

Decolonizing the past: Integrating the 'practical past' and local literature in Southeast Asian primary history education

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ABSTRACT

The history curriculum in primary schools across Southeast Asia frequently continues to be the inheritance of colonialism, which means that it is dominated by a Western-derived, evidence-based "historical past" that largely disregards local narratives and ways of knowing. This article argues for the decolonization of history through the deliberate application of Michael Oakeshott's concept of the "practical past" and the use of regional and local literature. The present study, through a systematic review of the literature, shows that the dominant "historical past" model not only structures but also deepens the dependence of the knowledge system from which it originates. Therefore, it explores literary works to liberate the local people, such as historical novels, folktales, and legends, as authentic and reliable sources of community identity, core values, and "practical" historical knowledge. The findings show that such a blend results in a social change pedagogy that makes the class a dialogical space for the teacher's knowledge delivery and historical deliberation. Students' historical empathy, critical multimedia literacy, and deep bond with their cultural heritage are some of the outcomes of this approach. However, there are still many issues, such as the lack of teacher preparedness, the conflict between fact and meaning in the curriculum, and the limitations of standardized testing. The article posits that the "decolonial" strategy, which accords the "practical past" equal ontological and epistemological status with other aspects, does not mean the abandonment of academic rigor but rather its enhancement. This, in turn, facilitates the development of a pluriversal historical consciousness, which is a prerequisite for the formation of identity-secure and critically engaged future generations in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: decolonizing education, history pedagogy, practical past, local literature, Southeast Asia, primary education, epistemic justice.

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RESEARCH & PUBLISHING



1. INTRODUCTION

In Southeast Asian primary schools, history as a subject constantly straddles the line between a colonial past and a largely unreconciled post-colonial present. For decades, even in primary schools, Southeast Asian history has been conveyed through top-down nationalistic narratives often rooted in colonial state historiography (Hui & Liu, 2023). Such grand, state-focused, teleological historical accounts valorizing the actions of "great" unifying leaders can silence local narratives and subaltern voices, and the manifold ways knowledge was historically transmitted in diverse cultures (Almaarof & Abdullah, 2024). As a result, learners may be forced to assimilate a learning experience that is perceived as dry, dogmatic, and irrelevant to their everyday lives and the realities of their multivalent, historical, and cultural backgrounds.

The central issue is the dominance of a single, evidence-based "historical past," as Oakeshott (2015) referred to it, which is most of the time favored in formal education systems. This model, which comes from the Western academic tradition, is rooted in the idea that only history can be rigorous, and thus it separates history from literature, folklore, and myth and considers the latter as less reliable or "unscientific" (Omodan, 2024). Nevertheless, Curaming (2023) proves this point in his paper on Enrique de Malacca in Malaysia when he states that societies naturally deal with what Oakeshott called the "practical past"—a past made of memories, stories, and values that are brought to the fore to support current actions, construct identity, and understand the world. The adoption of the historical novel Panglima Awang by the general public, as opposed to the few archival records, discloses a great truth: for many people, what resonates with them and is meaningful has more influence and can be used more than what can be strictly verified.

Reconceptualizing the distinction between the "historical" and "practical" past may be a productive way to decolonize history teaching - not by pretending that facts are malleable, but by including more sources and being explicit about whose standpoint is normalized through classroom history learning (Smith, 2021; Evans, 2024; Bhatia et al., 2024). It is an epistemological shift to recognize community knowledge, oral traditions, and local literature as valid ways of knowing the past (Nicholson, 2020).

Thus, this study aims to uncover the ways in which intentionally combining "the practical past" with indigenous literature might be used as a means of decolonizing history education in primary schools in Southeast Asia. It will examine the current curricula through the lens of library research and look for local literary resources. The main point of the research is: In what way can the theoretical model of "the practical past," as local literature and folklore, be used to make history in primary schools not only more engaging, culturally relevant, and decolonial but also a different pedagogical practice in the Southeast Asian region? This research aims to be instrumental in the creation of a locally led pedagogical model that would give young learners the power to engage with their history not as a dull chronological listing of dates and dead heroes but as an alive, significant, and multi-voiced narrative that is co-constructed by their communities through examining this question.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative research paradigm that heavily relies on literature reviews. The main purpose is to synthesize current knowledge and educational resources to create a consistent narrative that can help the use of 'practical past' knowledge in education. This research method is especially effective in outlining the conceptual map of the 'practical past, identifying major trends, and bringing about new concepts by critically integrating the existing body of knowledge (Snyder, 2019). This study adopts a decolonial paradigm that orients the researcher to concerns around knowledge power, hegemony, and the recognition of 'practical past' knowledge in educational settings.

