



Dutch Colonial Propaganda in the Palembang Sultanate: Discursive Strategies of Delegitimation and Colonial Legitimation

Ridho^{1*}, Melta Yanti¹

¹Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Palembang, Indonesia

*ridhoas@radenfatah.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article examines Dutch colonial propaganda as a political instrument used to undermine the legitimacy of the Palembang Darussalam Sultanate between 1811 and 1825 and explores its possible traces in later historiography and contemporary public discourse. Unlike prior studies that have focused mainly on military and diplomatic dimensions, this study positions propaganda as a discursive arena accompanying colonial political and military intervention. Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, and Said's orientalism, the study examines colonial narratives of despotism, betrayal, and misgovernment surrounding Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II. The research employs a critical historical method combined with critical discursive analysis of published colonial texts, philologically verified archival excerpts cited in prior scholarship, and relevant secondary literature. Because direct access to unpublished archival repositories was limited, the study relies substantially on mediated rather than first-hand primary evidence. Findings suggest that colonial narratives functioned not only to discredit the sultan but also to legitimise Dutch intervention by contrasting colonial order with the alleged disorder of the sultanate. The study proposes a three-layer analytical model consisting of material-coercive, institutional-administrative, and discursive-epistemic dimensions. It also identifies possible traces of colonial narratives in later historiography and contemporary public discourse, while treating this continuity cautiously. The study contributes to Nusantara colonial studies by offering a critical framework for examining colonial propaganda in the Palembang case and for future comparative research on Sumatran coastal sultanates.

Keywords: Colonial Propaganda; Colonial Historiography; Colonial Discourse; Hegemony; Palembang Sultanate.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)

INTRODUCTION

The Palembang Darussalam Sultanate stood as one of the important political and economic powers on the east coast of Sumatra from the second half of the seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century. Its strategic position at the mouth of the Musi

River made it a trading hub for tin, pepper, and forest products connecting the interior of Sumatra with the Malacca Strait shipping routes (Andaya, 1993; Reid, 1993). The sultan's power rested not only on military strength, but also on Islamic religious legitimacy, kinship networks among the indigenous elite, and control over the distribution of natural resources that constituted the main source of revenue for the VOC and later the Dutch East Indies Government (Andaya & Andaya, 2015).

Tension between the Palembang Sultanate and European powers peaked in a series of armed conflicts from 1811 to 1821, often referred to by historians as the Palembang War or the Menteng War, culminating in military conquest by the second expedition led by Hendrik Merkus de Kock in 1821 (Wargadalem, 2017). Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II and part of his family were exiled to Ternate, while the sultanate was formally dissolved on 7 October 1823, although the full process of stripping the sultan of his power continued until 1825 (Britannica, n.d.; Wargadalem, 2017).

Most studies on this collapse foreground military chronology, treaties, and post-war socio-economic impact, treating the sultanate's defeat largely as an outcome of superior Dutch force (Kurniawan et al., 2023; Lindblad, 2002). This article instead argues that the erosion of the sultanate's legitimacy cannot be adequately understood without examining a quieter, equally decisive battlefield: the contest of discourse and political propaganda that unfolded before, during, and after the military confrontation. Colonial propaganda, in this context, is understood not merely as the dissemination of misleading information, but as a systematic discursive practice that produced categories of knowledge about the sultan as a despotic figure, a treaty-breaker, and a ruler who failed to maintain order in his territory (Foucault, 1980). Reports by residents such as J.L. van Sevenhoven and the political memoirs of H.M. de Kock did not merely record events; they also helped construct the moral framework that justified Dutch intervention and seizure of power as a necessary act of "restoring order" (van Sevenhoven, 1971 [1823]).

This inquiry also has present-day resonance. Public debate in Palembang over the status of the sultanate's "abolition" – whether it was formally abolished in law or merely stripped of authority – suggests that the colonial narrative framework still operates within contemporary collective memory, at least as reflected in popular commentary on the topic (Kompasiana, 2025). It should be stressed that such commentary is used here only as an illustration of ongoing public discourse, not as historical evidence in its own right; some widely circulated interpretations appear to reproduce assumptions originally constructed by the colonial apparatus, without apparent awareness of their genealogical origin.

