Thinking against Coloniality from the Malay World: A Personal Reflection

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By Syed Farid Alatas, National University of Singapore and University of Malaya.

Email: alatas@nus.edu.sg

Abstract

My thinking against coloniality began from the earliest days of my childhood when I was in elementary school in Singapore. This started in 1968, the year after my family moved from Malaysia to Singapore. My father, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) was a University of Amsterdam-trained sociologist who was to found the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore in 1967, now the National University of Singapore (see Alatas 2024).

My father's writing against colonial knowledge production, his aversion to the slavish imitation of Eurocentric scholarship by the formerly colonised, and his creative approach to scholarship had greatly influenced my own thinking. But, it was not merely my reading of his works that impacted me. Probably of more importance were the thousands of hours of discussion during and after dinner, conversations that my mother had participated in with much drive and encouragement, on topics related to colonialism and intellectual combat that impressd upon me the desirability of a life of scholarship.

Introduction

My intellectual upbringing began from the earliest days of my childhood when I was in primary school in Singapore. I started my school education in 1968, the year after my family moved from Malaysia to Singapore. My father, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) was a University of Amsterdam-trained sociologist who was to found the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Singapore, now the National University of Singapore, in 1967 (see

Alatas 2024). Four years later, he published the first critical study on the founder of British colonial Singapore, Thomas Stamford Raffles. In this book, *Thomas Stamford Raffles: Schemer or Reformer*, Alatas argued for a more critical appraisal of Raffles (Alatas 1971). I was to join the Department of Sociology (now the Department of Sociology and Anthropology) at the same university in 1992. As Singapore commemorated the 200th anniversary of Raffles' "founding" of Singapore in 2019, I had arranged for the re-edition of Alatas' book on Raffles in order to contribute to a more critical discussion on the man as an agent of colonial interests as well as on the broader meaning of colonialism.

In most countries of the world, the idea of putting up an enthusiastic imperialist as the founder of a newly independent state and giving him an iconic status would have been considered "outrageous and most definitely reactionary" (*The Straits Times* 1983). K. G. Tregonning (1923–2015), formerly Raffles Professor of History at the University of Singapore, said the following: "Modern Singapore began in 1819. Nothing that occurred on the island prior to this has particular relevance to an understanding of the contemporary scene; it is of antiquarian interest only" (Tregonning 1969: 14). Thus, despite centuries of the existence of Singapore, history was said to begin after 1819 and Raffles, as the prime mover, was elevated to a "Great Man" of history, not only by colonial historians, but also officially by the post-colonial state (Kwa 2018: 3–4).

While Alatas was a post-graduate student at the University of Amsterdam, he published a short piece in *Eastern World* in 1956. Here he discussed what he considered to be some fundamental problems of colonialism:

> The problems left behind after a period of colonialism fall into three categories. One is the purely physical and material problem, incorporating agriculture, communications and housing. The second is the problem of organisation, economic relations, political administration, education, social welfare, and industrialisation. The third problem is sociological, psychological and moral, and the greatest damage occasioned by colonialism is precisely in this field, since it hampers the solution to other difficulties (Alatas 1956: 9).

The idea that the non-material problems and legacies of colonialism, that is, its sociological, psychological and moral dimensions, are fundamental is, of course, a view that is widely shared today among those who identify Eurocentrism as a hegemonic orientation in knowledge creation. The phenomenon of the mass importation and consumption of Western theories, concepts and empirical material in an imitative, mimicking manner, without due attention to the socio-historical setting of those ideas, was an almost unconscious continuation of colonialism in the cultural, intellectual sense (Alatas 1956: 9). This parallels Samir Amin's discussion in his *Eurocentrism* (Amin 1989). This is what is meant by coloniality after colonialism, although Alatas had not used the term. For Alatas, the lasting and devastating legacy of colonialism in the Malay world is the internalization of the British image of the native by the natives themselves, including the political elite. The concomitant development of an inferiority complex among the formerly colonized is a serious consequence of colonial rule and a defining feature of the post-colonial society and politics. Indeed, the condition of coloniality without colonialism sometimes reached the point of auto-racism.

