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**A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF COLONIAL NEWSPAPERS IN SABAH**

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***Abstract***

This paper discusses the conflicts of interest between commerce and colonialism in colonial newspaper advertisements. The era of colonialism has seen the transfer of British technology in printing through the distribution of newspapers in the colonised regions such as Tanah Melayu, Sabah, and Sarawak. Three advertisements from a selected newspaper are selected for the study to ascertain the connections between the ideologies of commerce and colonialism in the paper. The assumption in regards to the advertisements released in this era is that these advertisements represent a primary medium for the unequivocal propagation of Western values and colonial interests. To study these conflicts of interests, this paper focuses on the advertisements from *The British North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette*, a newspaper publication distributed in North Borneo by The British North Borneo (Chartered) Company, the government of North Borneo. This paper utilises qualitative methods to analyse the advertisements by conducting a semiotic analysis on the selected newspaper advertisements focussing on the visual and linguistic texts of the advertisements. We, therefore, argue that the newspaper advertisements project the conflicts of interest between commerce and colonialism through the semiotic analysis conducted in the paper.

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**Keywords:** Commerce, colonialism, advertisement, North Borneo, semiotics.



## 1. Introduction

The need for Western empires to expand their power and territory has led to colonisation activities in many regions of the world, Borneo included. European powers had attempted to build their colonies in Borneo (Tregonning, 1965) due to the immense supply of raw materials to fulfil the demands from mother countries. This is in line with the commercialist and capitalist ideologies which incline towards securing raw materials to maximise production and profit. According to McLeod (2000), colonialism very much involved with imperialism and capitalism. He argues:

The seizing of 'foreign' lands for government and settlement was in part motivated by the desire to create and control market abroad for Western goods, as well as securing the natural resources and labour-power of different lands and peoples at the lowest possible cost. Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others (p.7).

In other words, the Western Empires, such as Britain, colonised lands to obtain the natural resources from the lands and then used the resources for their own needs, expanding the power and wealth of the empires. Through commercialism, colonisation of other lands was justified and normalised. Colonisation was not seen as a negative process; rather it was perceived as a positive action to support the empires. The Western producers and consumers believed that colonialism was important to increase the profit which would eventually benefit the respective empires.

The British North Borneo (Chartered) Company (BNBC) governed North Borneo until 1946 and was granted the permission to "improve, develop, and cultivate any lands in the areas granted" as well as to gain profits and revenues through the trading of commodities, merchandise and natural resources from North Borneo (Kahin, 1947, p. 44). The governing of North Borneo, initially through BNBC and later directly through the British Government, started with gaining profits in mind, like many other colonised regions. This reflects the intention of the chartered company and the British Empire.

## 2. Problem Statement

Colonialism involved the building of settlements of colonisers in the colonised lands (McLeod, 2000, p.18). The desire to gain profits through trading and exploitation of resources and the existence of these settlements who served as consumers created the need for newspaper publishing to "[promote] consumption by creating consumer wants for products through advertising, and [serve] the financial interests of newspaper owners" (Picard, 2004, p.109). However, the promotion of products and services through advertising is complex as argued by Goddard (2002, p.8) that "advertising texts are seen as potentially involving complex notions of audience, where readers have to work hard to decode messages and understand different address relationships". Therefore, it is important to address the complex relationship between the ideologies of commerce and colonialism which exists in the colonial advertisements. There has not been many research conducted on the study of colonial newspaper advertisements in North Borneo. Previous studies such as by Sabihah and Nordi (2011) and Mat Zin Mat Kib (2011) are more concerned with the history of newspapers in Sabah or North Borneo. They did not look at the semiotic aspects of the newspapers. Therefore, we aim to fill the gap by conducting a semiotic

analysis on the colonial advertisements in *The British North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette (BNBHOG)*.

