

*Reorienting identities at the imperial fairground:
British Malaya and North Borneo*

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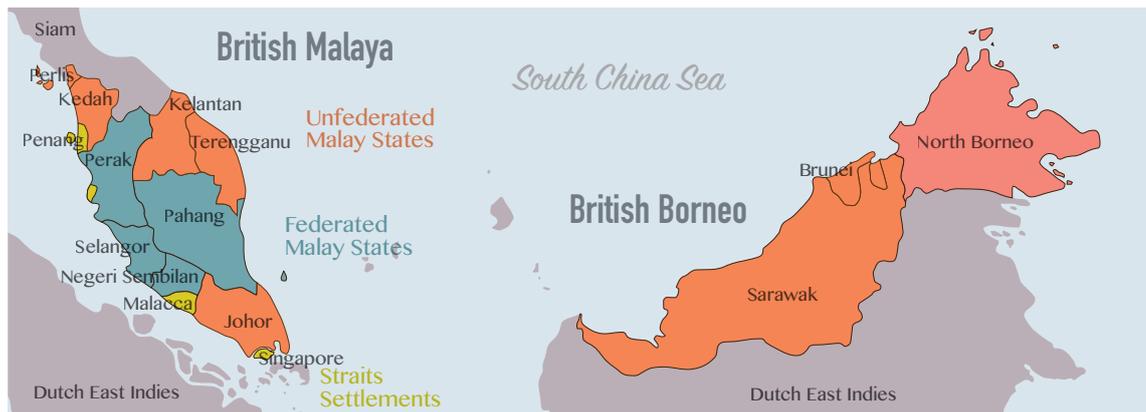
Abstract: Grand exhibitions of commerce and manufacture were key events for the British Empire's economy. The British Empire Exhibition of 1924–1925, for example, was expressly intended to reinvigorate British and colonial markets after the First World War by encouraging inter-colonial trade. This exhibition shaped appearances of wealth, industry and development throughout the empire with its regionally styled pavilion architecture, model villages, craft and industry displays, and ephemera. However, this event, and others like it, also drew prominent attention to the relationships between the peoples within the empire, shaping imperial subjecthood and proto-nationalism, and revealing conflicting ideas of identity construction. This paper examines the representations of British Malaya and North Borneo at the British Empire Exhibition, comparing them to those of the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition, a lesser-known event held in Singapore in 1922. It discusses how British administrators portrayed the material and cultural values of the region in relation to their wider economic and developmental programmes.

The British Empire Exhibition's Malaya and Sarawak pavilions collected a number of separate colonies, states and companies together as two distinct entities, beginning a process of unifying the region and defining the identity of its peoples. In placing this exhibition alongside the localised Malaya-Borneo Exhibition, we see how these territories adapted their economic and cultural identities between different regional and global scales. These events show the shaping of a Malay identity alongside the effects of British modernisation, and how raw materials, regional crafts, and inter-colonial relations were re-cast for an international stage. The paper contributes to our understanding of how early twentieth century exhibitions sought to transform regional economies and identities, and how value was ascribed to the material culture of British Southeast Asia.

In this presentation I will be talking about different portrayals of the British colonial states in Malaya and Borneo at international fairs in the 1920s. This involves two key events: the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition, which was held in Singapore in 1922; and the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in London in 1924–1925. These events sought to grow the value of British trade and production, both in Britain's Malay regions, and the British Empire as a whole. But in order to do this they also defined Malaya and Borneo and their peoples. To use the terms of the anthropologist Benedict Burton, these exhibitions negotiated a regional identity for the people of Malaya and Borneo that could then be 'socialised' with a larger imperial 'citizenship'.

However, to talk of a singular regional identity does cover the fact that at this time no such thing really existed. At the start of the 1920s, British territories in Malaya and Borneo were

divided between traditional sultanates, a trading company, and British port towns. The Straits Settlements was a British colony that comprised disparate islands and towns like Singapore, Penang, and Labuan. North Borneo was a company possession, and thus a pseudo-privatised organisation. The remaining states were British protectorates with traditional ruling classes that had essentially lost most of the power to British Residents. Some of the states on the peninsula had joined in a Federation, whose central executive government only strengthened the British position, while the others remained unfederated. Essentially, this means that at the time, there was no single ‘British Malaya’.