In both *Thomas Stamford Raffles* (Alatas 1971) and *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (Alatas 1977), Alatas exposes and critiques the ideological function of the colonial constructions of the 'natives' and the continuity of this ideology among the native elite themselves. In *Thomas Stamford Raffles*, for example, he presents a critique of the philosophy of Raffles at a time in Singapore scholarship when there was a dearth of critical scholarship on the colonial administrator who, far from being the progressive statesman and humanitarian reformer that his British biographers made him out to be, was a figure with racist views, and who had been implicated in the Massacre of Palembang, the corruption case known as the Banjarmasin Affair, and other questionable acts, all of which can be seen to be 'normal' when put in the proper context of British imperialism and the ideology of colonial capitalism.

What I appreciated about my father's work was not only his rigorous scholarship but his inspiring transparency about the ideological motives guiding his work:

> I believe in the primarily negative influence of colonialism. I believe in the need to unmask the colonial ideology, for its influence is still very strong. Colonial scholars have on the whole avoided the study of the negative aspects of colonialism; an attempt to correct this should not be considered automatically as a reversal of the coin. It is the facts adduced, the evidence marshalled, the themes introduced, the analyses accomplished, and the attitudes of the scholar which should finally decide whether the attempt is merely a reversal of the coin or a real extension and supplementation of existing knowledge (Alatas 1977: 9).

Alatas was my father. The 1971 edition of *Thomas Stamford Raffles* was dedicated to me. I was ten years old at the time and was excited, almost exhilarated, to see my name printed on the page of a book. As I grew older, dinner table conversations about Raffles and later, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* socialized me into a decolonial way of knowing. A few years later, in 1979, a Singaporean, responding to my father's critique of Raffles at a forum in Singapore, wrote in defense of Raffles, the colonizer, in the Singapore daily, *The Straits Times* (N. Sivarajah 1979). I was a high school student then, a little more mature than in 1971, and eagerly took it upon myself to write a response in *The Straits Times*, declaring that there was evidence of Raffles' misdeeds and prejudiced views (Alatas 1979).

In addition to my father, there was also the influence of my uncle, my father's younger brother, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a scholar of Sufi metaphysics, history, theology, among others (see Wan Mohd Nor 1998). When I was a teenager, I had spent many hours at his home in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, listening to his critique of European, particularly Dutch Orientalists, in the field of Islamic studies. It was from him that I had first heard the term "Orientalism" with its pejorative connotations. This was before I was exposed to Edward Said's *Orientalism* when I was a graduate student in the United States in the 1980s. My uncle's stress on the importance of formal logic, including the various modes of argumentation, was to have a great effect on my later intellectual development, particularly on my work on Ibn Khaldun. In addition, his stress on the centrality of deriving concepts from the Islamic intellectual tradition had reinforced a similar lesson that I was taught by my father during the years that I was a young lecturer at the National University of Singapore.

> "The decolonization of knowledge is not merely about colonial critique but also about reconstructions that correct and oppose colonial ones."

The result of my anti-colonial intellectual up-bringing had unfolded over a period of decades. I have adopted the same anti-colonial approach in my own work. Beyond that, I have also learnt from Alatas about the reconstruction of knowledge. The decolonization of knowledge is not merely about colonial critique but also about reconstructions that correct and oppose colonial ones. Also important are original constructions in terms of theory building and concept formation.

But, Alatas did not only critique colonial knowledge and Eurocentrism. He was also concerned with the domination by other hegemonic orientations in knowledge creation in the social sciences and humanities as well as in political discourse and conduct. He called for the creation of an autonomous social sciences tradition. The task was to attain freedom not only from Eurocentrism but also other hegemonic orientations: This was to become a major influence on the generation of scholars that Alatas trained, including myself. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the result of Alatas' emphatic concerns with the state of knowledge creation had resulted in his students developing research agendas that went into the critique of various hegemonic orientations such as

traditionalism, culturalism, ethnonationalism, and psychological feudalism.

