitudes and traditions. Instead, the status of Malay economic backwardness and poverty was associated with the policies and practices of the British administration. Since these writings did not specify the Malays' contributions to economic growth and development during British colonisation, their economic contribution still seemed unclear and insignificant (see Ungku Aziz, 1964; Lim Chong Yah, 1969; Lim Teck Ghee, 1967; Andaya and Andaya, 1982; Kratoska, 1975 & 1983; Shaharil Talib, 1983; and Jomo, 1988).

To address this gap, this study examines the significant economic contributions of the Malays to the economic development of *Tanah Melayu* during the colonial period, through a case study of migration to Kerian, Perak. The discussion of Malay migration to Kerian highlights how the region became not only the 'rice bowl' of Perak but also a key area for the Federated Malay States (FMS) demonstrating that this community was actively engaged in efforts to improve their economic conditions. Nevertheless, the actions of the British administrators hindered the Malays' efforts to advance their economy during the colonial period, particularly by confining them to padi planting to meet the domestic rice needs of *Tanah Melayu*. As a result, the Malays remained entrenched in an economy that offered minimal economic returns (Ungku Aziz, 1964; Lim Chong Yah, 1969; Andaya and Andaya, 1982). In most instances, padi planting provided little to no profit for them.

METHODS

This study employs the historical research method to examine the contribution of Malay migration to the development of padi cultivation in Kerian, Perak, between 1874 and 1940. The analysis is based primarily on archival and official British colonial records, including the *Annual Reports on the Social and Economic Progress of the People of Perak*, *Federated Malay States Census Reports*, *Perak Government Gazette*, *Reports on the Krian Irrigation Scheme*, *Annual Reports on the Working of Co-operative Societies in the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements*, *Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee*, *Selangor Secretariat Files*, and other relevant contemporary publications, including government bulletins and newspapers such as the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* and *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. These primary sources were selected because they provide contemporaneous evidence on demographic change, land administration, agricultural devel-

opment, irrigation, cooperative development, and colonial policy.

The study adopts qualitative document analysis to examine patterns of Malay migration, agricultural expansion, and economic contribution in Kerian. Quantitative data derived from census reports and annual reports are incorporated to support the historical analysis and substantiate the study's arguments. Evidence from different primary sources was compared and corroborated to strengthen the reliability of the historical analysis. Relevant secondary scholarship was consulted to situate the study within the existing historiography and to compare previous interpretations with evidence derived from the primary sources, thereby enabling the development of new historical interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

An Overview of the Malays' Economic Backwardness in Past Writings

Ungku Aziz (1964) and Lim Chong Yah (1969) specifically argued that the poverty of the Malays was closely linked to the rice cultivation policy enforced by British administrators. In contrast, Lim Teck Ghee (1977), although not explicitly claiming that this policy directly caused Malay poverty, nonetheless concurred that such practices led to significant challenges for the Malays, particularly in their inability to engage in more profitable crops, such as rubber. For instance, the imposition of the '*no rubber*' condition on certain land applications by the Malays, alongside the enforcement of the Malay Reservations Enactment 1913 and the Rice Land Enactment 1917, effectively confined the Malays to rice cultivation, preventing them from shifting to rubber cultivation, which offered far greater economic returns (Lim 1977). Jomo (1988) likewise argued that both enactments were designed to confine the Malays to rice cultivation. A recent study by Siti Noor Hafizah and Mahani (2025) has further demonstrated that the Malay Reservations Enactment 1913 did not effectively protect Malay land ownership, as British land laws and administrative regulations continued to restrict Malay access to land, limit their ability to cultivate more profitable crops such as rubber, and expose them to the risk of land loss.

Andaya and Andaya (1982), on the other hand, link the policies of British administrators, who prioritised two main export commodities rubber and tin while neglecting padi cultivation. When forced to choose between rice and these commodities, little could be done to provide the essential economic support, such as credit facilities, which were crucial

for rural Malays, particularly farmers, to facilitate their integration into the modern economy. This situation prevented this community from having the opportunity to participate in the rapid economic growth that was taking place. Andaya and Andaya (1982) further reiterated that, due to the restrictions imposed on the Malays to remain engaged in rice cultivation to meet domestic rice needs, they were unable to participate in other crops, such as rubber, which could have helped increase their income, given that income from padi cultivation was consistently low. As a result, they were burdened by debt and found it extremely difficult to escape the cycle of indebtedness due to the consistently low income from rice cultivation and the constraints on earning supplementary income from rubber cultivation.

The issue of credit needs that prevented the Malays from engaging with the modern economy and, in turn, influenced their economic aspects has also been argued by scholars both before and after Andaya and Andaya, such as Gamba (1958), Wong (1975), Kratoska, (1983) and Drabble (2000). Wong and Kratoska, for example, link the issue of credit among the Malays to the enforcement of the Malay Reservations Enactment, 1913, which was later revised and replaced by the Malay Reservations Enactment, 1933. According to Wong and Kratoska, this legislation limited the opportunities for the Malays to engage in the rapidly expanding commercial and modern economy, as access to more advantageous credit facilities became increasingly restricted. This was because the enactment reduced land value by imposing additional restrictions on land rents and mortgages between Malays and non-Malays, making land less valuable to Malays and ultimately reducing the amount of credit available to them (Wong, 1975; Kratoska, 1983). The impact of the implementation of this enactment was that the Malays had to rely on credit facilities recognised by the government, such as cooperatives. However, credit assistance from recognized credit institutions provided very little support and was therefore insufficient (Gamba, 1958).