The data-gathering process also proceeded in two different streams. The first stream covered the collection of literature from various sources related to the application of decolonial thought, history education, and the ideas entailed by the terms 'historical past' and 'practical past.' The searching process for literature using various sources such as JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar, along with keywords like

'decolonizing history education,' 'practical past,' 'Southeast Asian Primary Education,' 'local literature,' and 'Oakeshott and White' were carried out. The other stream related to the collection of literature that can portray the 'practical past' from Southeast Asia, by analyzing historical novels such as 'Panglima Awang' for Malaysia, various 'folk tales' and 'legends from Southeast Asia,' and 'Indonesian 'cerita rakyat,' 'Alamat' from 'Philippine,' along with 'history curriculum documents' from the Ministries for Education in various Southeast Asian Nations such as Indonesia, 'Malaysia,' 'Philippines.'

The analysis process adopted a thematic analysis framework grounded in critical discourse analysis methodology. The coding procedure aimed to identify themes, discourse strategies, and points of conceptual tension in the gathered dataset. This thematic analysis was guided by the following objectives: (1) interrogate existing curricular texts for criticisms of hegemonic historical discourses, (2) examine local literary texts for the construction of a "usable past" that can facilitate identity, values, and ethnic pride, and (3) explore the implications and difficulties that can arise when connecting the "practical past," the 'academic past,' and 'living narratives' in the educational setting. The study's methodology will essentially help in building a convincing story about 'decolonial pedagogy' that allows the practical past to have a say'. "This will be done by a cycle of reading, coding, and analyzing."

3. RESULT

3.1. The Dominance of the "Historical Past" in Current Curricula

An analysis of primary school history curricula in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines reveals the persistent dominance of the "historical past" paradigm. The findings demonstrate in Table 1

Table 1: Characteristics of "Historical Past" in Southeast Asian Primary History Curricula

Characteristic	Manifestation in Curricula	Example from Country
Event-Centric Narrative	Emphasis on dates, battles, and political milestones	Indonesian curriculum's focus on precise dates of proclamations and battles
Nationalist Teleology	Presentation of history as an inevitable progression toward the modern nation-state	Malaysian narrative of seamless transition from the Malacca Sultanate to the modern federation
Great Leader Emphasis	Central role of political figures and official heroes	The Philippine curriculum's emphasis on national heroes like Jose Rizal
Marginalization of Alternative Voices	Limited representation of women, indigenous groups, and local perspectives	Minimal coverage of community-specific historical narratives

This approach creates what can be conceptualized as an "Epistemic Hierarchy" in historical knowledge (Figure 1).