Map of Malay states and political organisation within the British Empire in the 1920s. Author's diagram.

Most of the Malay states had individually taken part in other international exhibitions. The Straits Settlements, for example, had been involved in events since the Crystal Palace Exhibition in 1851, several of the Malay states had taken part in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886, and North Borneo was in the Melbourne Exhibition in 1888. But it was the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition in 1922 where, for the first time, all of the British states of Southeast Asia were put on display together, marking its significance for attempting to connect the region economically and culturally, as Laurence Guillemard, the Governor of the Straits Settlements recognised in 1922 when he initiated the planning for this event.

Just as there was not a political unity in the region, there was also no clear unity of peoples. Malaya, and the wider Nusantara region, was ethnically diverse, and had been well before European colonisation, as Chinese, Arabic and Indian peoples traded and settled. And even among those native to the Malay world there was ethnic diversity and frequent regional migration. Thus, there was no single concept of a Malayan identity. However, the 1920s was also an important period of emergent Malay nationalism, which at times suggested a Malay nation that disregarded colonial borders, grouping Malays of the peninsula with peoples from Dutch Sumatra, and distinguishing them from those of British Borneo. Against this background, the exhibitions in 1922 and 1924 provided a very British definition of these people, a complicated task that negotiated ethnicity, migration and political borders.

Naturally, though, the exhibitions's aims were not initially with people. Both were intended to address the world economic downturn that followed the First World War. The Empire Exhibition was proposed first, in 1919, in order to bolster trade between the states of the British Empire. Economic problems only reached Malaya at the end of 1920, and so a similar

exhibition was planned from 1921, with the intention of connecting regional economies and – to a lesser extent – linking these to other parts of the world.

The Malay-Borneo exhibition was timed to coincide with a visit to Singapore by the Prince of Wales, who was also the president of the Empire Exhibition. But since this was to happen at the end of March in 1922, and a site for the exhibition was only decided in October 1921, this only left five months to plan and build the fairground. It was located on a recent land reclamation, which provided 68-acres of flat and vacant land. Planning was the combined effort of Singapore's bureaucrats, including the Improvement Trust (which at this time was only a new municipal department), the Botanic Gardens, the Colonial Engineer, Public Works Department, and sectional committees of business leaders and public figures. What these groups developed comprised mostly of warehouses concentrated around a central avenue, with a number of kiosks and event fields around the rest of the site. The buildings tended to adopt neo-tudor motifs and emulate vernacular Malayan architecture, which were both popular approaches to public buildings at the time.



Cover, *Malaya Borneo Exhibition, Singapore*. Singapore, 1922. National Library of Singapore, MR607.34595MAL

Throughout the exhibition, there was a clear effort to represent the region by creating a 'Malayan' atmosphere. This largely involved adapting the images of native populations. We see this on the cover design of the exhibition's *Official Guide*, which features a Bornean tribesman

welcoming visitors, and also in the fair's building styles, such as the British American Tobacco kiosk's variation on traditional Minangkabu architecture. The exhibition clearly attempted to present itself through a broader 'Malayan' identity, while dealing with the fact that no such thing existed – or was at least contentious. As a result, the exhibition tended to emphasise ethnic differences between archipelagic peoples, and draw a syncretic view of the region.

From this point, it is interesting that the fair contained a small model village, with Malay, Dayak and Murut houses being occupied throughout the exhibition and used to show traditional crafts and lifestyles. It is a format that treats local populations as distant and exotic. While to some extent this was a programme adopted from previous imperial exhibits, its existence here underlines the cultural distinctions between the different parts of the region. Despite efforts to suggest that this was a unified region for trade, the model village shows just how easy it was for its peoples to be shown as foreign. Residents of urban Singapore, for example, were particularly caught by surprise when the Bornean Dayaks who came to build their longhouse went into town in traditional costume – the headman, dressed in leopard-skin and full headdress, walked into the John Little department store and asked for a gun, before shopping for presents for his family back in Sarawak.