Based on these arguments, it was found that they did not discuss Malays' contribution to the country's economic development. Previous literature has not detailed the role of Malays in the economy during colonial administration. These writings merely highlighted the causes of the Malays' economic decline. Such writings have thus perpetuated the perception that the Malays made no significant contributions to economic growth and development during the colonial period. Therefore, this

study aims to highlight the significant roles and contributions of local Malays to the nation's economic prosperity during colonial rule. The Malays played an important role in ensuring economic progress and development of their livelihood. However, due to British policies that disregarded Malays' needs, financial support for their growth and economic progress was limited. Thus, farming activity became more challenging, to the extent that they had to resort to loans to sustain and expand their produce while attempting to commercialise it. At the same time, Malay padi farmers faced other challenges and risks from unfavorable weather, such as drought or floods, which affected productivity and, in turn, resulted in declining earnings. Pest infestations were also a risk, further reducing productivity and contributing to their loss of income. When faced with these unexpected situations, they were forced to seek loans to sustain themselves and secure new capital to maintain their farms and related production (Firth, 1961). Limited credit facilities and the British administration's refusal to increase the amount eligible for loans created further complications. The unavailability of better credit arrangements prevented the Malays from effectively participating in the commercialisation of their commodities, thus resulting in serious repercussions.

Malay Migration and Padi Cultivation During Colonisation, 1874 – 1905

The British administration's involvement in agriculture had two main purposes. Firstly, to ensure a sufficient domestic rice supply to cater to the needs of the rapidly increasing population, so as not to be dependent on imported rice, since rice was the staple food of the population. For instance, in 1891, rice and paddy (rice in husk) imports totalled \$1,498,000. The British administration believed that developing unexploited land for paddy cultivation could reduce rice imports and prevent a large outflow of money. This would balance the import-export trade in padi, as exports that year were valued at only \$191,000, resulting in a surplus of \$1,307,000, or 87.2%. This situation resulted in high government expenditure and reduced trade revenue (*AR Perak*, 1891). Secondly, the administration wanted to encourage the plantation sector to generate national income through exports. In fulfilling the first objective, the Malays must be retained in padi planting, and this also ensured that the Malays became permanent residents in the district. At the same time, permanent residents would ensure a continued source of income for the British admin-

istration (AR Perak, 1895). As part of these efforts, migration in the region during British colonisation was also divided into two phases: before the implementation of the Kerian Irrigation Scheme (1874-1905)

Migration of Local Malays (From Tanah Melayu itself), 1874 - 1905

In the first phase of migration, land ownership reforms introduced by the British were aimed at simplifying the ownership process and reducing land costs. Land ownership was further reinforced through written laws, whereby ownership was endorsed through registration. These reforms not only attracted foreign migrants but also local Malays, specifically to Kerian and more generally to Perak. During the early stages, Malay communities from districts close to Kerian (Kedah, Pulau Pinang and Seberang Perai) became the dominant migrants (Lim, 1976). These neighbours were attracted here because of the relatively low land rentals and premiums. A \$3 premium and \$0.40 per-acre land rental were charged for each acre of land utilised for padi planting. These rates were much lower than those in Pulau Pinang and Seberang Perai. Comparatively, although these districts had similar weather and land quality to Kerian, their rental and premium rates were much higher, ranging from \$0.30 to \$0.40 for rental and \$14.50 for premiums (Lim, 1976). In addition, the British administration offered a 3-year exemption from land tax on any newly cleared land. Financial assistance, in the form of an advance, was also provided to new Malay migrants. This provision was only granted after detailed investigation to ensure the farmers' eligibility for financial advancement (Lim, 1976).

The entry of many Malay migrants from Seberang Perai and Pulau Pinang into Perak and Kerian, had caused great concern for W. E. Maxwell. In 1882, Maxwell saw that opening of new areas and tax exemptions had led to an influx of Malay farmers. Maxwell's uneasiness was due to the imminent impact on land value and the balance of population of Malay communities in both districts (Seberang Perai and Pulau Pinang) which had long been under British colonisation (Lim, 1976). Maxwell's concern was legitimate, as confirmed by the Straits Settlements Census of 1891. This report documented the phenomenon of mass migration of local Malays from Seberang Perai and Pulau Pinang to Perak. These migrations contributed significantly to the permanent Malay population in Kerian. (Merewether, 1891).

Various other initiatives, such as the 3-year tax exemption, succeeded in attracting Malay migration from Kedah to Perak since the early era of colonisation. In 1877, according to Hugh Low's notes, the suitable and fertile agricultural lands in Seberang Perai, which were highly utilised, had become saturated. This caused between 500 to 600 Malay families to prepare and await approval to emigrate into Kerian (Low, 1877). Low recorded that he only gave the rights to explore a piece of land in Parit Buntar, measuring 100 *orlong* to an individual by the name of Mahomet Sahan. This particular land was supposed to be utilised by only 100 families. This meant that each family secured only one *orlong* of land for farming activities. Low further noted that land used by these families would be registered and provided with ownership grants (Low, 1877). In the same year, a piece of land measuring 4,135 acres that stretched from Sungai Bakau to Tanjung Piandang was used for farming activities, with a major part of the land dedicated to padi planting and the remaining part used for the cultivation of pumpkins and other vegetables. These cultivations were meant to fulfil the market demands in Pulau Pinang (Low, 1877). Following this, there were continued migration activities by Kedah Malays to Kerian. In 1885, an additional 1,500 Kedah Malays migrated to various districts in Perak, with the continued focus being on Kerian as their destination (Lim, 1976). These Malay communities were not hesitant to bring along their families, carrying only the minimum basic necessities, due to the attractiveness of the political stability and the availability of fertile land in this district. Some of these migrant farmers were said to reciprocate well to the British administration's effort to cultivate padi in Kerian, while retaining their own land to continue with padi cultivation (Afifuddin, 1986). The new lands acquired in Kerian were instead turned into their reserved land despite their lack of capability to utilise and cultivate the land themselves. They had intended to rent the newly acquired land to new migrants in the coming years. These new landowners (early migrants) would even assist new migrants (also from Seberang Perai and Kedah) by providing financial advances to help meet the costs of padi cultivation (Gullick, 1989). Afterwards, when new migrants reaped their padi harvests, they would settle their financial advances and land rentals in the form of harvested padi (Gullick, 1989). This method of payment (in kind), using harvested padi, is called *padi kuncha* among the Malay communities. Under the *padi kuncha* system, payment for one *orlong* of land used, which was the equivalent of

160 *gantang* of padi, was required, while for an acre of land, 120 *gantang* had to be paid (Lim, 1976).