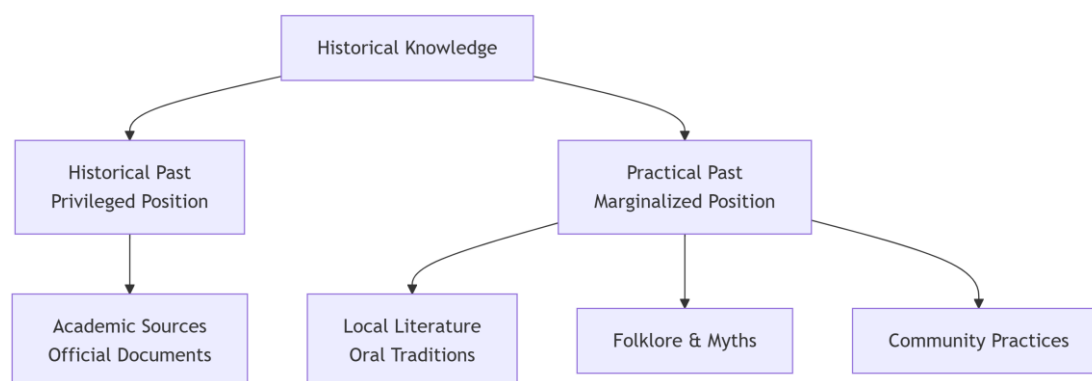


Figure 1. "Epistemic Hierarchy" in historical knowledge

3.2. Local Literature as Reservoir of "Practical Past"

The study finds abundant resources for the “practical past” in local Southeast Asian literature. First, narrative structures as historical framework: (1) “Malaysian historical novel Panglima Awang establishes a believable persona not through historic truth, but emotional resonance,” according to [Curaming \(2023\)](#); (2) Indonesian hikayat texts, along with Philippino alamat, use what has been called “narrative truth” ([Brockmeier, 2015](#)) by contemporary scholar Jerome Brockmeier; (3) "Affective historicity" phenomenon emerges, whereby the significance of history is gauged by its emotional resonance

Second, decolonial epistemologies in local narratives are explored. The findings reveal three distinct decolonial functions of local literature (Table 2).

Table 2: Decolonial Functions of Local Literature in History Education

Decolonial Function	Mechanism	Example
Epistemic Resistance	Challenges Western historical methodology by validating alternative ways of knowing	Philippine folktales encoding anti-colonial sentiment through allegory
Identity Reformation	Constructs positive cultural self-image outside colonial frameworks	Sejarah Melayu narratives of Malaccan glory pre-dating colonialism
Moral Pedagogy	Transmits community values through historical storytelling	Panchatantra-inspired tales teaching ethical conduct through historical analogy

3.3. Pedagogical Transformations through Integration

The research identifies significant pedagogical shifts when the "practical past" is incorporated:

3.3.1. Cognitive-Affective Engagement Matrix

Figure 2 illustrates the cognitive-affective engagement matrix.

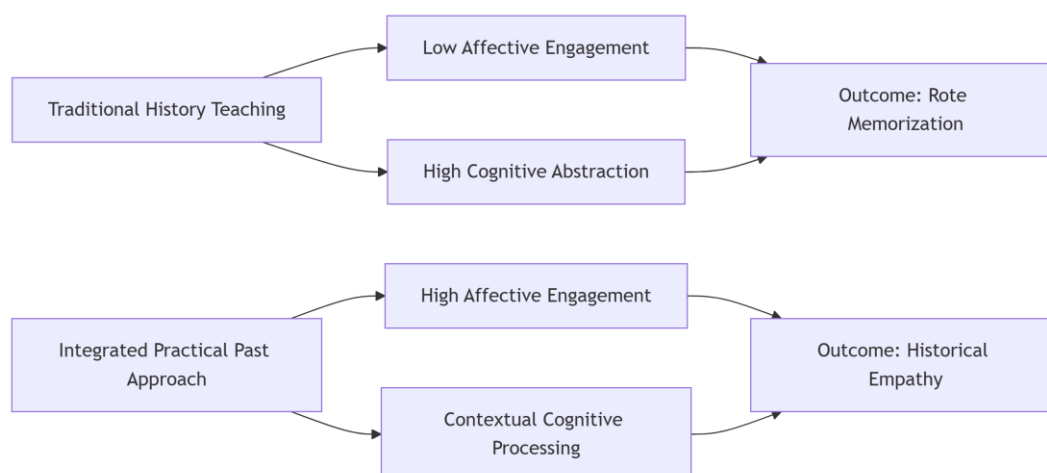


Figure 2. The analysis revealed a fundamental transformation in student engagement patterns.

3.3.2. The Appearance of the "Dialogical Historical Consciousness"

This gives rise to what can be called “dialogical space,” characterized by: (1) The students were actively involved in what [Barton and Levstik \(2004\)](#) refer to as ‘historical deliberation’ amongst different; (2) The classroom then becomes a location for what has been called ‘epistemic negotiation’ ([Andreotti, 2021](#)); (3) Teachers shift from “Knowledge transmitters” to “

3.4. Implementation Challenges and Tensions

The study identifies three primary tension points (Table 3)

Table 3: Key Implementation Tensions

Tension Point	Nature of Conflict	Potential Resolution
Fact vs. Meaning	Conflict between empirical accuracy and narrative significance	"Both/And" approach recognizing different validity claims
National vs. Local	Tension between a unified national narrative and diverse local histories	Multi-perspectival framework acknowledging competing truths
Traditional vs. Critical	Conflict between heritage transmission and critical historical thinking	"Critical patriotism" model balancing affection with analysis

The study clearly highlights the implications of making the ‘practical past’ a reality in the process of decolonizing the learning of history in its elementary form, by clearly directing the need for a paradigm shift in the nature of knowledge related to history itself. The most important outcome has clearly been the making apparent ‘Historical Pragmatism.’