### 3. Research Question

Our main research question for this paper is:

How does the semiotic analysis of advertisements in *The British North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette (BNBHOG)* explain the relationships of interest between commerce and colonialism in colonial advertisements?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

Newspapers serve as a resource that is significant and distinctive for research such as “reader reception, cultural production and political agency in the colonial period” (Newell, 2011, p. 26). The *BNBHOG* satisfies all the features identified by Newell (2011, p.26). It is a paper published with the backdrop of a colonial environment with targeted set of readers in North Borneo by a colonising agency vis-à-vis the afore-mentioned The British North Borneo (Chartered) Company (BNBC), in the implementation of its colonising activities. We aim to study these conflicts of interests between commerce and colonialism in colonial newspaper advertisements using a semiotic analysis.

### 5. Research Methods

The analysis of this paper is conducted by using Halliday’s transitivity model (1994) and Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) idea of representation and interaction between the producer and the viewer. Halliday’s transitivity model (1994) analyses “the semantic structures of clauses and refers, broadly, to who does what to whom, and how” (Halliday, 1994; Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 65) especially pertaining to power relations. These relationships of interest between commerce and colonialism are also discussed in the light of Kress & van Leeuwen’s (2006, p. 114) idea of representation and interaction, which are between the producer and the viewer. This idea observes the relationship between *represented participants* (elements in images such as people, places and things) and *interactive participants*, which refer to people who communicate via images such as the producers and the viewers or audience of images) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 114). Three advertisements taken from the 1<sup>st</sup> January and 1<sup>st</sup> February 1892 issues of *The British North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette* were analysed and discussed in this paper. The *BNBHOG* is the official publication in North Borneo during the governing of North Borneo by The British North Borneo (Chartered) Company (BNBC).

### 6. Findings

There are three colonial advertisements taken from the *BNBHOG*.

The first advertisement (*BNBHOG*, 1892, p. 35) (see Figure 01), is an advertisement for a construction company, Francis Morton and Company Limited. The company was based in Liverpool and advertised its specialisations in building structures such as houses, stores and factories, and manufacturing

building materials such as constructional wrought and cast iron works. Note that it claimed to have constructed for the Dutch Indian Factories and Plantations. For the textual analysis, three clauses were identified and analysed using the transitivity model which are as follows:

1. (Hamilton Iron Works, Garston, Liverpool) which cover(s) over 10 acres of ground
2. F. M. & Co., selfbased Wrought Iron Columns dispense with all brick or stone foundation to support roof of moderate span
3. Francis Morton & Company's system of construction simplifies foreign erect



**Figure 01.** Francis Morton and Company Limited advertisement

All three clauses involve with the material process; a transitivity process which describes the process of *doing* (Simpson & Mayr, 2010). The analysis of this transitivity process is as Table 01 below:

**Table 01.** Material processes of Francis Morton and Company Limited advertisement

Agent	Material Verb	Goal
(Hamilton Iron Works, Garston, Liverpool)	[which] cover(s)	over 10 acres of ground
F. M. & Co., a selfbased Wrought Iron Columns	dispense	with all brick or stone foundation to support roof of moderate span
Francis Morton & Company's system of construction	simplifies	foreign erection

The analysis of the material processes in the advertisement indicates that the subjects for the clauses are the company, the product of the company and the service provided by the company. To discuss the idea of commerce and colonialism in advertisements, the first clause was analysed in great

detail. The first clause, which is “Hamilton Iron Works, Garston, Liverpool which cover(s) over 10 acres of ground” provides the information on the size of the company’s land. This connotes the idea that this company was a big company with large operation activities. The first clause, which has the company as the subject of the clause sets to attract the customers by highlighting the size of their operation, providing assurance of the service provided to the customers. Another important clause which needs to be discussed is the clause “Francis Morton & Company’s system of construction simplifies foreign erection” (see Figure 01). There are many possible meanings to “foreign erections”. The phrase “foreign erection” in this clause refers to the designs of the structures or buildings of the locals, i.e. either the people being colonised or the locale of the colonised which were foreign to the British. It could also refer to the process of erection being carried out in a foreign place. However, the use of the material verb “simplifies” with a British company as the agent in this process provides a negative connotation to the goal “foreign erection”. The structures of the locals were not only strange or unique to them, but they were also complex and difficult according to British construction. Equally it could refer to the agent being able to provide a less complex construction to be carried out in a foreign place. This might indicate a precursor to prefabrication in the construction process. Whichever is or are the correct meaning or meanings, the word “foreign” projects a negative connotation.