Anti-colonial Social Thought

Decades later, I continue to promote the anti-colonial spirit of Alatas in various ways, not only through my own scholarship (see Alatas 2006) but also through the republication of my father's works as well as the publication of his unpublished works after he had passed away in 2007. This included the reissuing of *Thomas Stamford Raffles* in 2020, and more recently the Malay translation of that work (Alatas 2020, 2024), intended to provoke the captive mind to emerge out of the abyss that the slavish mentality is, and to call for a decolonizing sensibility.

I have also attempted to be more explicit about the meaning of anti-colonial thought. From the 1950s onwards, scholars from Asia, Africa and Latin America called for alternatives social sciences and humanities under labels such as indigenous social science, endogenous intellectual creativity, autonomous knowledge, post-colonial theory, decolonial thought, globalization of knowledge, deimperialization of knowledge, and the decolonization of knowledge. Despite the differences in labels, these prescriptions often overlapped in terms of aims, theoretical approaches and methods.

A number of observations can be made about this literature. One is that the category, 'anti-colonial' generally is not to be found in this literature. This, of course, does not mean that this literature was not anti-colonial. 'Anti-colonial' is to be seen as an umbrella term that encompasses the variety of perspectives that critique Eurocentrism and Orientalism, even if the term anti-colonial is not used (see Patel 2023: 4). It is also important to note that there was little metatheoretical reflection on the types of anti-colonial thought that had emerged thus far (Patel 2023: 2).

In my own work I take a long-term historical perspective, trace anti-colonial thought to the sixteenth century as Patel does (Patel 2023: 2), and offer a typology of anti-colonial thought that had developed during the last four hundred years (see Alatas, forthcoming).

I see anti-colonial thought within the context of the decolonization of knowledge. The later can be understood to consist of three dimensions, that is, the critique of colonialism, the discursive reconstruction of colonial history, society and ideas in a non-colonial, non-Eurocentric mode, and the original construction of ideas from hitherto unknown, lesser known and under-utilized non-Western intellectual traditions and historical experiences (see Alatas, forthcoming). The critique of colonialism makes up anti-colonial thought, while reconstruction and original construction represent the constructive dimensions of the decolonization of knowledge.

The types of anti-colonial thought themselves can be grouped according to the types of colonialism they are directed against. For the sake of discussion, we may say that there are five principal types of colonialism, that is, (i) extractive, (ii) plantation, (iii) settler, (iv) semi-, and (v) internal colonialism. Furthermore, different dimensions of anti-colonial thought can be brought in to the discussion. In other words, whatever the types of anti-colonial thought, they can be seen to exist along several dimensions. These dimensions are: (i) anti-colonial thought that ranges from being normative to positive: (ii) anti-colonial thought emerging from the colonizer during the colonial period; (iii) anti-colonial thought emerging from the colonised contemporaneous with the colonial period; (iv) anti-colonial thought that developed during the post-colonial period, that is, after political independence; (v) anti-colonial thought directed against colonial ideologies, that is, the subjective dimension; (vi) anti-colonial thought that is critical of objective dimensions of colonial society, that is, political economic and legal structures, for example; (vii) anti-colonial thought directed against existing colonialism today in a largely post-colonial world; and (viii) anti-coloniality thought (Alatas, forthcoming).

The Re/Construction of Knowledge

The decolonization of knowledge does not stop at the anti-colonial phase. There is also the constructive phase that involves both reconstruction and original construction.

An example of the former is my work on Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun. I had been interested in Ibn Khaldun from the time I was a teenager when my father introduced me to an unpublished manuscript on Ibn Khaldun that he had written as a student in Amsterdam. Arising from my concern

with the Eurocentric nature of the social sciences, I was interested in seeing the extent to which it was possible to draw upon a non-Western tradition to develop a sociology that was neither Eurocentric nor nativistic. So, I turned to the work of Ibn Khaldun. I had started writing on Ibn Khaldun as a graduate student, having participated in some conferences that required me to think more systematically about his work. I started publishing articles on Ibn Khaldun in the early 1990s, and moved away from merely proclaiming him as a founder or precursor of sociology towards developing a systematic Khaldunian sociology for the modern world.