A review of the literature reveals at least three research gaps. First, studies on the post-war Palembang Sultanate, including the important works of Wargadalem (2017) and Kurniawan et al. (2023), provide rich chronological and socio-economic reconstructions, but have not explicitly framed colonial reports as propagandistic texts requiring critical-discursive reading, rather than as transparent descriptive sources.

Second, Gramscian, Foucauldian, and Saidian studies of hegemony and colonial discourse have been widely applied to the Javanese context and to studies of orientalism in the Middle East and South Asia, but have rarely been applied systematically to Sumatra's coastal sultanates such as Palembang, Jambi, or Aceh, which had different colonial relational dynamics owing to their tin- and pepper-based economic positions (Andaya & Andaya, 2015).

Third, the relationship between nineteenth-century colonial propaganda and twenty-first-century local-popular historiography – including the ongoing debate over the sultanate's legal status in Palembang's public sphere – has rarely been the object of academic study linking historical discourse analysis with the analysis of contemporary collective memory.

Recent research on post-war Palembang shows a shift in focus from heroism-defeat narratives toward structural analysis of bureaucratic and socio-economic change. Kurniawan et al. (2023), for example, show how power divided between Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III and the colonial government in 1821 shifted entirely into Dutch hands by August 1823, except for the Islamic religious court, which was retained as a symbolic space of autonomy. Wargadalem (2017), through a dissertation later published as a book and reviewed positively in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, provides an in-depth reconstruction of the 1804–1825 period drawing on British, Dutch, and local Palembang manuscripts (Andaya, 2020).

Studies of Palembang's socio-economic transformation after 1900 (Jurnal El Tarikh, 2024) show how physical colonial development – including the transformation of the Kuto Besak Palace into a European entertainment venue – functioned as a form of symbolic erasure of the sultanate's sovereignty that continued long after military conquest had ended. This study implicitly points to a dimension of visual and spatial propaganda that has not yet been extensively explored within the framework of hegemony theory or the discourse of power.

The novelty of this article lies in three aspects. First, methodologically, this article applies critical discourse analysis to a corpus of Palembang colonial texts – residency reports, official memoirs, and administrative records accessed through published editions and verified scholarly citation – as propagandistic texts that actively produced colonial legitimacy, rather than merely neutral factual sources. Second, theoretically, this article integrates Gramscian hegemony, Foucauldian power-knowledge, and Saidian orientalism into a single layered analytical framework applied specifically to Sumatra's coastal sultanates, broadening the geographical scope of Indonesian postcolonial studies that has thus far been dominated by the Javanese case. Third, empirically, this article connects the analysis of nineteenth-century colonial propaganda with the contemporary phenomenon of public debate over the “abolition” status of the Palembang Sultanate, pointing to a line of continuity between colonial discourse and postcolonial collective memory that has not been extensively mapped academically.

Based on the discussion above, this study addresses four research questions: (1) how were Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II and the Palembang Sultanate represented in Dutch colonial narratives during the period of political conflict and transition; (2) what recurring discursive strategies were employed in colonial sources to delegitimise the Palembang Sultanate and legitimise Dutch intervention and rule; (3) how can these colonial representations be interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of hegemony, power-knowledge, and orientalism; and (4) to what extent can traces of these colonial narratives be identified in later historiography and contemporary public discourse on the Palembang Sultanate?

This study aims to critically examine how Dutch colonial narratives represented Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II and the Palembang Sultanate, particularly in relation to the construction of political legitimacy during the period of conflict and colonial

transition. It seeks to identify recurring discursive strategies through which colonial sources portrayed the sultanate, to interpret these representations through the frameworks of hegemony, power-knowledge, and orientalism, and to explore their possible traces in later historiography and contemporary public discourse. Academically, the study contributes to the expansion of postcolonial and colonial discourse studies in the Nusantara context by focusing on southern Sumatra, a region that has received less scholarly attention than Java. Practically, the study encourages a more critical and reflective reading of colonial sources in the writing, teaching, and interpretation of Palembang local history, while acknowledging that claims concerning contemporary collective memory remain interpretive rather than directly demonstrable from the available evidence.

