

Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Malay Personality and the Dynamics of Cultural Values

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000346>

Received: 07 September 2025; Accepted: 12 September 2025; Published: 10 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study interrogates the enduring stereotype of Malay indolence as a colonial ideological construct that continues to influence contemporary discourse. Rooted in British colonial narratives, the stereotype of the "lazy native" was historically used to justify the economic marginalisation of the Malays and the importation of foreign labour. The objective of this research is to analyse how this stereotype was constructed, legitimised, and reproduced through various socio-political and economic narratives across both colonial and postcolonial periods. Employing an interpretive qualitative methodology, the study conducts a textual analysis of *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas, 1989), supported by thematic content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and historical comparison. The findings reveal five interrelated themes: resistance to continuous labour, fatalistic temporal orientation, climatic justification, coercive necessity, and a leisurely lifestyle. These themes collectively demonstrate that the stereotype lacks empirical grounding and instead operates as an ideological discourse to maintain colonial and postcolonial hierarchies. The discussion highlights how such myths persist in modern development narratives, often leading to flawed policy assumptions about the Malay community. The study calls for the critical deconstruction of these inherited narratives in order to foster a more equitable and contextually informed discourse on development and cultural identity in Malaysia. In doing so, the study contributes to the decolonisation of knowledge and the affirmation of Malay cultural dignity in development discourse.

Keywords: Malay indolence; colonial discourse; postcolonial narratives; ideological construct; critical discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Malay indolence has been widely scrutinised in academic discourse as a stereotype constructed within the colonial context and subsequently perpetuated into the postcolonial period. This label has often been used in a reductive manner to explain the economic behaviour of the Malays, overlooking broader structural factors such as the impact of colonialism, unequal access to resources, and development policies skewed against indigenous communities. Raffles, for instance, popularised the clichéd phrase that Malays are "lazy when they have enough rice" (Alatas, 1989, pp. 57–59), while Swettenham emphasised supposed traits such as a "reluctance for continuous work" and a "lack of initiative" (Alatas, 1989, pp. 63–65; 139–141). Similarly, Clifford documented the practice of forced labour as evidence that Malays would only work under coercion (Alatas, 1989, pp. 67–68). Wright and Reid further reinforced this narrative by highlighting forms of entertainment such as cockfighting and a leisurely lifestyle as indicators of unproductiveness (Alatas, 1989, pp. 69–70).

In reality, Malay society in Malaysia is deeply anchored in a value system shaped by ethics, morality, and Islamic teachings (Wan Samiati Andriana, 2023). This worldview illustrates that Malay economic attitudes and

behaviours cannot be simplistically equated with indolence. Instead, they must be contextualised within broader cultural, religious, and historical frameworks. Even after independence, colonial stereotypes endured; for example, the Revolusi Mental (1971) reiterated claims that Malays “do not value time” (Alatas, 1989, pp. 207–208), thereby exemplifying the persistence of colonial ideologies within postcolonial nation-building efforts.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE CONCEPT OF MALAY INDOLENCE

2.1 The Concept of Indolence

The notion of laziness has long been subject to critical academic inquiry, and is increasingly recognised as a socially constructed concept rather than an inherent psychological or moral deficiency. Rather than reflecting personal failings, perceptions of laziness are shaped by cultural norms, socio-economic systems, historical legacies, and institutional narratives. Recent interdisciplinary studies have explored how this concept is framed differently across languages, communities, and ideological settings, revealing its complexity and often contradictory meanings.

Canjek and Žažar (2020) argue that laziness is best understood as a product of intersecting cultural, religious, and temporal influences, rather than an innate human trait. Within capitalist societies, laziness is typically viewed in negative terms and closely associated with non-productivity. Their study highlights how media discourses and lifestyle expectations reinforce such interpretations and calls for more contextually grounded sociological analysis. Their qualitative research, based on student interviews, reveals multiple interpretations of laziness, thereby challenging fixed and monolithic definitions.

Likewise, Madsen (2018) conceptualises laziness as a culturally mediated narrative, grounded in the perceived mismatch between effort and capacity. Drawing on Bruner’s theory of folk psychology, he suggests that attributions of laziness function as moral narratives that rationalise non-conforming behaviour. Utilising Tversky and Kahneman’s heuristics, as well as Moscovici’s theory of social representations, Madsen demonstrates how such labels often ignore the individual’s motivations and contextual limitations, thus reducing nuanced experiences to simplistic moral judgments.