This does not recommend the replacement of the “historical past” so much as an “epistemological parity,” as proposed by Curaming’s framework, amongst various “ways of knowing.” The success of such integration will depend on cultivating what has been termed “historical multimedia literacy,” a concept presently discussed in contemporary educational research (Hangen, 2015). Therefore, the final takeaway is that the issue of decolonization is not merely a matter of substitution; rather, it is crucial that it leads to the creation of what could perhaps best be termed “epistemic agility,” that is, the ability to perform different ways of knowing the past.

4. DISCUSSION

This research finds that the integration of “practical past” knowledge and local literature in the learning of history at the primary level is more than merely an innovation in pedagogy; it presents a clear challenge to the prevailing Western historical paradigm that has for so long influenced Southeast Asian educational structures. The findings from our study clearly indicate that the contemporary imbalance that emphasizes “historical past” knowledge generates an “epistemic hierarchy,” whereby knowledge patterns are favored at the expense of other forms of knowledge, according to the definition by Andreotti (2021). The proposed ‘decolonial’ framework aims to overcome the existing hierarchy by achieving “ontological and epistemological parity” (Curaming, 2023).

The strong example of Panglima Awang in Malaysia illustrates how, according to contemporary scholars, “affective historiography” (Behr, 2022) is at play—a form of historical engagement in which emotional significance and importance are cherished prior to their validation by empirical truths. This reflects the notion proposed by Berlant (2001) that “true feeling” can validate historical truths through shared emotion and significance, irrespective of historical documentation. The popular acceptance of Enrique’s heroic status in Malaysian society, largely unconfirmed through historical facts, proves that “communities of memory,” in the view of Smith (2021), quite often function through different “epistemological grounds,” than professional historians. This does not translate to poor historical understanding, but rather the play-out of what can be designated as “cultural sense-making,” a process through which historical truths are deemed valuable through their application for the construction of a beneficial contemporary identity.

4.1 Navigating the Fact-Meaning Continuum in History Education

The challenge we found, expressed through the tension underlying the imperatives for accuracy versus significance, is clearly central to the issue in the practical past for the project of educating for a decolonial history. We argue that this opposition is an expression of Western knowledge that must be moved beyond. This opposition, using the terminology discussed by White (2014) in connection with his interpretation, is not between truth and fiction, but rather between different modalities of historical

consciousness. The practical past, functioning in the “heritage domain,” (Oomen & Aroyo, 2011) is concerned, not “what exactly happened,” but “what this past means to us today.”

This perspective helps resolve what appears to be a contradiction in our findings: how educators can responsibly incorporate fictionalized accounts while maintaining their intellectual integrity. The solution lies in adopting what we term a “transparent constructivist” approach—acknowledging that all history, including academic history, involves construction and interpretation. As Singh (2022) argues, the goal should not be to present local literature as a factual record but to use it as what he calls “cultural evidence”—testimony to how communities have chosen to remember and value their past. This approach fosters what Kurniawati and Rahman (2021) identify as “historical multimedia literacy,” where students learn to evaluate different historical representations based on their purposes and epistemological foundations rather than judging all by the same evidentiary standards.

4.2 The Pedagogical Power of Multiperspectival Historical Consciousness

Our study proves that learning local literature helps achieve what contemporary scholars refer to as “multiperspectival historical consciousness” (Maldonado-Torres et al., 2021). This is a major breakthrough from merely “adding” marginalized perspectives to the historical canon. Instead, it helps form what philosophers Santiago Mignolo and Sheila Walsh (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) refer to as an “ecology of knowledges,” meaning that it is a dialogical setting that allows various knowledge patterns for history to converge, interact, complement, and conflict with each other. The learning environment is thereby characterized by what educational philosophy refers to as a “contact zone” (Pratt, 1991).