METHOD

This study employs a critical historical research approach combined with critical discursive analysis within the framework of colonial and postcolonial studies. The historical approach is used to reconstruct the chronology and context of events, while critical discursive analysis is used to examine narrative structures, diction choices, and rhetorical strategies within colonial sources to identify the workings of propaganda. This is a descriptive-interpretive qualitative study employing a single historical case-study design – the case of the Palembang Sultanate between 1811 and 1825 – with an extended analysis of historiographical traces into the contemporary period. Because direct access to unpublished archival holdings in the Netherlands and Indonesia was not available for this study, the analysis relies on a combination of (a) primary texts that exist in published or translated form and were read directly by the author, and (b) primary material that is analysed only indirectly, through excerpts, transcriptions, or summaries documented and verified in prior philological and historical scholarship. This distinction is maintained explicitly throughout the analysis below, and it qualifies the strength of the claims that can be made from the findings.

Data Sources

Primary sources analysed directly by the author consist of the published Indonesian translation of J.L. van Sevenhoven's residency account of Palembang (van Sevenhoven, 1971 [1823]). Primary material analysed indirectly – accessed through quotations, paraphrase, or tabulation already published and philologically verified in prior scholarship – consists of: (1) the political memoirs and correspondence of H.M. de Kock concerning the 1821 military expedition, as cited in Wargadalem (2017); (2) colonial administrative documents, in particular the *Algemeen Jaarlijksch Verslag van den Resident van Palembang*, as reproduced and discussed in Kurniawan et al. (2023); and (3) local Palembang manuscripts, including the *Syair Perang Menteng* and the text of the 1821–1823 political contracts, as documented in the same philological studies.

Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed works by historians, including Wargadalem (2017), Andaya and Andaya (2015), Reid (1993), Ricklefs (2008), and Kartodirdjo (1993), as well as accredited journal articles discussing post-colonial Palembang (Kurniawan et al., 2023; Jurnal El Tarikh, 2024). Theoretical literature includes original and translated works by Gramsci, Foucault, Said, Anderson, Scott, Guha, and Althusser as the analytical foundation.

Corpus Composition and Document Selection

The analytical corpus comprises one primary text read in full by the author (van Sevenhoven, 1971 [1823]) and a bounded set of secondary-mediated primary material drawn from three philologically verified sources: de Kock's memoir excerpts, the annual resident reports summarised in Kurniawan et al. (2023), and the political-contract texts of 1821 and 1823. Documents were selected using three inclusion criteria: (i) direct thematic relevance to the depiction of the sultan, the sultanate, or the legitimacy of Dutch intervention; (ii) prior philological verification of authorship and provenance by an independent scholarly source, so that the study does not rely on unverified transcriptions; and (iii) public availability through a published edition, translation, or peer-reviewed citation. Materials that could not satisfy criterion (ii) – including undated genealogical family records and unmoderated online sources – were excluded from the analytical corpus and are, at most, mentioned as illustrations of contemporary popular memory rather than treated as evidence.

Unit of Analysis and Coding Procedure

The unit of analysis is the narrative segment: a sentence, clause, or short passage within a source that makes an evaluative claim about the character or conduct of the sultan, the internal condition of the sultanate, or the legitimacy of Dutch presence. Segments were identified through a close reading of the directly analysed primary text and through the excerpts and summaries reported in the secondary-mediated sources described above.

Coding proceeded in two stages. In the deductive stage, four narrative categories were derived from the theoretical framework **prior to systematic coding**: (1) despotism, (2) betrayal or breach of agreement, (3) internal disorder or misgovernment, and (4) legitimization of colonial order. In the inductive stage, segments were re-examined to assess whether the four categories adequately captured the patterns in the material or whether additional sub-categories were needed; this second pass produced the refinement of category (1) into an explicit sub-theme concerning the selective framing of slavery, discussed in the Results section below. **Two separate rounds of reading and coding**, conducted approximately one month apart by the author, were compared to assess the consistency of category assignment; discrepancies were resolved by returning to the source passage and its immediate context.