Borisova and Kostina (2025) provide an ethnolinguistic analysis of the concept of laziness as articulated in the sub-dialects of the Kuban region, focusing on Cossack and non-Cossack communities. Their findings show a deeply rooted cultural aversion to laziness, linguistically linked to themes of idleness, excessive drinking, and inefficiency yet paradoxically, also associated with wealth. Their analysis uncovers how ethnic stereotypes and folklore embed the idea of laziness within culturally specific expressions, positioning labour as a moral virtue and deviation from it as socially deviant.

In the Malay context, shame serves as a powerful moral regulator that discourages behaviours deemed socially undesirable, including perceived laziness. Unlike Western interpretations, where shame is often viewed pathologically, in Malay society it is regarded as constructive and socially necessary. Cucuani et al. (2022) examine this through the development of a shame-proneness scale for Malay employees in Indonesia. Using a mixed methods design, they identified four indicators, negative self-evaluation, withdrawal, perceived social judgement, and motivation for self-improvement, culminating in a validated 18 item instrument. This tool offers a culturally nuanced framework for assessing workplace behaviour and reveals how Malay perceptions of effort and discipline are embedded in broader moral and emotional systems.

From an educational perspective, academic laziness among students is frequently tied to the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Sunnatova (2022) investigates this phenomenon using an ecopsychological framework and finds that dissatisfaction with teachers and parental relationships correlates significantly with student disengagement. Additional factors such as poor health and a limited understanding of education’s value also contribute to academic disinterest. Her findings suggest that laziness in this context is not an intrinsic trait, but rather a manifestation of disrupted social dynamics and psychological well-being.

Within public health discourse, laziness is often cited as a barrier to adopting preventive health behaviours. In Malaysia, the uptake of hypertension-prevention practices such as regular physical activity, a healthy diet, and

blood pressure monitoring remains low. Tan et al. (2022), applying the Health Belief Model, found that despite general awareness of healthy practices, Malaysians reported barriers such as limited time, restricted food options, and low motivation—commonly interpreted as laziness. These findings indicate the need for public health strategies that not only address individual behaviours but also engage with the broader structural and cultural contexts that shape lifestyle choices.

Beyond the health domain, laziness is widely problematised as a social and ideological construct. As Madsen (2018) reiterates, accusations of laziness are often used to obscure deeper motivational or systemic constraints. These judgements, framed as moral evaluations, act as narrative tools to maintain normative standards, often penalising those who deviate from them.

Reyna, Brandt, and Viki (2009) explore how laziness is embedded in stereotypes targeting Black communities through rap and hip-hop culture. In the United States, negative attitudes towards rap music are strongly correlated with prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory behaviours, often justified by narratives that frame Black individuals as solely responsible for their socio-economic marginalisation. Interestingly, this legitimising function of the stereotype was not observed in the UK, indicating its culturally contingent role in maintaining racial hierarchies.

Similarly, Smith-Carrier and On (2021) show how myths of laziness shaped poverty discourse in Canada. In debates surrounding the canceled Ontario Basic Income Pilot, poor participants were often depicted as “lazy, unmotivated, or addicted,” reinforcing individual blame while obscuring structural causes of poverty. This further illustrates that accusations of laziness function ideologically across contexts, sustaining inequality rather than reflecting empirical reality.