Another factor why the Malay migrants from Kedah were attracted to migrate to Kerian and cultivate rice here was that the land in Kerian was easier to cultivate compared to the land in Seberang Perai, such as in Bagan Tiang and Sungai Acheh. This advantage was due to the fact that the land here did not require plowing with a *tenggala* or buffaloes. Instead, the forests only needed to be cleared and burned, after which the soil was suitable for transplanting padi seedlings. Thus, the migration of Kedah people to Bagan Tiang and Sungai Acheh gave rise to new settlements in both areas (*Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1896).

Census reports indicate that, as an important and prosperous agricultural district in Perak, Kerian experienced a 97.2% population increase, from 24,698 residents in 1891 to 48,696 in 1901. This increase was attributed to the migration of 'foreign' or 'other' Malays to the district (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States* 1901). Migrant Malays made up the majority of the population in Kerian, accounting for 28,705 people, or 58.9% of the total population of 48,696. With this population in 1901, Kerian became the district with the highest Malay population in Perak, as shown in Table 1. In the same year, the Chinese, Indian, and other populations in Kerian numbered 9,135, 9,809, and 164 people, respectively (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States*, 1901, pp. 86, 89, 105).

The reference to 'foreign' in the 1901 Census clearly referred to Malays who originated from outside Perak, such as Java, Sumatera, Kedah and others (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States*, 1901). In previous writings, such as those by Lim (1976) and Hill (1977), the term "foreign Malays" was also not clarified as referring to Malays from outside Perak but still from the STM region, specifically Malays from Kedah, Penang, and Seber-

ang Perai, although both explanations focus on Malays originating from the FMS states. Therefore, it is important for the term "foreign Malays" to be clarified to highlight the role of the local Malays. Although it was undeniable that Malay communities from outside the Malay Peninsula, such as the Banjar and Javanese from the Dutch East Indies moved to Kerian, these were small in number compared to the local Malays from the Malay Peninsula. For example, the total Malay population from the Dutch East Indies, according to the first year of arrival in the Malay Peninsula and the following nine years, was only 9,931 people (see Table 5 and the related discussion in Tunku Shamsul Bahrin, 1967). For example, according to the census, the Banjar community was still not included in the ethnic division of the Malays, compared to other Malay ethnic groups from outside the STM, such as Aceh, Boyan, Bugis, Dayak and Java. As for these Malay populations from outside the STM, their numbers did not exceed 100 people, except for the Javanese Malays, who numbered 2,195 people (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States*, 1901). Meanwhile, in the Annual Report of Perak, the Banjar community appeared in the record only in 1891, when the British administration acknowledged Banjar migrants as diligent padi farmers in their efforts to further promote the development of padi cultivation in Kerian (see *AR Perak* records before 1891). However, other documents and records before 1891 mostly focused on Kedah Malay migrants (in Seberang Perai, Pulau Pinang, and Kedah), thus reflecting that local Malays were the significant and dominant migrants in Kerian until 1891. In contrast, other districts in Perak were dominated by Malay migrant communities from outside Peninsular Malaya. In the district of Kampar, for instance, Malay migrants from Sumatera exceeded the local Malay population (Sadka, 1968). The districts of Perak Bawah and Batang Padang also had dominant presence of foreign migrants, particularly Javanese Malays (Winstedt, 1923). Therefore, compared to other districts in Perak, Kerian is unique because migration to this area was dominated by Malays from the STM.

Thus, before the opening of the Kerian Irrigation Scheme in 1906, most Malay migrants who migrated to this district were local Malay migrants from the FMS itself, who were also referred to as 'foreign' Malays in the 1901 census report. The continuous influx of these migrants, particularly Malay migrants, resulted in Kerian having the highest population density in the entire region of the FMS, with 240.98 people per square mile. This high con-

Table 1. Malay population by Districts in Perak, 1901

District	Malay Population
Larut	10,580
Matang	7,508
Kuala Kangsar	27,954
Hulu Perak	3,006
Kinta	18,273
Hilir Perak	23,600
Batang Padang	7,387
Kerian	28,705
Selama	1,805

Source: *General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States* (1901, 89 & 105)

centration surpassed the population density of the mining districts in Kuala Lumpur, which had 203.20 people per square mile, while Kinta had a population of 172.86 people per square mile (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States*, 1901).

Padi Cultivation in Kerian, 1874-1905

Since 1879, the British have made Kerian the centre for padi planting (dry or wet rice) and have directed this at the State's Council Meeting. All residents were required to be involved in padi cultivation when the season arrived (Wilkinson, 1971). The village chief and elders were given responsibility for monitoring the entire cultivation process to ensure that residents in all districts undertook padi cultivation simultaneously. The process of this cultivation included land clearance activities, planting and re-planting. Farmers who did not comply with the required steps and processes were fined up to \$5 (Wilkinson, 1971).

Although the British administration encouraged padi farming, infrastructure for this sector was not of primary importance. Facilities for padi planting, which were mostly used by the Malays, became a secondary concern, although the administration understood the necessity for proper irrigation and drainage facilities, good communication (logistics), as well as other facilities necessary for the development of padi cultivation. Since the administration's main concern regarding high expenditure was the construction of railway tracks, there was little effort to provide the much-needed facilities for padi planting (*AR Perak*, 1891). Due to lack of financial provisions, the irrigation needs on a larger scale to support overall padi planting activities in other parts of Perak were not provided for except in the district of Kerian (see *Reports on the Krian Irrigation Scheme, Perak, Malay Peninsular 1892-1930*). It cannot be denied that, except for Kinta, small irrigation facilities had been implemented in Kuala Kangsar, Batang Padang, and other districts in Perak. The government spent \$122,171 on these facilities between 1892 and 1896. During the same period, efforts to provide irrigation facilities in Kinta to facilitate padi planting were undertaken by local leaders such as Datoh Panglima Kinta and Datoh Muda Wahab (*Perak*, 1896, p. 8). The irrigation plan by Datoh Muda Wahab was successfully completed in 1899 at a cost of \$40,000, and the State Secretary congratulated him on his success (*AR Perak*, 1899). Construction work on irrigation facilities was far too slow and was only completed for residents' use in 1906, that is, 15 years after being

planned in 1891 (Dyson, 1905). The delay was due to the British being preoccupied with constructing railway tracks to encourage development of tin mining, which was more profitable for the British administration. In 1892, The Deputy British Resident of Perak, W. H. Treacher clearly stated that unless and until the construction of the Kinta Valley Road was completed, it was not possible to proceed with providing irrigation facilities to support padi farmers (*Perak Government Gazette*, 1892).