Data Collection

Data-collection techniques were carried out through library and document studies, searching national and international journal databases (SINTA, DOAJ, Taylor & Francis, Brill) as well as library and archival catalogues (ANRI, KITLV/Leiden University, Nationaal Archief) insofar as accessible through published bibliographic descriptions and scholarly reviews.

Source Criticism and Interpretation

Source criticism was carried out at two levels. External criticism assessed the authenticity and provenance of documents, relying on the philological verification already performed by prior researchers for material not directly consulted by the author. Internal criticism assessed the credibility of content by questioning the subjective position of each document's author – given that the authors of colonial reports were

actors directly interested in the conflicts they described – so that such documents were treated as discursive artefacts rather than objective reflections of events.

Data interpretation was carried out through layered reading: a literal reading to capture factual events, a structural reading to identify recurring narrative patterns (corresponding to the coding categories above), and a critical reading to link these patterns to colonial political-economic interests and the theoretical frameworks of Gramsci, Foucault, and Said. Historiography, as the final stage of the historical method, was conducted by constructing an analytical narrative integrating chronological findings with discursive interpretation, accompanied by explicit reflection on the author's position as a researcher writing from a present-day postcolonial perspective.

Data Validity

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation (comparing directly consulted colonial sources with local manuscripts and historical evidence documented in prior verified scholarship), theoretical triangulation (using more than one theoretical framework to avoid interpretive reductionism), and epistemic honesty by not claiming direct access to archival documents that were not consulted first-hand but instead basing interpretation on published and traceable sources. Because a substantial share of the primary evidence is accessed only through prior scholarly mediation rather than first-hand archival consultation, the findings below are presented as an interpretive synthesis rather than an independent archival discovery and are framed accordingly.

RESULT

Chronological Data and Propaganda Actors

Table 1 presents the chronology of key events shaping the political and discursive battlefield between the Palembang Sultanate and colonial power, compiled from a synthesis of the sources cited in this article.

Table 1. Chronology of Key Political Events and Their Discursive-Political Dimensions in the Palembang Sultanate

Year	Event	Political/Propaganda Dimension
1804	Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II ascends the throne	Growing tension with European trade interests
1811	Sultan expels the Dutch with British support (Raffles)	Shift in geopolitical alliances involving British and Dutch interests
1814	Treaty of London returns Palembang to Dutch influence	Inter-European agreement affecting Palembang without direct local representation
1819	First Palembang War; Sultan's forces victorious	Victory receives limited emphasis in the colonial narratives examined in this study
1821 (Apr)	Contract with Pangeran Prabu Anom (future Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III)	Colonial intervention in the succession structure

1821 (Jun-Jul)	Second Palembang War; defeat of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II	De Kock expedition; sultan exiled to Ternate
1823 (Aug)	Substantive power fully transferred to the Dutch	Except for authority over the Islamic religious court
1823 (Oct)	Demolition of Kuto Tengkuruk fortress; formal dissolution of the sultanate	Physical replacement of the former political centre by colonial authority
1825	Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III exiled to Manado	Final dissolution of the sultanate as a political institution
1919-1931	Construction of colonial infrastructure (water tower, roads)	Material development associated with narratives of colonial progress
2003 & 2006	Symbolic revitalisation of the Palembang sultan's title	Symbolic revival of sultanate memory in the postcolonial period

Systematic Textual Evidence of Propaganda Motifs

To move beyond a purely narrative summary, Table 2 presents the four coding categories described in the Method section, together with the colonial discursive mechanisms associated with each motif and the source basis on which the category rests. Direct quotation of primary-language material is avoided where the underlying document was not consulted first-hand by the author; instead, each row indicates the mechanism identified and the scholarly source through which the underlying passage is traceable, allowing the classification to be assessed against the cited literature.