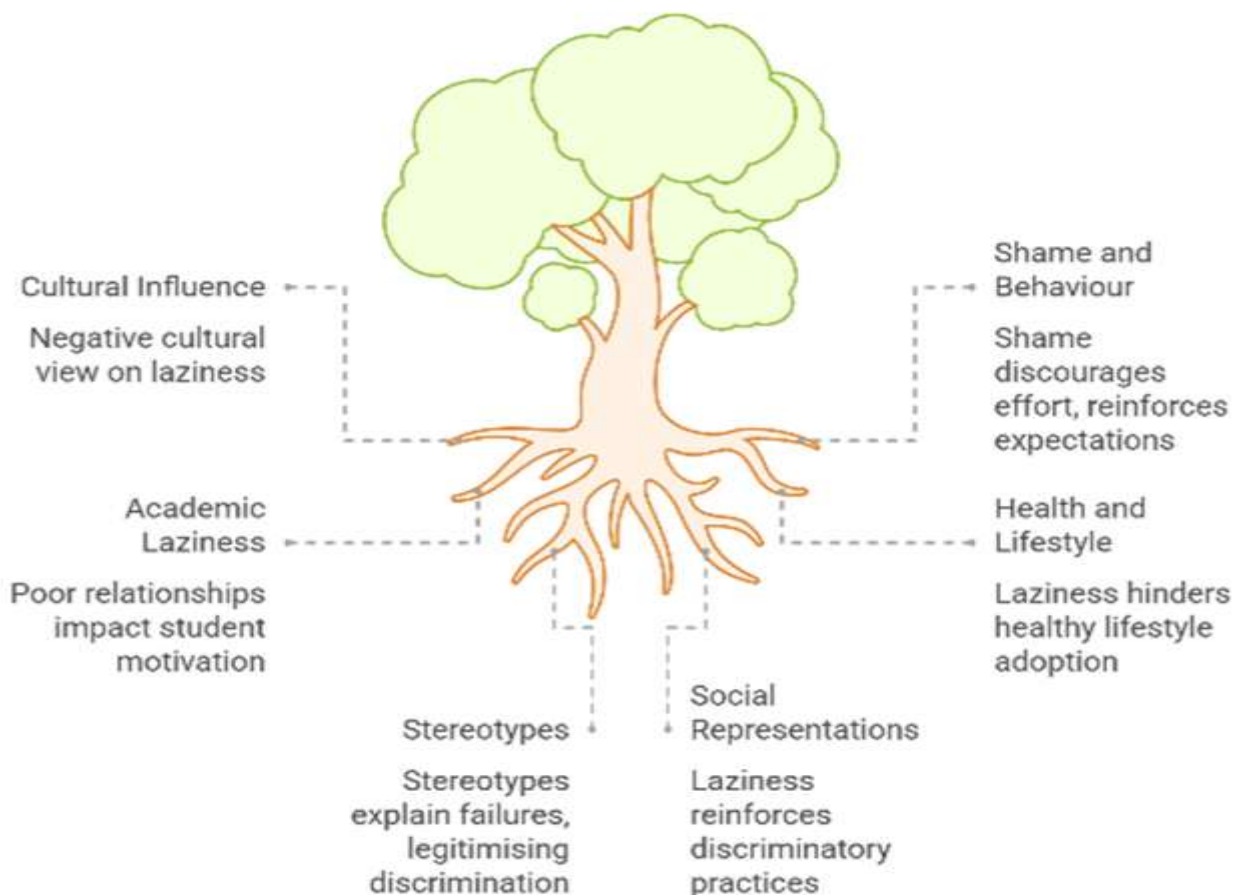


Figure 1: Interpreting laziness: cultural narratives and social representations

Laziness, or indolence, is not simply a personal characteristic, but rather a complex and socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural, historical, and environmental influences. While commonly associated with a

lack of effort or motivation, empirical research indicates that such behaviour is often conditioned by broader contextual factors—including cultural values, interpersonal relationships, health conditions, and institutional frameworks. In many societies, behaviours labelled as "lazy" may in fact reflect deeper issues such as emotional disengagement stemming from inadequate social support, misinterpreted intentions, or tangible barriers to action such as time constraints, financial limitations, or restricted access to resources. Accordingly, laziness should not be regarded as a fixed personal shortcoming but understood as a multifaceted and contextually situated construct.

2.2 The Evolution of the Discourse on Malay Indolence in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies

The notion of Malay indolence has been the subject of sustained academic scrutiny, particularly as a stereotype rooted in colonial discourse and subsequently perpetuated into the postcolonial era. Far from serving as a neutral descriptor of behavioural tendencies, this concept has operated ideologically to legitimise colonial domination and economic marginalisation. As Shamsul (2001, 1996) argues, national and ethnic identities in Malaysia are not fixed categories but are shaped through a "nation-of-intent", a socially constructed vision managed by political elites to frame discourse surrounding people and institutions. This perspective aligns with Milner's (2008) contention that the question of "who are the Malays" is historically contingent and shaped by shifting socio-political contexts, thereby challenging the validity of static labels such as "lazy".