Despite the surface of traditional cultures, most accounts of the exhibition focused on its displays of modernising industry and domestic convenience. Major exhibits covered primary production – oil, rubber, tin, forestry and clay. And the Imperial Propaganda section contained a concrete map of the world documenting British territories, telegraph and postal connections, and import and export quantities. There were also significant demonstrations of the materials of a modernising city of the 1920s – cement manufacture, electrification, and a display of British motorcars (the prize Rolls Royce was bought by the Sultan of Johor). Great celebration was made of the fact that the exhibition grounds were lit with electric lights. They were decorated with Chinese lanterns depicting mythical scenes, and electricity poles along the main avenue were adorned with flags, attap roofs and seats (thus 'Malayanising' the image of electricity). This was a time when Singapore was expanding to provide new suburban amenities, and British town planning departments were beginning to operate in the Federated States. The exhibition spoke to these interests in improving towns and lifestyles, and the displays of cars, new buildings and electrification signified the importance of British commerce and enterprise in the development of the region.

To portray the region, the exhibition concentrated its image of Malaya and Borneo on the traditional physical and symbolic landscape of native Malayan peoples, avoiding the imagery of migrant populations (such as the Chinese and Indian communities), despite their heavy involvement in setting up the displays of the fair. An image of the Malay people was pushed to the foreground. However in doing this it showed a fractured identity, implying the foreignness of these groups to one another. As an economic region, the exhibition showed Malaya and Borneo as significant primary producers, integrated into the empire, and benefiting from imperial commerce in its urban development.



Scene of Malaya, from: Donald Maxwell. *Wembley in Colour: Being both an impression and a memento of the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 as seen by Donald Maxwell, with over one hundred sketches in colour and monochrome*. London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1924. British Library, D-7959.h.38.

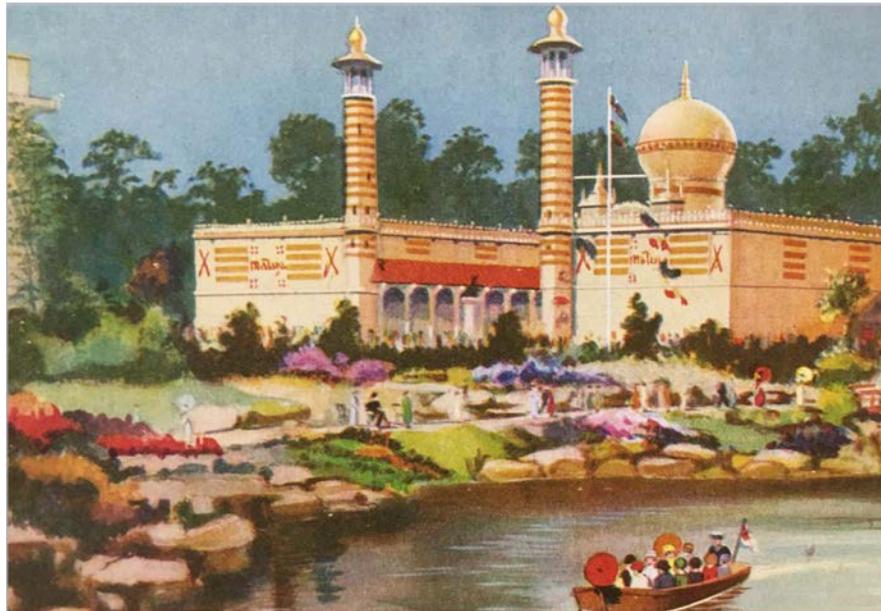
After the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition closed, Andrew Caldecott, Assisting Secretary to the Federation government, then on leave in London, was placed in charge of organising the Malay and Bornean exhibits at the upcoming Empire Exhibition in Wembley. The Wembley grounds (including each of its pavilions) were designed by the Scottish architects Simpson and Ayrton as an empire in miniature, where every building housed a particular state and said something about its location, culture or history. The idea was that the pavilions would transport visitors to distant places; this was emphasised in the exhibition guide, which was written as a travelogue of colonial fantasy.



Sarawak pavilion, British Empire Exhibition [postcard], 1924, Author's collection.

Within this, Caldecott's aim was to show the Malay and Bornean states together, housing them in the same building, under the same title, and creating the impression of a state called 'Malaya'. His plan was disrupted by Sarawak, which declined a collective show in favour of its own pavilion. For complicated reasons, Sarawak was one of the more independent kingdoms

whose rajah, Vyner Brooke, had inherited the throne in 1917 and began a programme of modernisation. There was some public concern within the state that he might opt for more direct connections with Britain, so an integrated exhibit was viewed as undesirable. The pavilion that was built for Sarawak was modelled on the Kuching Astana (rajah's palace) of 1870, which combined the hip-jointed ironwood roof of vernacular longhouses with elements of an English castle. It was a building that highlighted the complicated connections between Britain and Sarawak at that time. (In 1925, Sarawak declined to continue their display, and the pavilion was given to Southern Rhodesia.)