There is an aspect of modality found in the advertisement. Although modality is not the focus of the study, it is interesting to note the way the company used modality to provide assurance to potential customers. The clause which contains modality in the advertisement is: “Intending purchasers **can** entrust their requirements to FRANCIS MORTON & Company with confidence in reputation extending over FORTY-FIVE years and an experience gained in the construction of nearly 20,000 erections in that period”. The presence of modality through the use of the modal verb “can” in this clause provides some degree of certainty, which reflects the company’s intent to provide assurance to the customers in regards to the quality of the service provided by the company. Note that the company also included their history of providing construction service to strengthen their certainty of assurance in garnering customers’ trust. This would eventually lead to the customers using the company’s service, which correlates with the ideology of commerce involved.

The second advertisement, see Figure 02, (*BNBHOG*, 1892, p. 38) is an advertisement for soda water machinery from Barnett & Foster, a company which was based in London (refer to the Figure 02). This advertisement promotes several machines and items involved in the making of soda water. The clauses in the advertisement used for the transitivity analysis are as follows:

- 1.The “Niagara” machines are superseding all other kinds, for the manufacture of first-class Aerated Waters
- 2.(The “Niagara” machines) are in use in most of the leading manufactories in the world.
- 3.Our Machinery effects a Saving of 50 per cent, in cost of Labour and Material
- 4.This is the most serviceable, reliable and economical in the market
- 5.There is no waste of Syrup, water, or Gas
- 6.It has the only Syrup Pump
- 7.There is no strain upon the glass barrel
- 8.This never breaks
9. The Pump Leather is self-tightening

10. It is the quickest in filling
11. It is the quickest for altering and adjusting syrup
12. It is by far the strongest
13. It is comparatively valveless
14. It is the simplest to work and most lasting
15. It is not liable to go out of order, having but few working parts
16. (You) buy the "London Made" syphon
17. (You) support British Industry
18. It is the strongest, cheapest, handsomest and best in the world



**Figure 02.** Barnett & Foster advertisement

There are several transitivity processes involved in this advertisement and they are material process, relational process and existential process. The material process was explained in the discussion of the first advertisement above. The relational process describes about the “state of being, where things are stated to exist in relation to other things” (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 67-68). There are two types of relational process: *Carrier-Attribute* and *Identified/Token-Identifier/Value*. In the first type, the *Attribute* describes the *Carrier* in term of quality or classification while the second type, *Identified/Token-Identifier/Value* is about identifying or defining the *Identified/Token* (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 67-68). Besides material process and relational process, the existential process is also involved in this advertisement. This process describes the state of something happens or exists (Simpson & Mayr, 2010, p. 68-69). Table 02, Table 03 and Table 04 list the material process analysis, relational processes analysis and existential processes analysis of the clauses respectively.

**Table 02.** Material processes of Barnett and Foster advertisement

Agent	Material Verb	Goal
The “Niagara” machines	are superseding	all other kinds, for the manufacture of first-class Aerated Waters
Our Machinery	Effects	a Saving of 50 per cent, in cost of Labour and Material
(You)	Buy	the “London Made” syphon

**Table 03.** Relational processes of Barnett and Foster advertisement

Carrier/Identified	Relational Verb	Attribute/Identifier
(The “Niagara” machines)	Are	in use in most of the leading manufactories in the world
This	Is	The most serviceable, reliable and economical in the market
It	Has	the only Syrup Pump
The Pump Leather	Is	so self-tightening
It	Is	the quickest in filling
It	Is	the quickest for altering and adjusting syrup
It	Is	by far the strongest
It	Is	comparatively valveless
It	Is	the simplest to work and most lasting
It	Is	not liable to go out of order, having but few working parts
It	Is	the strongest, cheapest, handsomest and the best in the world