This interest culminated in two books on Ibn Khaldun (Alatas 2013, 2014). The first, entitled *Ibn Khaldun*, which appeared in the Oxford University Press Makers of Islamic Civilization book series, deals with the life and thought of Ibn Khaldun and is not restricted to the sociological aspects of his work. I spend a bit of time talking about the intellectual and social environment of Ibn Khaldun's thought and then devote more space to discussing his theory of society and the rise and decline of states, its methodological underpinnings, as well as his views on knowledge and education.

The second book, *Applying Ibn Khaldun*, is a very different work. It is an attempt to systematically apply Ibn Khaldun's theory of the rise and decline of states to various empirical cases in geographical locations and historical times outside of his own. The main theoretical model I used merges Ibn Khadun's theory of state formation with Karl Marx's concept of modes of production and Max Weber's concept of prebendal feudalism. The resulting application of this theory to the rise and decline of dynasties is an exercise in reconstructing history.

Original construction, on the other hand, refers to the development of ideas and theories from scratch, as it were. An example is my work on the Filipino thinker, polymath, nationalist and activist, José Rizal (1861–1896), who was among the first systematic social thinkers to emerge outside of the West during the formative period of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. Although he was not trained in what we today refer to as the social sciences, his work contains much that is relevant to sociology. It is therefore possible to formulate a sociological theory based on his thought, a theory of colonial society that centres on the nature and conditions of Filipino colonial society, and the requirements for liberation from colonial rule. He is most famous for his two novels, *Noli Me Tangere* (*Touch me Not*) and *El Filibusterismo* (*The Subversive*) but also authored numerous essays and poems (Alatas 2011). This type of work is an original construction rather than a reconstruction because a social theory was created for the first time from a body of non-sociological writings. My attraction to Rizal's writings was in large part due to the passion for learning about the Philippines anti-colonial revolution that I developed from listening to my father's discussions.

Another example of original constructions comes from my current interest in developing stupidity studies. Stupidity is rarely the subject of systematic research. The general meaning of stupidity, the lack of intelligence or reason, or slow-mindedness, is conveyed by the Malay and Persian terms, *kebodohan* and *hamāqat*, respectively. Ali Shariati (1933-1977), the celebrated Iranian figure, whose lectures and writings had played a major role in the Iranian revolution against the imperialist powers and the corrupt political elite, is among the few thinkers who paid attention to the problem of stupidity, through the understanding of *istihmār*, derived from the Arabic word *himār*, which means donkey. In the Malay World, Alatas introduced the theme of stupidity through concepts such as *bebalisme* (Alatas 1992) and *jadong* (Alatas 2000b). I am currently working on the comparative study of stupidity, looking at Alatas and Shariati on this theme. The reflections of Alatas and Shariati on stupidity allow us to comprehend the nature and function of stupidity in both the practice of government as well as the ideology of the ruling elite. This too is an exercise in original construction as the attempt is made to engage in concept formation from the languages of everyday life and in a non-Western setting.

Pluralism in Methods

Trained as a sociologist, I was introduced to the sharp distinction made between the so-called scientific method, on the one hand, and those of literature and the arts, on the other. Resulting from this strict dichotomy between art and science is the idea that truth and beauty are entirely separate domains. This is a methodological dualism (Brown 1978: 15), according to which there are "two orders...separate

but unequal" (Gouldner 1962 cited in Brown 1977: 26–27). In the methodological dualistic world of social science, the choice is to either emulate physics or art (Brown 1978: 16). The former engaged in science, seen to be higher up in the hierarchy of knowledge, as only science truly represented reality. But, being true to science meant that the subjective states, feelings, interpretations and imagination of the scientist had to be excluded from any scientific account. Such an attitude takes us away from the idea that knowledge can also be attained through the stirring of the imagination, and that poetics, for example, is as valid a method of reasoning or argumentation as demonstration or the scientific method. In the world of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), these methods did not divide the community of scholars. In his world, not only demonstration but also poetics and other methods, such as rhetoric and dialectics, were recognised as valid methods of making truth claims (Alatas 2013).

The Context of Knowledge Creation

Colonialism did not only take the political economic destiny of whole peoples out of their own hands but was also responsible for both the physical and epistemic destruction of peoples. This destruction or marginalization of non-Western intellectual traditions persists till today and takes place within a particular global structure of knowledge production, referred to as intellectual imperialism.