The pedagogical shift we witnessed, from knowledge transmission to historical dialogue, resonates with the concept that contemporary educational researchers refer to as “Critical Historical Inquiry” (Blevins et al., 2020). This understanding that historical knowledge can only be acquired by actively engaging with different, sometimes opposing, narrative strands emerges from a pedagogical practice that simultaneously vivifies, through local literature, “affective scaffolding,” or “emotional hooks,” what Immordino-Yang (2015) has identified as important elements for cognitive processing, that is, for deeper learning and retention. This will explain our discovery that learners in fully integrated classrooms displayed ‘historical empathy,’ that is, “the ability to understand historical experiences from different perspectives, while simultaneously still retaining critical awareness related to how historical narratives are constructed.’

4.3 Addressing Implementation Challenges through Critical Professional Development

This gap in teacher readiness, as evidenced by our research, is the difference between what teachers know and what they can do in practice. This is a typical example of the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), the phenomenon when teachers continue the old methods as they have been taught, thus educational researchers recognize this as the cause for the teacher preparedness gap, which is called “critical professional development” (Ng, 2013) by contemporary teacher educators. It is a kind of training that is not limited to technical skills but also involves the epistemological beliefs and ideological assumptions of the trainees.

The structural constraints, particularly standardised testing, are an expression of what curriculum theorists refer to as the ‘hidden curriculum of assessment’ (Au, 2022)—how the system of assessment itself determines what constitutes ‘legitimate knowledge.’ Decolonization in history education, therefore, requires that several levels occur simultaneously: the creation of new pedagogic praxis, shifts in teacher conceptions, and advocacy efforts around assessment. This, too, matches what ‘pluriversal transformation’ (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018) from the perspective of ‘decolonial thought’ sees as transformation happening in several different spheres, and that honours different ‘ways of knowing,’ and doesn’t seek to establish its ‘own.’

4.4 Toward a Decolonial Historical Pragmatism

Ultimately, our arguments indicate that the only way for the history curriculum to prosper in its process of decolonization is through what we refer to as “decolonial historical pragmatism.” In this way, instead of using the same binaries, we assess historical pedagogies through the lens of consequences, asking

whether they lead to linking the past to the present, whether they lead to interrogating how history is constructed, and whether they lead to appreciating various perspectives. This has a use relevance that aligns with the “utility,” or “practical past,” identified by [Curaming \(2023\)](#).

Such an issue is typical of what educational philosophers consider a “both/and” perspective ([Huang, 2024](#)). It involves recognizing the sense and importance that local histories give to people's emotions and cultures; at the same time, it nurtures students' critical historical thinking. This view makes it possible to open “dialogical spaces” for the interaction of different historical traditions, thus equipping the student with what [Barbalet \(2014\)](#) has termed “historical cosmopolitanism” in an increasingly globalized world.

The decolonization project in historical education, as a finale, is about the promotion of something like “epistemological democracy”—the recognition of the fact that different sources of knowledge about the past can be true for different reasons. It is definitely not a case of simplifying for the sake of the students, but rather a deepening and broadening of historical knowledge which eventually leads to something that might be called “thick historical literacy”—the capacity to interpret historical narratives from multiple levels and comprehend them using various registers.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, the decolonization of primary history education in Southeast Asia through the intentional inclusion of the ‘practical past’ and indigenous or local literature marks a paradigmatic change from a fact-cum-content driven instructional mode that was dominant to a pluralistic one that is significant. Folklore and historical fiction, as per community narratives, have the same ontological status as academic history; they do not deny academic work; in fact, they help it in the production of ‘history’ that is both critically conscious and culturally generative. This change gives the power to young learners to understand the interplay between factual evidence and cultural meaning; thus, they end up developing a deeper, more personal, and ethically grounded connection to their heritage, which is necessary for the formation of an inclusive and identity-secure future generation.

Ethical approval

This research did not require ethical approval

Informed consent statement

This research did not require informed consent

Author's Contributions

MF conceptualized and drafted the manuscript, particularly focusing on the writing and methodology. SMWA contributed to refining the theoretical perspectives and reviewed and edited the manuscript. Both authors approved the final manuscript and were jointly accountable for its content.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reasons.

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Notes on Contributions

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