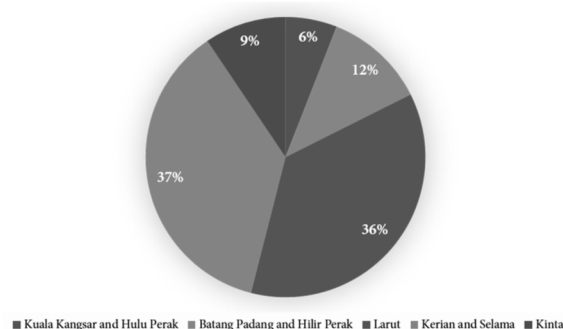
Any serious consideration and effort by the British administration to provide irrigation facilities for padi planting in Kerian depended on whether the district concerned was capable of consistently contributing high revenue to the administration (Caulfield, 1932). The land revenue received for each district is as shown in Table 2.

With reference to Table 2 and Figure 1, Kerian and Selama were the main contributors to Perak's land revenues during the 11-year period, which amounted to \$565,906.20. Together, they contributed \$206,927.99, or 37%, of Perak's total land revenue, 1% higher than the contribution of Larut, the state's principal mining district. This showed that, besides mining activities, agriculture played an important role, as it contributed a substantial share of Perak's land revenues. In fact, revenue from agricultural activities was much higher than revenue from mining activities during the early decades of British administration of Perak. Thus, high revenue from padi was evidence of the progress and development of padi cultivation in Kerian. Likewise, although sugarcane plantations were developed in this district, land rentals collected per acre were much lower than rentals charged on padi fields. Padi field rentals per acre were at \$0.40, whereas plantation land only cost \$0.25 per acre (Lim, 1976). In fact, sugarcane plantation owners were probably not charged rent for each acre of land cultivated if they had chosen to pay higher total premiums. However, in practice, the British did not charge any rent on plantations in Kerian because they wanted to encourage the commercialization of the plantation sector to make it export-oriented. Therefore, the early pioneers of sugarcane plantations were not imposed with rentals from 1877 to 1881 (Jackson, 1968). Till the end of 1881, the overall land revenues of Kerian were the result of the development and progress brought about by the Malays' involvement in the economic activities of the district, particularly padi farming and the cultivation of other crops. In addition, the total land area dedicated for padi planting was much higher compared to areas devoted to sugarcane planting. As in 1888, total

Table 2. Land Revenue Collected by Districts in Perak, 1878 - 1888

Year	District				
	Kuala Kangsar and Hulu Perak (\$)	Batang Padang and Hilir Perak (\$)	Larut (\$)	Kerian and Selama* (\$)	Kinta (\$)
1878	-	2,450.7	6,239.6	8,308.1	-
1879	247.4	1,404.4	6,768.8	13,216.0	-
1880	246.8	4,917.4	21,203.0	12,016.7	4.0
1881	-	5,684.5	8,346.9	18,150.6	317.0
1882	102.0	2,170.7	28,794.8	26,189.3	1,108.3
1883	102.9	3,709.4	24,015.0	27,011.7	1,639.8
1884	528.2	5,243.0	14,777.0	26,219.7	1,767.5
1885	4,312.8	9,633.8	23,710.2	17,079.7	6,767.9
1886	7,120.9	11,979.5	23,071.3	20,322.1	10,654.5
1887	10,579.7	8,693.7	21,085.3	18,701.1	13,649.9
1888	10,508.8	10,070.0	27,776.7	19,713.2	17,557.8
Total	33,749.4	65,973.9	205,788.4	206,928.0	53,466.7

Source: Cited and adapted from *AR Perak* 1888, 34

**Figure 1.** Total Land Revenue by Districts in Perak, 1878 to 1888

land area for sugarcane planting in Kerian was only 16,414 acres, whereas padi planting covered a much higher acreage of 36,455 acres (*AR Perak*, 1888). Therefore, the failure of the rice crop significantly affected the land revenue collection in this district. In 1890, Kerian recorded the lowest revenue collection since 1880 due to farmers experiencing issues with bad harvests caused by the dry season, coupled with irrigation problems, which resulted in earnings dropping to a total of only \$8,364 (*AR Perak*, 1890). Later, however, when situations improved, harvests increased and once again contributed to higher land revenues. As a result, in 1891, Kerian's land revenue increased to \$16,050 (*AR Perak*, 1891). This became an important factor to consider when planning the construction of irrigation facilities.

Kerian's position as the main padi planting district was also demonstrated by the total land area dedicated to the crop. In 1892, in Kerian, total cultivated land for padi alone was 37,000 acres compared to 23,000 acres for sugarcane cultivation and 20,000 acres for fruits, nipah and other crops (*AR Perak*, 1892). Padi land revenue collected this year amounted to \$59,514, which was much higher than mining activities, which only received \$21,719. Padi cultivation, therefore, contributed \$28,029 or 47.1% of the overall total revenue from agricultural activities in Perak (*AR Perak*, 1892). As a result of this high return from agricultural activities, the British administration extended an additional 11,055 acres of land reserved for padi planting in 1896. Of this, 6,148 acres or 55.6% of padi planted in Kerian constituted more than half of the total land dedicated to padi planting (*AR Perak*, 1896). The average land owned by Malay padi farmers in Kerian was as large as three to five acres each (*Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 1896). Kerian's geographical position, along with the main economic activities of its population, which offered great potential benefits and profits, were important factors influencing the consideration for the implementation of irrigation facilities in the district. Nevertheless, until 1906, towards the implementation of the Kerian Irrigation Plan, the total land area for padi cultivation in Kerian was only 31,090 acres. Therefore, there was a

reduction in the land area for padi planting compared with the padi planting area in 1892, a decrease of 6,810 acres or 18.4% (*AR Perak*, 1906, p. 3).