Table 2. Coding Categories, Colonial Discursive Mechanisms, and Source Basis

Coding Category	Colonial Mechanism Identified	Source Basis	Approx. Period
Despotism	Framing of the sultan's exercise of authority – including the existence of slavery – as inherent tyranny, without comparison to contemporaneous European colonial practice	van Sevenhoven (1971 [1823]); Wargadalem (2017)	1819-1823
Betrayal / breach of agreement	Repeated characterisation of the sultan as a treaty-breaker in residency correspondence surrounding the 1811-1821 conflicts	De Kock memoir excerpts, as cited in Wargadalem (2017)	1811-1821
Internal disorder / misgovernment	Administrative labelling of interior areas as “not-yet-orderly” in annual resident reports	Algemeen Jaarlijksch Verslag van den Resident van Palembang, as reproduced in	1821-1825

Coding Category	Colonial Mechanism Identified	Source Basis	Approx. Period
		Kurniawan et al. (2023)	
Legitimation of colonial order	Retention of the sultan's ceremonial honours and stipend within the 1821 political contract, presented as continuity of legal order rather than seizure of power	1821 political contract text, as documented in Kurniawan et al. (2023)	1821-1823

Read together, Table 1 and Table 2 suggest that the despotism and betrayal motifs are particularly evident in materials relating to the years immediately preceding and following the 1821 defeat (1819-1823), a period in which the political contract and the formal dissolution of the sultanate required substantial political justification. This pattern is discussed further below as indicating that such narratives were especially relevant during moments when Dutch military and administrative authority required discursive legitimization.

DISCUSSION

Dutch Colonial Politics in Palembang: From Trade Partnership to Political Domination

Dutch relations with the Palembang Sultanate initially unfolded within a relatively equal trading framework, particularly concerning tin from Bangka and pepper from the interior of South Sumatra (Reid, 1993). However, throughout the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, this relationship shifted from trade partnership toward increasingly explicit political domination, especially following the period of disruption caused by the British occupation of Java (1811-1816) and Thomas Stamford Raffles's involvement in encouraging the Palembang sultan to expel the Dutch in September 1811 (EFEO, 2017).

This momentum was alternately exploited by both the British and the Dutch to influence leadership succession within the Palembang Sultanate, creating a fourteen-year period that historians have described as "chaotic" (EFEO, 2017). It is important to note that the characterisation of this period as "chaos" may itself reflect, at least in part, colonial framing. The instability that occurred did not stem solely from internal sultanate conflict but was also shaped by the alternating interventions of foreign powers competing for influence over the Palembang throne.

After the 1814 Treaty of London returned Palembang to Dutch influence, tensions rose, culminating in two rounds of the Palembang War: the 1819 confrontation, won by Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II, and the second expedition of 1821, which ended in the sultanate's decisive defeat (Wargadalem, 2017). As Table 1 shows, Palembang's 1819 victory receives limited emphasis in the colonial narratives examined in this study. This suggests that the final defeat of 1821 should not be understood solely as the outcome of linear military superiority, but within a broader context of military and political strategies accompanied by discursive efforts that sought to undermine the sultan's legitimacy.

After the 1821 defeat, power was divided between Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III and the colonial government under the April 1821 contract, before finally shifting entirely to the Dutch in August 1823, except for authority over the Islamic religious court (Kurniawan et al., 2023). The formal dissolution of the sultanate on 7 October 1823, marked by the demolition of the Kuto Tengkuruk fortress on the orders of van Sevenhoven, who subsequently built the resident's residence atop its ruins, can be interpreted as both a symbolic and political act. The former centre of political authority was physically replaced by a new colonial power structure on the same site (Djohan Hanafiah, 1995).

This pattern suggests that colonial domination in Palembang was established through a combination of military force, intervention in succession, unequal political arrangements, and, as elaborated in the following subsections, the production of colonial discourse that represented the sultanate as politically problematic while legitimising the Dutch presence as a source of order.

Propaganda Narratives against the Sultan: Constructing Images of Despotism and Betrayal

Analysis of narrative patterns in colonial reports reveals a recurring tendency in the depiction of Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II, corresponding to the despotism and betrayal categories in Table 2. At least three dominant narrative motifs can be identified: first, the image of the sultan as a despotic ruler oppressing his own people; second, the image of the sultan as a cunning figure who repeatedly broke agreements with European parties; and third, the image of the sultanate as a political entity inherently prone to internal conflict and therefore in need of external "restoration of order."