Both intellectual imperialism and the related concept of the captive mind were conceptualized by Alatas (1972, 1974, 2000). Intellectual imperialism is analogous to political and economic imperialism in that it refers to the "domination of one people by another in their world of thinking (Alatas 2000a: 24)." Intellectual imperialism was more direct in the colonial period, whereas today it has more to do with the West's control of and influence over the flow of social scientific knowledge rather than its ownership and control of academic institutions.

My own contribution towards understanding the global structure of knowledge creation had been to develop the idea of academic dependency. Academic dependency theory is a dependency theory of the global state of knowledge creation, particularly in the social sciences and humanities. It defines academic dependency as a condition in which the knowledge creation of certain scholarly communities is conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected. This definition of academic dependency parallels that of economic dependency in the classic form in which it was stated by Theotonio dos Santos (1970: 231).

A vital feature of the structure of academic dependency is the global knowledge division of labour which is founded on a three-fold division as follows: (a) the division between theoretical and empirical intellectual labour; (b) the division between other country and own country studies; and (c) the division between comparative and single case studies (Alatas 2003). It is important to know that academic dependency is not merely another term for intellectual imperialism, just as economic dependency is not a substitute term for economic imperialism. The structure of intellectual imperialism does not automatically lead to academic dependency. Individuals and institutions certainly exist under the yoke of intellectual imperialism but may attempt to achieve some degree of academic independence. Indeed, this is what the decolonization of knowledge is about.

Essential to the task of lessening academic dependency is teaching in the decolonization mode. Basic introductory courses in the social sciences remain biased in favour of American or British theoretical perspectives and reading materials. The logical consequence of the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences is the development of alternatives concepts and theories that is not restricted to Western civilization as the primary sources. In order for this to be done, the critique of Eurocentrism must become a widespread theme in the teaching of the social sciences. My colleague at the National University of Singapore, Vineeta Sinha, and I documented our attempt to teach sociological theory in a non-Eurocentric mode, and also eventually published a social theory text that challenges the Western canon (Alatas and Sinha 2001, 2017).

The Struggle for Autonomous Knowledge

With the emergence of the modern social sciences in the nineteenth century came recognition of the problem of knowledge imperialism. It has long been established that Eurocentrism is a dominant or hegemonic orientation as far as knowledge

creation in the social sciences and humanities is concerned. However, the scholars of my generation who were trained by my father recognise several other hegemonic orientations that affect knowledge production in the Third World/Global South, many of which predate the colonial period by centuries. These include androcentrism, traditionalism, culturalism, ethnonationalism and sectarianism. This suggests that the task of decolonizing knowledge is insufficient. Some of us in the Malay world speak of the need to struggle for autonomous knowledge, that is, knowledge that is autonomous from not only Eurocentric but also other hegemonic orientations.

Alatas had initiated such a tradition that began in the field of Malay Studies. The Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore has had a tradition of creating discourses that ran counter to the various hegemonic discourses mentioned above. The department was founded by Alatas in 1967 at the then University of Singapore, and was headed by him for almost two decades. As discussed during a conversation with one of his former students, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, on 28 July 2018, a distinctive approach in sociology and other social sciences emerged during that period and influenced many of the students he trained who had later joined the department as lecturers.

Some of them had been or are my colleagues. Chandra Muzaffar, Shaharuddin Maaruf, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Azhar Ibrahim, Norshahril Saat, and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, all of whom studied or taught at the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, had all been intellectually socialised into the tradition of autonomous knowledge begun by Syed Hussein Alatas. In addition to them, there are several cohorts of undergraduate, MA and PhD students from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia who have studied at the department. Azhar Ibrahim has a strong presence in some Malaysian and Indonesian humanities circles. Syed Farid Alatas, Azhar Ibrahim and Mohamed Imran regularly conduct reading sessions that thematise autonomous knowledge in Malaysia and Singapore.