**Table 04.** Existential processes of Barnett and Foster advertisement

-	Existential Verb	Existent
There	Is	no waste of Syrup, water or Gas
There	is	no strain upon the glass barrel
This	[never] breaks	-

Based on the analysis, relational processes are the most observed in the advertisement. This means that the company wanted to highlight more on the attributes of the product. The existential process is also evident in the advertisement, which is not evident in the other advertisements used in this paper. However, the clauses of the material process address the conflicts of interest between commerce and colonialism. The clause “Our Machinery effects a Saving of 50 per cent, in cost of Labour and Material” has the machinery as the agent of the material process. This indicates what the machine can do to reduce the labour and material cost; in commerce, it is important to have lower cost, higher production. Therefore, the company tried to appeal to the customers by promoting the ability of the product to reduce production cost. One of the clauses of the existential process which is “There is no waste of Syrup, water, or Gas” also promotes the same notion, which is reducing the cost of production.

There are another two important material clauses in discussing the conflicts of interest between commerce and colonialism, which are “(You) buy the “London Made” syphon” and “(You) support British Industry”. The agents are not specified in the original clauses because the clauses are imperative.

However, we can assume the agents of the clauses are the potential customers. The important aspects of these material processes in the context of commerce and colonialism are the material verbs (*buy* and *support*) and the goals (*the “London Made” syphon and British Industry*). It is interesting to note that the company was very direct in promoting the British Empire, especially the phrase “support British Industry”. The customers, who were mostly British, would be inclined to purchase the machines under the notion of supporting the Empire to uphold the imperialist and colonialist ideologies.

The third advertisement is an advertisement from L. Rose & Co., (see Figure 03; *BNBHOG*, 1892, p. 70) a company which was based in London, advertising the company’s lime juice beverages. The company cautioned potential customers about the imitations of the product and advertised that the bottle design of the product now had been trademarked. There are several clauses used for the transitivity analysis:

1. Messrs. ROSE & CO., [as the original Manufacturers and Patentees of the LIME JUICE BEVERAGES, prepared from the West Indian Lime Fruit, now so favourably known, as supplying delicious, wholesome Beverages, highly medicinal, preserved without the aid of spirits] beg to caution buyers against the now numerous imitations of these Beverages, more especially of their LIME JUICE CORDIAL, by Rectifiers, Wine Makers, and others
2. ROSE & CO., have adopted Glass-stoppered Bottles, engraved with the Lime Fruit as Trade Mark
3. (ROSE & CO.,) specially manufactured for them
4. (ROSE & CO.,) registered [- (*as represented on margin*) -] the Labels also bearing the Signature of the Firm



**Figure 03.** L. Rose Co. advertisement



There is only one transitivity process taking place in this advertisement and that is the material process. The analysis of the material process of the clauses found in the advertisement is shown in the Table 05 below.

**Table 05.** Material processes of L. Rose and Co advertisement

Agent	Material Verb	Goal
Messrs. ROSE & CO., [as the original Manufacturers and Patentees of the LIME JUICE BEVERAGES, prepared from the West Indian Lime Fruit, now so favourably known, as supplying delicious, wholesome Beverages, highly medicinal, preserved without the aid of spirits]	beg	to caution buyers against the now numerous imitations of these Beverages, more especially of their LIME JUICE CORDIAL, by Rectifiers, Wine Makers, and others
ROSE & CO.,	have adopted	Glass-stoppered Bottles, engraved with the Lime Fruit as Trade Mark
(ROSE & CO.,)	[specially] manufactured for	Them
(ROSE & CO.,)	registered	[- ( <i>as represented on margin</i> ) -] the Labels also bearing the Signature of the Firm

This advertisement is quite unique in the sense that the mechanism used in advertising of the product is a warning. Customers were warned of the imitations of the product, but at the same time, the company introduced a new design of the bottles which were used to keep the juice. Potential customers are advised to look for the new designed bottles to avoid purchasing the imitated products. This strategy in promoting and advertising their products would potentially secure the product's market through their brand trademark and safeguard the profit of the company.