Foreign Malay (Banjar) and Ongoing Local Malay Migration: Economic Challenges of Malay Rice Farmers, 1906-1940

During this period, Kerian had established itself as the main padi planting district well supported by the necessary infrastructure. Efforts by the British to provide needed facilities in Kerian had attracted more Malay migrants to reside permanently. The irrigation plan was designed not only for padi irrigation but also to provide a clean water supply to residents, so that they would not move out because of a shortage of clean water (Vincent, 1894, p. 21). In the following years, although areas dedicated for padi planting fluctuated from time to time, yet the dedicated areas still exceeded the initial year of implementation of irrigation facilities which was 31,090 acres. After 1906 more areas were dedicated for padi planting as in 1908 whereby 48,363 acres were reserved for padi planting (*AR Perak*, 1906-1939). However, the policy of gazette land reserved for padi planting had one major limitation. Since no other cultivation was allowed, padi farmers had no choice but to continue cultivating padi even though returns from padi cultivation remained consistently low. In Kerian, restrictions on cultivation could be seen in Clause (4) on the Nature of Cultivation in the Krian Irrigation Enactment. Clause (4) established that the Resident had full powers over land use (*F.M.S. Government Gazette*, 1905, p. 2). It was therefore not surprising that in Kerian only padi planting was allowed on land gazette under the irrigation plan. Crops other than padi, such as rubber, could only be planted outside the gazette areas (*AR Perak*, 1939, p. 77).

Malay Migration to Kerian, 1906–1940

Kerian had been faced with difficulty in getting supply of clean water for daily use. Due to this insufficiency, some padi farmers were forced to leave this area and migrate to other districts (*AR Perak*, 1908). This created the need for proper and sufficient water facilities for padi farming so that existing farmers would not migrate to other areas. However, the situation had attracted new migrants to settle in Kerian as soon as the irrigation plan was implemented in 1906. Hence, Malay population in Kerian alone almost doubled, from 28,705 people in 1901 to 45,038 in 1911. These figures only involved the Malay population that was dominant in this

Table 3. Total population of Malays in Kerian, 1911, originating from the Malay Peninsula and from the Indonesian islands

Year	1911
Malays	27,347
Banjar	15,391
Javanese	2,300
Total	45,038

Source: Pountney (1911, 41)

district, namely local Malays, Banjar, and Javanese. The increase recorded was 16,333 people or an increase of 56.8% (*General Remarks on the Census, Federated Malay States* 1901; Pountney, 1911). The Malay population in Kerian therefore comprised of local Malays from the Peninsular, Banjar and Java. Table 3 provides the composition accordingly.

As shown in Table 3, local Malays in comparison to Banjar and Javanese, still made up the highest composition in Kerian. Malays represented 60.7% of the total Malay residents in Kerian, whereas Banjar and Javanese each accounted for 34.2% and 5.1%, respectively. Hence, although Banjar were becoming significant, the population of Malays from the Malay Peninsula was still higher and almost doubled that of Banjar.

Besides the availability of adequate irrigation facilities, various other factors had attracted foreign migrants to the Kerian district. Limited land in their homeland led to rapid overpopulation, affected their economic status, and affected their social life. These had pressured them to search for better pastures in new areas to the extent that some emigrated to the Malay Peninsula. Banjar communities from the districts of Rawa in Delta Barito and areas downstream in Kalimantan could not accommodate 1,500,000 (1.5 million) people from the Banjar communities (Mochtar, 1979). Land became less fertile while areas suitable for padi planting became subsequently limited. Jobs as fishermen, were not economically sufficient to replace their core earnings from padi planting. Many among the Banjar communities chose to emigrate to new settlements in the hope of securing their livelihoods. It was interesting to note that ethnic Malays from the Indonesian islands with the highest percentage of tendency to emigrate were from the Banjar communities (Mochtar, 1979).

Until 1947, there was continued migration into Kerian by Banjar and Malays from Pulau Pinang, Seberang Perai, and Kedah. That year, the number of local Malays from outside Kerian who had resided in the area totalled 2,667, compared to the Banjar population from Banjarmasin which was only

1,515 people (Tufo, 1949). Therefore, there were 1,152 more local Malays or 43.2% higher than Malay migrants from Dutch East Indies. However, both communities played important roles in the development and progress of Kerian as the main district for padi cultivation.

Contribution and Economic Challenges of the Malays in Padi Cultivation, 1906-1940

Through padi planting activities, it was obvious that Malays played a significant role in fulfilling the British aspiration to create a permanent settlement to guarantee continued revenue for the administration through land taxes and payment for irrigation facilities. Padi planting in Kerian had to some extent reduced dependency on imported rice. The objective of padi planting was not for the sole purpose of self-sustenance but also for distribution to other areas for commercial purposes and export. In 1907, total rice exports were valued at \$600,000. This was the highest earnings recorded before implementation of irrigation facilities. It is undeniable that this amount was small and not comparable to Perak's imported rice which was worth \$5.7 million in the same year (AR Perak, 1907). However, this performance and earnings showed that Kerian was capable of producing rice beyond the needs for self-sustenance. Conclusively, these achievements nullified the perception that padi cultivation by the Malays was merely for self-sustenance. In 1913, Kerian exported 169,233 pikuls (4,230,825 *gantang*; 1 pikul = 25 *gantang* [AR Perak, 1913, p. 5]) of padi. The year before (1912) Kerian recorded higher padi exports, which totalled 171,819 pikuls (4,295,475 *gantang*) (AR Perak, 1913).

Although the influx of Malay migrants to this region was still considered insufficient to boost rice cultivation, prompting the British administration to establish settlements for non-Malays to further stimulate rice farming (Hill, 1977): Malays remained the main rice farmers in Kerian. In fact, the total rice production by Malays was far higher than that of non-Malays. For example, in 1930, the total rice production in Kerian was 9,758,596 *gantang* (AR Perak, 1930). Of this total, rice production by the Chinese and Indian communities was 1,200,000 *gantang* and 1,250,000 *gantang*, respectively, making the total rice production for both communities 2,450,000 *gantang*. Meanwhile, rice production by the Malays in this region was 7,308,596 *gantang* (Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee, 1931). Thus, the Malays contributed 74.89% of the rice production in this region, compared to 25.11% produced by non-Malays.