Within a Foucauldian framework, such narratives do not merely describe reality but produce a "regime of truth" about who has the right to rule and on what basis (Foucault, 1980). When residency reports consistently associated the sultan with despotism and betrayal, while associating the Dutch presence with order and legal certainty, the result was the formation of an epistemic binary: the chaotic native versus the orderly European. This binary then became the basis for the moral justification of political and military intervention, and it is precisely this binary that Table 2's despotism and legitimization categories are designed to make traceable rather than merely asserted.

It should be critically noted that the practice of slavery, which did exist in the Palembang Sultanate in the early nineteenth century (Wargadalem, 2017), was often used as singular proof of the sultan's despotism in colonial narratives, without being juxtaposed with the fact that slavery practices during the same period were also common within the European colonial economic system in the East Indies and other colonial territories. Such selectivity is a hallmark of propaganda: not total fabrication of facts, but the asymmetric selection and highlighting of particular facts to construct a lopsided moral impression.

Conversely, Palembang's victory in the 1819 confrontation receives comparatively limited narrative emphasis in the colonial materials examined in this study when compared with the 1821 defeat. This asymmetry can be interpreted, through Said's lens (1978), as consistent with orientalist logic, in which representations of indigenous strength are often framed within narratives that ultimately reaffirm European civilisational superiority.

Propaganda through Colonial Administration

The colonial administrative apparatus served as one of the most effective channels of propaganda precisely because it appeared in a seemingly neutral bureaucratic guise. Annual resident reports, as reflected in references to the *Algemeen Jaarlijksch Verslag van den Resident van Palembang* in recent philological studies (Kurniawan et al., 2023), were compiled as routine administrative documents, yet the categories employed within them, for instance, the distinction between “orderly” areas under direct Dutch control and “not-yet-orderly” areas in the interior, implicitly asserted the superiority of colonial governance over the former sultanate administrative structure.

Within an Althusserian framework, such administrative apparatus can be understood as part of the Ideological State Apparatus, which functions not through open repression but through the reproduction of categories of thought that gradually come to be accepted as natural (Althusser, 1971). The incorporation of indigenous officials, including priyayi circles and local Palembang elites, into the colonial bureaucratic structure may have facilitated the circulation and institutionalisation of Dutch administrative categories. From an Althusserian perspective, this process can be interpreted as extending colonial discourse beyond explicit political representation into the routine practices and conceptual categories of administration.

The political contract governing the post-1821 power transition, which granted the sultan military honours, insignia, and an annual stipend while stripping him of effective authority (Kurniawan et al., 2023), is a concrete example of how colonial administration preserved the symbols of the sultanate in hollow form while seizing the substance of its power, the legitimisation motif in Table 2. This strategy effectively suppressed potential resistance, since the sultan was not formally “abolished” altogether, allowing the argument for colonial legitimacy to be framed as a continuation of legal order rather than a seizure of power.

Propaganda through Education and the Formation of a Collaborative Elite

Colonial education in the former territory of the Palembang Sultanate, though relatively limited in the early nineteenth century and only expanding significantly after 1919 (Jurnal El Tarikh, 2024), can be understood as contributing to the reproduction of colonial knowledge hierarchies over the long term. The education system introduced by the Dutch functioned more to supply low-level administrative staff for the colonial structure than to revive the scholarly tradition of the Palembang court, which had previously possessed a strong Malay-Islamic religious and literary tradition.

Within a Gramscian framework, this process can be interpreted as an important mechanism in the formation of hegemony: colonial power was maintained not solely through military coercion, but also through institutional arrangements that offered material and social-status benefits to local elites cooperating with the colonial structure (Gramsci, 1971). Palembang's priyayi and aristocratic elites, absorbed into the colonial bureaucracy, were positioned within an institutional structure in which colonial notions of progress and order could acquire greater legitimacy, while the restoration of sultanate authority became increasingly marginalised.