A growing body of scholarship has criticised the reductive portrayal of Malays as rural, traditional, and economically passive. Kahn (2006) underscores how such representations obscure substantial Malay involvement in trade, urban migration, and Islamic reformist movements. Likewise, Hooker (2003) highlights how colonial administrations actively constructed the narrative of Malay indolence to justify political subjugation and economic control. The cultural and religious dimensions of identity formation have also been central to this discourse. Nagata (1984) emphasises the role of Islam in shaping Malay self-perception and resistance to colonial stereotypes, while Andaya and Andaya (2017) contextualise these portrayals within the broader historical continuity of colonial capitalism, where systemic inequalities were masked by attributing socio-economic stagnation to individual moral failings.

Crucially, this narrative did not dissolve with the end of colonial rule. Mohamad's (2010) re-reading of *The Malay Dilemma* illustrates how post-independence narratives concerning the Malay work ethic continued to echo colonial logics, equating perceived laziness with national development challenges. Hirschman (2004, 1986) similarly traces the origins of racial stereotyping to colonial political-economic strategies aimed at concealing entrenched inequalities. This enduring discourse is exemplified in national initiatives such as *Revolusi Mental* (1971), which reinforced the image of Malays as failing to value time thus maintaining colonial myths within postcolonial nation-building rhetoric.

The stereotype of Malay indolence has often served as a reductive explanation for economic underperformance, thereby deflecting attention from broader structural realities such as colonial legacies, unequal resource distribution, and biased policy frameworks. Portraying Malays as inherently averse to labour whether due to climate, religion, or a leisurely disposition obscures the exploitative nature of colonial economic systems, including land monopolies, labour extraction, and the systemic marginalisation of rural Malay communities. Contemporary critiques assert that this narrative is best understood as a politically motivated construct rather than an empirical truth. Much like contemporary critiques of poverty myths which blame the poor for their condition while ignoring structural barriers, this stereotype operates ideologically to rationalise inequality and shift responsibility away from systemic injustice.

In sum, the discourse of Malay indolence must be recognised as an ideological fabrication, initially devised to legitimise colonial exploitation and later rearticulated to serve postcolonial state agendas. Understanding this narrative through historical, political, economic, and cultural frameworks is essential to dismantling its enduring influence and cultivating a more accurate and equitable interpretation of Malay socio-economic realities.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative interpretive case study was designed to examine how the stereotype of Malay indolence was constructed and functioned within both colonial and postcolonial discourses. Such a design is particularly

valuable in illuminating the role of discourse in shaping ideology and social practices. Data collection was based on textual analysis of *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas, 1989), while data analysis employed thematic content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and historical comparison to uncover the ideological and material functions underlying this stereotype.



Figure 2: Research design and data analysis process

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Thematic Categories

The thematic findings reveal five key narratives that shaped the colonial stereotype of Malay indolence: a reluctance for continuous work, fatalistic attitudes and disregard for time, climatic justification for relaxed behaviour, coercion portrayed as necessary due to supposed laziness, and associations with leisure and moral weakness. Together, these themes constructed a discourse that framed Malays as unfit for modern labour and in need of external control, serving to legitimise colonial dominance.

Theme 1: Reluctance for Continuous or Routine Work

The stereotype of “lazy when there is enough rice” (Raffles) became a dominant cliché characterizing the Malays. Swettenham reinforced this portrayal by stressing their “reluctance for continuous work” and “lack of initiative.” Such narratives served to justify the colonial perception that Malays were unfit for modern capitalist labour, thereby legitimising the importation of foreign workers.

Theme 2: Fatalism and Temporal Orientation

The Malays were also depicted as “Muslim fatalists” (Swettenham) with a tendency to disregard time. This discourse persisted into the postcolonial era through the *Revolusi Mental* (1971), which reiterated the stereotype of “not valuing time.” This reflects the continuity of colonial rhetoric within nation-state discourses, where time was employed as a moral benchmark to evaluate Malay work ethics.

Theme 3: Climatic Justification

Swettenham associated the tropical climate and the “ease of subsistence” as reasons for the Malays’ relaxed attitudes. This argument normalised the assumption that laziness stemmed from natural environmental factors, thus supporting colonial rationales that Malays could not compete in modern economic structures without external intervention.