The main issue faced by Malays in padi cultivation was that the government's efforts to increase padi production caused the costs of rice cultivation to rise, while the market price continued to fall.

For instance, based on an experiment by the Agricultural Department, the cost of rice cultivation in *Tanah Melayu* per acre of land ranged from \$30 to \$35, which varied based on the infrastructure facilities provided by the government, the higher land rental costs for lands gazetted under irrigation schemes, different planting methods for varying soil types and the type of rice seeds used (Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee, 1931). Although the British administration introduced new techniques, earnings of padi farmers in Kerian were still not high. Padi revenue was less than \$30 for each acre, due to prices that were always low. Revenue was only high between 1922 to 1926 and in 1935. The market price per *gantang* of padi for instance, was \$0.13 or \$0.14 sen between 1922-1930. Then, from 1931 to 1939, padi prices dropped further to only between \$0.08-\$0.09 (AR Perak, 1930-1939). The average padi output per acre during the same period was still the same, that is, between 160 *gantang* to 393.3 with the highest production in 1935 (AR Perak, 1930-1939). Hence, due to farmers' low revenues for most years, they were unable to cover even the minimum costs of planting an acre of padi. This situation was evident from records which showed that throughout a period of 17 years farmers only reaped revenues higher than the minimum costs per acre for just 6 years. The higher revenues received were for the years between 1922- 1926 and in the year 1935. Nevertheless, if the maximum cost of \$35 is taken into account, then only three years within that period saw the income per acre of rice planting exceeding the required cost for each acre of rice planting, namely in the years 1923, 1924, and 1925. This can be seen in Figure 2 below, which shows the estimated income per acre of rice planting from 1922 to 1939:

With reference to Figure 2, although overall padi production was highest during this period, at 393.3 *gantang* per acre in 1935, the market price was at its lowest, at around \$0.08. Padi farmers only obtained a difference of only \$1.5 for each acre planted. This meant that farmers had a loss of \$3.5 for every acre of padi planted. Consequently, to ensure that padi could be planted in the next season, farmers would be forced to secure loans for purposes of planting activities. It was no surprise that padi farmers were burdened with debts due to low prices (revenue) of padi. While farmers used their lands as collaterals to secure loans, they eventually lost their

lands when they failed to repay their debts (*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee*, 1931).

Although the commercialisation of rice cultivation increased the planting costs borne by rice farmers, who often incurred losses, the government's credit facilities were always insufficient. For instance, in 1910, the total loans provided by the government amounted to \$10,000, while the total loans, including interest on existing debts, amounted to \$19,464. This amount was small compared to public loans from moneylenders in Kerian. The amount for the same year was \$402,000, of which \$370,000 was owed by Malay farmers (*AR Perak*, 1910). Besides seeking loans from *chettiers*, padi farmers also obtained advance credits from Chinese manufacturers or shop owners by using the *kuncha* system as collaterals. The lower prices for padi sold to the Chinese compared to the market value were due to interests imposed which resulted in the farmers being burdened by debts (*Selangor Secretariat File 980/1924*). Whether farmers used their land or harvest as collaterals, the outcome was still a negative impact due to a 100% interest upon their loans. In 1921, this system resulted in farmers earning only \$0.06 for a *gantang* of padi, compared to the market price of \$0.12 (A. Rahman Tang & Mohd. Sohaimi, 2021). The insufficient credit facilities gave padi farmers no other choice but to continue being indebted to unofficial creditors.

In handling credit issues, the British administration was only resolute when they took steps to provide credit facilities in 1922. *The Cooperative Societies Enactment* was gazetted to assist residents in *Tanah Melayu* to have access to government loans. These were also made available for Malay padi farmers in the rural areas through the establishment of the *Rural Cooperative Credit Societies (RCCS)* (Cavendish, 1922). The establishment of this cooperative was intended to end the practices of *padi kuncha* which was considered to be the main cause that Malays were trapped with debts (*Selangor Secretariat File 980/1924*). However, the existence of the cooperative was not sufficient and failed to sustain its presence in Kerian (*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee*, 1931). This was not surprising since RCCS's implementation depended on the Malays' financial capabilities to participate in it. Membership in RCCS required owning shares worth \$100 each, to be paid over a period of 10 years (*Selangor Secretariat File 980/1924*). These monies were not allowed to be withdrawn until they reached maturity at 10 years. However, members could take a loan based on the conditions stated by the corporation. Members also saved their money with their corporations. In short, the RCCS functioned like a bank: it received money from investors and then used the money to provide loans to needy members at interest rates lower than those of other financial institutions (Cavendish, 1922, p.