Malaya pavilion, British Empire Exhibition [postcard], 1924, Author's collection.

The remaining Malay and Bornean states agreed to Caldecott's plan, and he proceeded with the idea that a representation of British Malaya must also be an accurate portrayal of the Malay people. He wanted a pavilion staffed by Malays – making crafts, cooking in the tea room, and managing sales. And so, like in the imagery in Singapore in 1922, at Wembley 'Malaya' was equated specifically with the Malay people, not any of the other groups that contributed to colonial life. And it is through this focus on the Malay people that we should view the design of the Malaya Pavilion, which was designed to give the impression of a stately mosque, above whose entrance was written in jawi: *Negri-negri Melayu* (the Malay nations).

The architects then created other motifs throughout the pavilion to create impressions of a 'Malay' character: they used the royal colours red, yellow and black on banners hung from the gallery ceilings and to paint the exhibition furniture, they installed attap roofs on the exhibition cabinets, adopted the kris (Malay dagger) as imagery and as sculptural finials on bannisters, and filled the galleries and courtyards with rattan chairs.

While some of the more rural and vernacular imagery is consistent with the exhibition in Singapore, the choice of a building that resembled a mosque is an interesting departure, as it defines the region and its people according to religion.

As I've suggested already, questions of Malay nationalism were being discussed at this time, partly by a Malayan intelligentsia (it was not yet a popular discussion), and partly by Straits Settlements officials who were questioning Malay identity. These officials particularly wanted to know how to represent Malayan peoples on municipal councils. They also preferred to view the group through religion, and thus appoint muslim councillors. But many Malay nationalists rejected this idea as they felt it would give greater power not to themselves but to wealthier Arabic and Indian muslims in the colony. They resisted an idea of an Islamic community in favour of a locally-defined ethnic identity.

In this pavilion, the religious definition was clearly adopted, and in certain ways it demonstrates the validity of the nationalist concern. The building was adapted not from any elements of Malay religious architecture, but from elements of moorish and indo-saracenic styles – styles that were more familiar to the English, and essentially an image of Islam more aligned with Indian and North African tradition. This wasn't how mosques had generally looked in Malaya.

This style of mosque, however, was being introduced to the region thanks to colonial architects combining middle-eastern forms with neoclassical elements. This could be seen in the Masjid Zahir in Perlis (1912) and the Masjid Ubudiah in Perak (1913). And even as the Wembley exhibition took place, the Sultan Mosque in Singapore, originally a Malay vernacular style, was being demolished and replaced by a new building designed by the colonial firm Swan and Maclaren. Many of these new mosques were designed by Europeans for royal clients. They carried a grandeur that the region's older mosques simply didn't, and were used partly to demonstrate the power and security of the Malay sultans to their own people, therefore lending the use of this building style at Wembley an element of aristocratic pomposity. It perhaps appealed to the heads of the Malay states, but stylistically it shifted the question of regional identity into orientalist imagination.

Both the British Empire Exhibition and the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition were intended to enhance the value of commodity trading and investment. One way that this was done was by constructing a neat and comprehensible external image of the states involved, essentially inventing the international impression of a defined region called 'British Malaya'. And for this new state they created the impression of a Malayan population through an ethnic-nationalism that focused on Malay peoples within British territories.

In some respects, the exhibitions were 'orientalising' devices, reshaping geography and group associations in ways that made sense from London. To adapt the ideas of the historian Peter Hoffenberg, this enforced a proto-nationalism on the region that speaks of Britain's interests in consolidating its power there. But what is interesting is the way that they concentrated on creating the image of a Malay ethnic identity, while at the same time, Malay citizens of the Malay peninsula and Sumatra were working toward comparable ideas. And while their ideas moved in other directions, these exhibitions served as the ground for expanding a consolidated idea about Malaya that would be promoted by the soon-to-be-established Empire Marketing Board and Malayan Information Agency.

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