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COLONIAL RATIONALITY AND THE OTHER: THE BRITISH IN NORTH BORNEO¹

Callistus Fernandez

Conquest of new territories, expanding markets and the civilising of the Other very much colour colonial expansionist policies in the New World. To the colonials, the conquest of new territories was largely driven by profit motivation i.e. increasing their wealth as well as expanding their business into the newly acquired regions. To the conquered, it meant changes in every aspect of their social life. Colonial discourse came to mean many things but largely it was seen as the way the colonial thought of the Other, ruled the Other and created the Other. One need not look far as this argument is posed interestingly in Edward Said's *Orientalism*² where he saw the making or construction of the Other- to an extent what the colonial thought was the Other in essence became the Other in practice, adhered too by them as their image. Michel Foucault³ saw the element of power factored into various relationships which always favoured the one with power over the one with none or object of power. Perhaps, Bernard Cohn's⁴ brilliant discussion on colonial knowledge should be a standard text for any serious academic in understanding the power of colonial discourse (or colonial knowledge) in constructing the Other. The nature of colonial knowledge in influencing every aspect of the Other's life- from clothing to history and every element of the Other's social life is the object of investigation and redefinition. Cohn's idea of colonial intervention not just inclusive of the invasion of the physical space but also of the epistemological one. In the end, with pessimistic tone, the Other is and can be no more than what the colonial constructed or a colonial invention- resembling a Christmas cookie, moulded, shaped and created to taste in the imagery of the "creator".

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Conquest of new territories, expanding markets and the civilising of the Other very much colour colonial expansionist policies in the New World. To the colonials, the conquest of new territories was largely driven by profit motivation i.e. increasing their wealth as well as expanding their business into the newly acquired regions. To the conquered, it meant changes in every aspect of their social life. Colonial discourse came to mean many things but largely it was seen as the way the colonial thought of the Other, ruled the Other and created the Other. One need not look far as this argument is posed interestingly in Edward Said's *Orientalism*² where he saw the making or construction of the Other – to an extent what the colonial thought was the Other in essence became the Other in practice, adhered too by them as their image. Michel Foucault³ saw the element of power factored into various relationships which always favoured the one with power over the one with none or object of power. Perhaps, Bernard Cohn's⁴ brilliant discussion on colonial knowledge should be a standard text for any serious academic in understanding the power of colonial discourse (or colonial knowledge) in constructing the Other. The nature of colonial knowledge in influencing every aspect of the Other's life – from clothing to history and every element of the Other's social life is the object of investigation and redefinition. Cohn's idea of colonial intervention not just inclusive of the invasion of the physical space but also of the epistemological one. In the end, with pessimistic tone, the Other is and can be no more than what the colonial constructed or a colonial invention – resembling a Christmas cookie, moulded, shaped and created to taste in the imagery of the “creator”.

My paper to some extent draws on the important contributions of these authors. Said's discussion on the Orientalist is central in seeing how one is constructed and this is brilliantly outlined by Cohn. Foucault reminds us that power is central in determining relationships and the conqueror is always the one who determines for the conquered. In the course of my discussion, many aspects discussed by these scholars will continuously surface time and time again. However, there is a step further I would like to explore i.e. the colonial psyche. The very colonial discourse we so readily accept as the creator of the

Other is in essence playing second fiddle to a greater power – colonial rationality.

A child of the Enlightenment, rationality was seen as the crucial factor in the modernising of society so as to produce a western European society free from the constraints of the Christian Church on knowledge, by the increasing mysticism in the forms of superstition and blind faith towards a verifiable world ruled by reason and knowledge⁵. It marked the clash between the rational and the irrational, reason versus unreason. In the end reason with the aid of the invincible hand of power decided what the irrational should be or was in essence. What started as an European experience soon found its way to the new world via colonialism with the purging of irrationality being the cornerstone of the post-enlightenment relations between Europeans and non-Europeans. One must keep in mind that in order for the rational to rule, the irrational must be observable. By *difference*⁶ highlighted, the rational acts to imprison the irrational, changing, converting and forcing them into submission. The open-endedness of rationality is the totality of coverage with nothing excluded from its dominating clutches. In this paper, my discussion will focus on colonial rationality with reference to the British experience in North Borneo. It will focus on three aspects of colonial rationality I have outlined i.e. moral rationality, economic rationality and the administrative rationality. Each of it having a distinct effect on the Other and in every case a negative one and will be discussed in the following sections.

COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE AND RATIONALITY

Before I proceed any further, I have outlined so far the types of colonial rationality at play. Rationality is in essence pitting one group's superior notions of righteousness – both ideas and practices against the Other. In this context, the representation of the Other as radically different from the Self i.e. the colonial. Put it differently, the Other is the opposite from the Self. Thus the Self representing the Euro-American man, white and most likely Christian in contrast to the Other comprising every nation coming into contact with the former. In these relations, power differentials come into play and difference must be done away with. Colonial rationality indefinitely places the Other in an inferior position in the evolutionary ladder and thus destined to be transformed in line with the view of the colonial masters. As such the knowledge of the Orientalist

... appears as rational, logical, scientific, realistic and objective. The knowledge of the Orientals by contrast, often seems irrational, illogical, unscientific, unrealistic and subjective. The knowledge of the Orientalist is, therefore, privileged in relation to that of the Oriental and it invariably places itself in a

relationship of intellectual dominance over that of the easterners. It has appropriated the power to represent the Oriental, to translate and explain his (and her) thoughts and acts not only to Europeans and Americans but also to the Orientals themselves. But that is not all. Once his special knowledge enabled the Orientalist and his countrymen to gain concessions, conquer, colonize and punish in the East⁷.

Inden's statement is interesting on two accounts. First, by stating the knowledge of the Orientalist as privileged in relation to the Oriental and secondly, how this privileged knowledge acts to subjugate the Other. However, the gained knowledge, needs to be in the perspective of rationality for the simple reason that after the Other is comprehensible, the Other needs to be put in context, whereby they are seen as opposites to the Colonial Self. Rationality is used for two purposes; first to justify colonial actions in regards to the Other – with emphasis on benevolence, civilising and the bastion of morality for all the actions taken. This is reflected in Raffles' comments, Treacher, Rutter and Pryer's works⁸. Secondly, rationality works in opposition to show why colonials need to bring civilisation to the natives on the accounts of their vile and crude practices and ideas.

Bauman gives a nice notion of Occidental rationality as a victorious struggle of reason against emotions and animal instinct, science against religion and magic, truth against prejudice, correct knowledge against superstition, reflection against uncritical existence, rationality against affectivity and the rule of customs and by doing so the modern age is defined as above all i.e. the kingdom of reason and rationality⁹.

Perhaps looking more closely, the rule of reason finds prominence by highlighting the irrational. Thus the irrational is created with a contrasting Dr. Jackal and Mr. Hyde comparison taking form where the Other represents the abominable of the two. In practice, the Other is everything the Occident isn't or the Other still wallowing in a lower stage of human civility. As such, the construction of the Other finds its form in the knowledge of the Occident where the Other is created, moulded and understood. Thus knowledge of the colonial is about power relations¹⁰ to make and describe the Other in 'the images of the Occident. In short, colonialism is not just about the invasion of the physical space but also the invasion of the epistemological space i.e. the realm where the Other is made and remade according to the views and constructs of the colonial. As Cohn pointed out, colonial knowledge is collected within a set of investigative modalities with the intention of putting the Other in perspective, among them, the historiographic modality, the observational modality, the enumerative modality, the museological modality and the surveillance modality¹¹. This evident in the context of North Borneo with various texts and reports by colonial officers and scholars, among them,