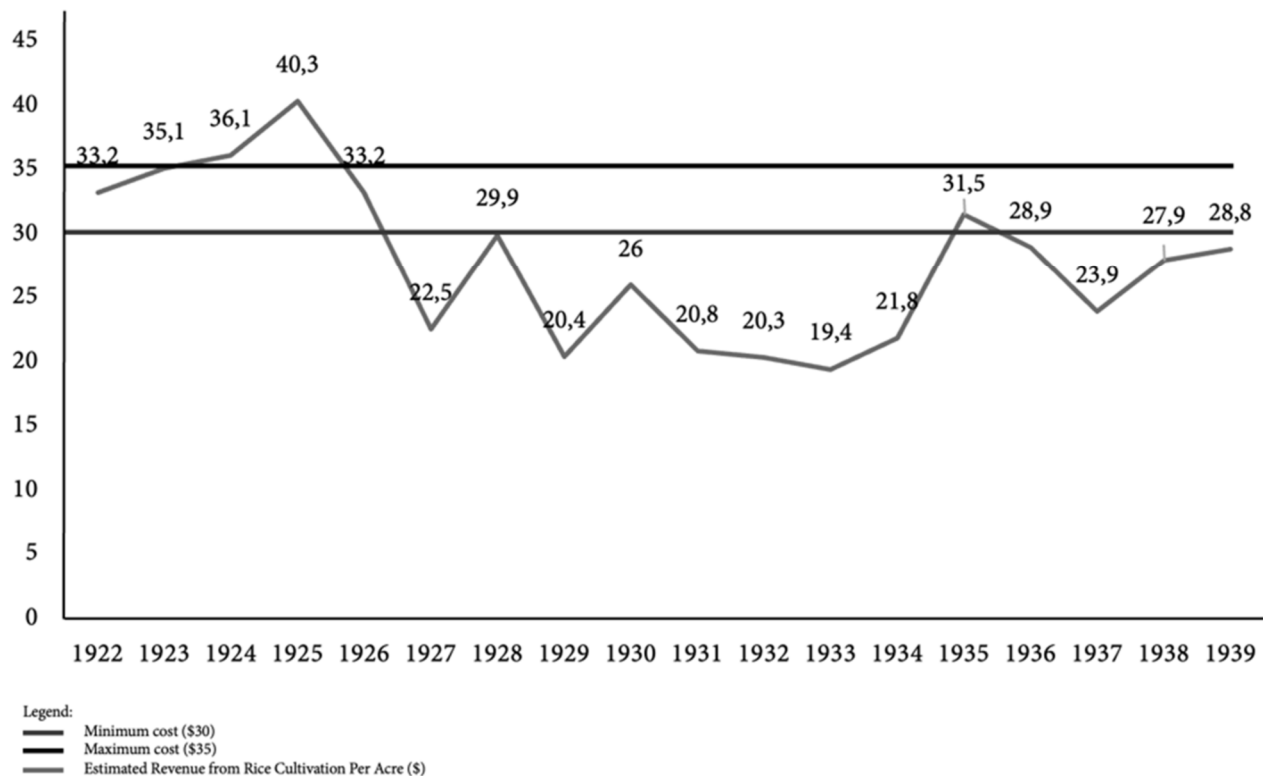


Figure 2. Estimated Revenue from Rice Cultivation Per Acre (\$), 1922-1939. (Source: AR Perak, 1936-1938)

5). Therefore, the members' economic and financial capability to sustain their yearly membership and clear their loans with RCCS was of great importance to the continuity and success of the cooperative. At the same time, membership sustainability depended on farmers' ability to afford yearly fees, which, in turn, relied on their earnings from the harvest. During the economic recession, farmers' earnings continuously declined due to falling prices. Consequently, throughout the period of recession, even until 1937, there were cooperatives that were inactive for extended periods as members were unable to settle their liabilities (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1937). These difficult times witnessed members' need for increased loans to settle their debts with outside parties, and therefore were pressured to surrender their lands and jewellery as collateral. At the same time, due to low settlement of loans by members, the cooperatives were not capable of accommodating requests for increased loans. Inactive cooperatives were then advised and directed to liquidate their assets if poor conditions continued, so that they would be able to accommodate existing liabilities (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1937).

For padi farmers, the situation became even more difficult because they had to contend with low crop prices coupled with unpredictable weather conditions. Failure of harvests still occurred due to water shortages even with the availability of irrigation facilities (*Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee*, Vol. II, p. 14). In 1937, for instance, although there was economic recovery after the recession, most padi planting districts still experienced poor harvests due to adverse weather conditions (*The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 1937). This led to higher credits being meted by cooperatives to padi planters in the rural areas. Since many borrowers were unable to repay their loans, cooperatives faced difficulties to extend loans because their loan repayments were low during this bad season. As a result, many RCCSs had to liquidate their assets to avoid high losses. In the case of the RCCS in Bagan Tiang, it tried to relinquish its padi field assets in order to reduce its liabilities, but was unsuccessful in liquidating these particular assets (*Annual Report on the Working of Co-operative Societies in Federated Malay States and Straits Settlement*, 1937).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Malays contributed significantly to the economic development of colonial Malaya during the British administration. They sought to

improve their economic conditions through emigration from their places of origin to districts that offered better economic opportunities. However, the policies and practices of the British administration-imposed limitations and challenges that contributed to the continued indebtedness of the Malays and constrained their opportunities for economic advancement. These findings challenge long-standing colonial narratives regarding Malay economic passivity by demonstrating that the economic constraints experienced by the Malays resulted primarily from colonial policies rather than from any inherent lack of initiative. As such, this study contributes to broader historiographical debates on colonial economic history by offering a reassessment of the Malays' contribution to colonial economic development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by the Ministry of Higher Education under the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) with the reference code KPT (FRGS/1/2023/SSI08/USM/02/1) and the USM account code (203.PHUMANITI.6712167).

DECLARATION OF AI USE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist with language editing, including improving grammar, clarity, sentence structure, and overall readability. All AI-generated suggestions were critically reviewed, revised, and verified by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, interpretation, originality, and integrity of the final manuscript.

REFERENCES

- A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, & Mohd. Sohaimi Esa. (2021). Dilema ekonomi wang dalam masyarakat Melayu: Penubuhan syarikat perniagaan dan koperasi di Tanah Melayu pada awal abad ke-20. *MANU: Jurnal Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa*, 32(2), 35–59. <https://doi.org/10.51200/manu.v32i2.3399>
- Afifuddin Hj. Omar. (1986). *Pembangunan ekonomi kaum tani: Suatu kajian ekonomi-politik di Wilayah Muda*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. (1982). *A history of Malaysia*. Macmillan.
- Annual report on the working of co-operative societies in the Federated Malay States and Straits Settlements*, 1937. (1937). Kuala Lumpur: Federated Malay States Government Press.
- The Burney papers* (Vol. 1). (1971). India Office Library.
- Caulfield, F. St. G. (1932). Report on the proposed Krian irrigation works, Perak, Malay Peninsular 1892.