Theme 4: Coercion as a Remedy

Clifford emphasised that the practice of local forced labour was common among Malays. The myth of indolence was used to legitimise coercion, while coercion itself generated behaviours later interpreted as evidence of laziness. This paradox reinforced the myth’s role as a tool for legitimising colonial power.

Theme 5: Entertainment, Profligacy and Moralising

Wright and Reid portrayed Malays as fond of entertainments such as cockfighting and as leading leisurely lifestyles. This depiction was reinforced by narratives of extravagance and frivolity, which cemented an image of low moral standards among Malays. Such stereotypes enabled the colonial administration to frame the Malay community as requiring guidance and control.

4.2 Discussion

The stereotype of Malay indolence functioned as an ideological tool rather than a neutral reflection of work ethics. It was deployed to legitimise colonial policies, including the importation of foreign labour, the exploitation of the workforce, and the economic marginalisation of rural Malays. Climatic justification, temporal orientation, and coercive necessity worked to conceal the realities of colonial capitalism, which monopolised land, resources, and labour. In the postcolonial context, the *Revolusi Mental* demonstrated that this rhetoric did not simply vanish but instead resurfaced in modern forms to frame nation-building projects.

Overall, the five identified themes highlight that the stereotype of Malay laziness was not a neutral observation of work ethic but rather an ideological instrument to sustain colonial hegemony. By linking indolence to cultural, religious, temporal, climatic, recreational, and coercive factors, colonial discourse obscured the structural realities of capitalist domination that constrained Malay economic choices. This myth enabled the colonial regime to justify the importation of foreign labour, the enforcement of forced labour, and the exclusion of rural Malays from the modern economy. Moreover, the persistence of this stereotype in the postcolonial era, such as through the *Revolusi Mental* discourse, illustrates the enduring resilience of this ideology in shaping narratives of national development.

4.3 Contemporary Implications: Malay Identity and Work Culture in the Postcolonial Era

The colonial stereotype of Malay indolence has long outlived its historical origins and continues to shape contemporary narratives concerning productivity, work ethic, and national development in Malaysia. Although thoroughly deconstructed within academic discourse, its lingering presence remains evident in policy assumptions, corporate performance evaluations, and even casual workplace commentary. Inherited from colonial ideology, this stereotype is frequently invoked to explain the socio-economic disparities experienced by the Malay community, without acknowledging systemic inequalities such as historical disenfranchisement, limited capital mobility, and the persistent urban–rural divide. The *Revolusi Mental* campaign of the 1970s, which reiterated the notion that Malays “do not value time”, exemplifies how colonial discourses have been naturalised within state-building efforts and institutional frameworks.

Contrary to these outdated portrayals, contemporary Malay identity is firmly rooted in ethical values such as *amanah* (trust), *tanggungjawab* (responsibility), and *malu* (shame as moral conscience), which influence not only personal conduct but also organisational culture and leadership style. These values carry significant implications for interpreting self-discipline, decision-making, and motivation within the modern workforce. Rather than signifying laziness, what is often misread as a lack of ambition may in fact stem from misaligned institutional expectations, cultural dissonance, or broader structural constraints. Studies such as Cucuani et al. (2022) demonstrate how moral emotions like shame function as internal regulators of effort among Malay employees, while research by Tan et al. (2022) identifies the contextual barriers to health and lifestyle discipline frequently mischaracterised as indolence. It is therefore imperative that contemporary discourse moves beyond these colonial residues and embraces a culturally grounded understanding of Malay work culture, affirming agency, dignity, and socio-historical complexity.

CONCLUSION

The stereotype does not reflect intrinsic cultural traits; rather, it has been employed to conceal underlying structural issues such as historical marginalisation, restricted access to capital, and unequal socio-economic opportunities. Addressing this requires more than a mere historical critique. What is needed is a cultural

reawakening that recognises the dignity, values, and capabilities inherent within the Malay identity. By rejecting inherited assumptions and embracing a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of effort and discipline, we can foster a development discourse that is fairer and more inclusive. The significant contribution of this study lies in its capacity to restore intellectual justice by dismantling oppressive colonial stereotypes, affirming the resilience of the Malay community, and guiding contemporary policy towards greater equity, cultural authenticity, and national cohesion.

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