The company also was very proactive in stopping the sale of the imitations of their product by addressing the companies that imitated them directly. This is observed in the first clause of the advertisement:

Messrs. ROSE & CO., [as the original Manufacturers and Patentees of the LIME JUICE BEVERAGES, prepared from the West Indian Lime Fruit, now so favourably known, as supplying delicious, wholesome Beverages, highly medicinal, preserved without the aid of spirits] beg to caution buyers against the now numerous imitations of these Beverages, more especially of their LIME JUICE CORDIAL, by Rectifiers, Wine Makers, and others.

Rose & CO., called out the companies that imitated their lime juice (Rectifiers, Wine Makers) by including these companies in the *goal*. It is interesting to note that the company used the material verb 'beg' instead of verbs such as 'ask' (verbal verb) or 'want' (mental verb). This verb reflects some degree of action of a person possibly kneeling, pleading for something such as food and money. There is the tone of humility in the use of 'beg' which is ironic. The use of this verb also addresses the emotions of potential customers, influencing them towards a positive image of a company that has finesse in chasing its commercial gains.

There is one similarity which is evident in all the advertisements. The advertisements include the origin of the companies which are places in Britain such as Liverpool and London (refer to Appendix). The inclusion of these places provides an underlying message of supporting the British Empire. By knowing the origin of the company, the British who lived in the North Borneo under the flag of the Empire would purchase products and services from these companies with the idea that purchasing British goods would mean supporting their mother country. This eventually led to the normalisation of colonialism and exploitation of the indigenous people.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discuss that the producer and the viewer of images or advertisements in this case, have no immediate or direct involvement as they are absent from each other (114). However, in British colonial advertisements, particularly the advertisements in *BNBHOG e*, observe this notion as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to some extent. It can be argued that the producers (of advertisements, products, and services) and the viewers (in this case the potential consumers) were aware of the identity of each other. The viewers might not know the process of creating the advertisements and people who involved in the process; however, colonial advertising (in the case of *BNBHOG*) was very direct in sending the message of commercialism and colonialism. The producers of the services and products are clearly evident as discussed previously, and the colonial viewers might already know the existence of these companies before moving to the British settlements in North Borneo. Although the producers might not know the viewers directly, they were aware of the target audience of their advertisements. The audience of colonial advertisements are very specific. They are not the locals but they are the people who moved to the colonised lands to exploit the resources of the lands. Therefore, they could be owners of factories, people involved with the transportation of goods or family members of the colonisers. The relationship between the producers and the viewers might not be immediate and direct; however, it is not completely devoid of direct interaction.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper discussed the conflicts of interests between commerce and colonialism by analysing colonial advertisements in *The North Borneo Herald and Official Gazette*. We utilised Halliday's transitivity model (1994) to study the participants involved in the advertisements and the message transmitted by the advertisements. The message sent by producers of the services and products to the consumers is direct. The advertisements promote the products; however, the advertisements also promote the producers or the companies by providing information on the companies to appeal to the consumers. We also analysed the relationship between producers and viewers of colonial advertisements by discussing Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996; 2006) idea of representation and interaction. We agreed on Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996; 2006) idea to some extent; however, we also argued that this relationship can be also direct to some extent. Therefore, through a semiotic analysis using Halliday's (1994) transitivity model and Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) idea of representation and interaction, it can be observed that the commercialism in colonial period is never devoid of colonialist ideology. The presence of the message to support the British Empire through consuming British products and services normalised the horrendous ideology of colonialism.

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