- In Government of Perak, *Reports on the Krian irrigation scheme* (pp. 7-8). C. E. Press
- Cavendish, A. (1922). *Co-operation as a subject for study in Malaya*. Pinang Gazette Press.
- Chai, H. C. (1967). *The development of British Malaya, 1896-1909*. Oxford University Press.
- del Tufo, M. V. (1949). *Malaya, comprising the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore: A report on the 1947 census of population*. Crown Agents for the Governments of Malaya and Singapore.
- Dobby, E. H. G. (1982). *Asia Tenggara* (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Trans.). Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Drabble, J. H. (2000). *An economic history of Malaysia, c. 1800-1990: The transition to modern economic growth*. Macmillan.
- Dyson, C. V. (1927). Report on the Krian irrigation scheme, Perak, Malay Peninsular 1905. In Government of Perak, *Reports on the Krian irrigation scheme* (pp. 43). C. E. Press.
- Federated Malay States government gazette*. (1905). Volume 18, Kuala Lumpur: Federated Malay States Government Press.
- Firth, R. (1964). Capital, saving and credit in peasant societies: A viewpoint from economic anthropology. In R. Firth & B. S. Yamey (Eds.), *Capital, saving and credit in peasant societies* (pp. 15-34). George Allen & Unwin.
- Gamba, C. (1958). Poverty, and some socio-economic aspects of hoarding, saving and borrowing in Malaya. *Malayan Economic Review*, 3(2), 33-62.
- General remarks on the census, Federated Malay States 1901*. (1901). Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer.
- Gullick, J. M. (1989). *Malay society in the late nineteenth century: The beginnings of change*. Oxford University Press.
- Hill, R. D. (1977). *Rice in Malaya*. Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, J. C. (1968). *Planters and speculators: Chinese and European agricultural enterprise in Malaya, 1786-1921*. University of Malaya Press.
- Jomo, K. S. (1988). *Pembangunan ekonomi dan kelas sosial di Semenanjung Malaysia* (Shamsul Bahriah Ku Ahmad, Trans.). Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Kratoska, P. H. (1975). *The chettiar and the yeoman: British cultural categories and rural indebtedness in Malaya* (No. 32). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Kratoska, P. H. (1982). Rice cultivation and the ethnic division of labor in British Malaya. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24(2), 280-314. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/178586>
- Kratoska, P. H. (1983). "Ends that we cannot foresee": Malay reservations in British Malaya. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 14(1), 149-168. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20174324>
- Lim, C. Y. (1967). *Economic development of modern Malaya*. Oxford University Press.
- Lim, T. G. (1976). *Origins of a colonial economy: Land and agriculture in Perak, 1874-1897*. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Lim, T. G. (1977). *Peasants and their agricultural economy in colonial Malaya, 1874-1941*. Oxford University Press.
- Low, H. (1877). The Journal of Sir Hugh Low, Perak, 1877, The National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), CO 273.
- Maxwell, W. E. (1884). The law and customs of the Malays with reference to the tenure of land. *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 13, 75-220.
- Merewether, E. M. (1891). *Report on the census of the Straits Settlements taken on the 5th April 1891*. Government Printing Office.
- Mochtar Naim. (1979). *Merantau: Pola migrasi suku Minangkabau*. Gadjah Mada University Press.
- Muhammad Hassan bin To' Kerani Mohd Arshad. (1968). *Al-tarikh salasilah negeri Kedah*. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Nathan, J. E. (1922). *The census of British Malaya, 1921*. Waterlow.
- Ooi, K. G. (2012). Mereka datang untuk berdagang dan bermastautin: Perkembangan Pulau Pinang sebagai bandar raya pelabuhan kosmopolitan 1780-an-1880-an. In K. G. Ooi (Ed.), *Warisan wilayah utara Semenanjung Malaysia*. Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Parkinson, B. K. (1967). Non-economic factors in the economic retardation of the rural Malays. *Modern Asian Studies*, 1(1), 31-46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/311583>
- Perak. (1888-1939). *Annual report on the social and economic progress of the people of Perak* [CO 438; microfilm 1488]. Perpustakaan Hamzah Sendut, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Perak government gazette*. (1892). Vol. V, No. 36, 25 November 1892.
- Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*. (1896).
- Pountney, A. M. (1911). *The census of the Federated Malay States: Review of the census operations and results, 1911*. Darling & Son.
- Report of the Rice Cultivation Committee, 1931* (Vol. 2). (1953). Federated Malay States Government Press. (Original work published 1931)
- Roff, W. (1984). *Kerjasama dan koperasi di Semenanjung 1910-1941: Petikan dari bahan-bahan terbitan sezaman*. Penerbit Universiti Malaya.
- Sadka, E. (1968). *The protected Malay states, 1874-1895*. University of Malaya Press.
- Selangor Secretariat File 980/1924. (1924). *Cooperative Societies Department, S.S. & F.M.S. annual report for 1923*.
- Shaharil Talib. (1983). Voices from the Kelantan desa 1900-1940. *Modern Asian Studies*, 17(2), 177-195.
- Siti Noor Hafizah Mohamed Sharif, & Mahani Musa. (2025). Malay land loss dilemma: Was the Malay Reservations Enactment 1913 relevant? *Kemanu-*

- siaan: *The Asian Journal of Humanities*, 32(2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2025.32.2.1>
- Snodgrass, D. R. (1980). *Inequality and economic development in Malaysia*. Oxford University Press.
- Swettenham, A. F. (1983). *About Perak*. National University of Singapore.
- Times are still hard in rural kampongs. (1937, April 26). *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/singfreepressb19370426-1.2.46>
- Tunku Shamsul Bahrin. (1967). The growth and distribution of the Indonesian population in Malaya. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 123 (2), 267–286.
- Ungku Abdul Aziz. (1964). Poverty and rural development in Malaysia. *Kajian Ekonomi Malaysia*, 1(1), 70–105.
- Vincent, C. (1932). Report on the Krian irrigation scheme 1894. In Government of Perak, *Reports on the Krian irrigation scheme, Perak, Malay Peninsula 1892–1930* (pp. 43). C. E. Press.
- Wilkinson, R. J. (1971). *Papers on Malay subjects*. Oxford University Press.
- Winstedt, R. O. (1923). *Malaya: The Straits Settlements and the Federated and Unfederated Malay States*. Constable.
- Wong, D. S. Y. (1975). *Tenure and land dealings in the Malay states*. Singapore University Press.