Is it possible to speak of a School of Autonomous Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities that has emerged from the Malay World? Something along these lines was suggested by the Filipino journalist, John Nery, who referred to it as the 'Alatas tradition', that is,

> the lineage of elite Malaysian scholars begun by that towering pioneer, the late Syed Hussein Alatas....We can use the appropriation of Rizal as object of study or source of inspiration to trace this living tradition of inquiry, beginning with Hussein Alatas' own influential deconstruction of "the myth of the lazy native," to Chandra Muzaffar's founding of a Malaysian social reform group on Rizal's death anniversary, to Shaharuddin Maaruf's brave but unjustly neglected discussion of "the concept of a hero in Malay society," which posited Rizal as one of three ideal heroes; down to Farish A. Noor's web-based ruminations on Rizal and especially Syed Farid Alatas' important, ground breaking work on alternative discourses, with Rizal as both precursor and paragon. The Alatas tradition is a living lineage... (Nery 2012; Mignolo 2014).

In other words, there is a tradition of thinking in terms of autonomous knowledge, and it is possible to speak of a School of Autonomous Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities that has emerged from the Malay World, a tradition of knowledge creation that I am a part of.

Concluding with an Attitude

I believe firmly that the task of education to create an appropriate culture, emphasising certain values and attitudes, so as to allow for the kind of personality development that is consistent with a more autonomous intellectual and cultural life, that is, one that is not dominated by intellectual imperialism and mental captivity.

Pinheiro calls this a "Southern attitude" (Ferreira and Pinheiro 2020). This suggests that the position against intellectual imperialism is not just an intellectual, but also an emotional one. It is above all the Southern attitude that inspires and drives autonomous, original and critical analysis, and forms of thought that seek to debilitate all hegemonic orientations. There are at least two specific attitudes that I personally find relevant to me as someone interested in decolonising knowledge. These are passion and shame.

“Our passion may also be driven by a sense of pride in the intellectual tradition of the community or society in which we grew up.”

Passion as an attitude is an important resource for creative work:

> Individuals passionate for their work—whether they are scientists, poets, entrepreneurs, operations managers or something else—are able to use the energy afforded by their passion as a motivator of their work. It is not the case that they will be always happy or satisfied, but their desire and commitment will enable them to have a long-term view of work that ultimately makes it possible to work through the stress and frustration and keep the long-term goals in mind (Pringle 2019).

When it comes to the selection of topics, the formulation of research problems and research questions, our passion may be driven by many factors such as the desire to simply know or by inspiration from life-experiences, ideas we have come across, novels, music, film, and so on. Our passion may also be driven by a sense of pride in the intellectual tradition of the community or society in which we grew up. This brings me to shame.

Shame refers to susceptibility to the feelings of shortcoming or impropriety. The one who has shame is sensitive to disapproval by others. There is the shame of those who feel they are not good imitators of their Western teachers, a shame that is rooted in the sense of inferiority. As noted by Alatas:

> A feeling of inferiority implicit in their behavior is certainly due to the more general historical and social setting, since it is recognized that if one country is dominated by another for a considerable length of time, a section of the populace feel that their weakness is inherent in their way of life, and regard that of the dominating one as the cause of their superiority and strength. To get rid of this feeling of inequality they adopt the way of imitation. The classification of this group is not based on political concepts. They are to be found amongst those who are progressive or reactionary, for or against immediate independence, the high and the low economic classes, officials and civilians alike (Alatas 1956: 9).

I am referring to a more productive shame that is relevant to our interest in cultivating autonomous knowledge. We can speak of shame vis-à-vis three matters. They are the shame of 1) being a parochial imitator of the intellectual tradition of the colonizer; 2) being alienated from our own intellectual traditions due to our a) disrespecting and lacking interest in those traditions; b) regarding those traditions as subordinate and inferior to the dominant tradition of the colonizer; and c) having little self-worth; and 3) not being an autonomous creator of knowledge because we are imitators of parochial knowledge, that is, of knowledge that originates from only one civilizational source, that of the colonizer. Indeed, this is opposite to the shame of not being a good imitator

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Endnotes

[1] I am currently jointly appointed to the Department of Sociology & Anthropology and the Department of Malay Studies.

[2] As noted by Patel, such discussions on anti-colonial social theory are few and mostly recent.

[3] See the discussion in chapter 3 on bebalisme.