The construction of colonial infrastructure in Palembang from 1919 onward, including a water tower and road network, can also be read as contributing to a material narrative of colonial progress, in which improvements in urban infrastructure were

associated with colonial rule, while simultaneously transforming the spatial traces of the sultanate's power, including the transformation of the Kuto Besak Palace into a European entertainment space that enclosed the palace complex with surrounding colonial buildings (Jurnal El Tarikh, 2024). This spatial transformation can be interpreted as a form of material propaganda, in which the impression of physical urban progress could be juxtaposed with the impression of the old sultanate order's backwardness.

Propaganda through Historical Writing and the Colonial Archive

Colonial historical writing on Palembang, as seen in the work of officials such as van Sevenhoven, can be read as serving a dual function: as administrative documentation and as an instrument of retrospective legitimation. When officials directly involved in the conquest also became important authors of historical narratives about the events in which they had participated, their position as both narrator and political actor raised an epistemic conflict of interest that requires critical attention when reading colonial historiography.

Read through Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, the Palembang colonial archive is not merely a collection of facts awaiting discovery, but a field of knowledge production shaped by the power relations that generated it (Foucault, 1980). The categories used within the archive, including distinctions such as "rebellion" and "legitimate resistance," or "binding agreement" and "unilateral breach," are not neutral, but can be understood as reflecting the position of the party in power that defines those categories.

Contemporary philological research on local Palembang manuscripts such as the *Syair Perang Menteng* presents perspectives that differ from colonial narratives, including a different emphasis on the chronology and the actors responsible for the outbreak of conflict (Kurniawan et al., 2023). This comparison between local manuscripts and colonial archives suggests that Palembang historiography is multivocal, while the prominence of colonial archival sources in historical writing can also be understood in relation to differences in archival preservation, accessibility, and epistemic authority, rather than necessarily indicating the objective superiority of those sources.

Contemporary popular debate over whether the Palembang Sultanate was "truly abolished" under law, noted here only as an illustration of ongoing public discourse rather than as historical evidence (Kompasiana, 2025), is consistent with Wargadalem's (2017) observation that no single archival document explicitly titled an "abolition" order has been identified in the sources she examined. This is consistent with the argument that the term "abolition" itself may represent a retrospective construction within collective memory, formed from the accumulation of colonial discourse about the end of Palembang's sovereignty, rather than a reference to a single explicit legal document. This interpretation, however, rests on Wargadalem's secondary characterisation of the archival record rather than on independent verification by the present author and should therefore be treated cautiously.

Divide et Impera Strategy and the Shaping of Public Opinion

The political strategy of divide et impera is evident in the pattern of Dutch and earlier British intervention in the succession of leadership within the Palembang Sultanate. Manipulation of the relationship between Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II and his brother Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II, as reconstructed in Wargadalem's (2012)

dissertation on the struggle for power within the Palembang Sultanate, suggests that foreign powers exploited internal rivalry within the royal family in ways that weakened the sultanate's political front as a whole.

The appointment of Pangeran Prabu Anom as Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III through the April 1821 contract, while his father, Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin II, was positioned as Susuhunan with more symbolic authority, reveals the colonial tactic of creating a dual power structure that mutually monitored and potentially weakened each other (Wargadalem, 2012). Such a dual power structure may have limited the consolidation of a unified resistance front among the post-war Palembang elite.

Colonial representations circulated within the European community in Batavia and, to a more limited extent, among the indigenous elite of Palembang through official reports, inter-official correspondence, and later the publication of memoirs and history books written by former colonial officials. Scott (1985) reminds us that such domination is never total; there is always room for what he calls "weapons of the weak," including forms of resistance such as the preservation of local manuscripts, alternative oral transmission, and religious practices that continued to sustain the memory of the sultanate beyond the reach of direct colonial oversight. Within this interpretive framework, the survival of the Sammaniyah Sufi order in Palembang into the twentieth century may be understood as reflecting the persistence of a relatively independent sphere of religious and cultural continuity outside direct colonial control.

Impact on the Local Elite and Palembang's Social Structure

The collapse of the Palembang Sultanate's effective sovereignty was accompanied by a substantial restructuring of the local elite's social hierarchy. Some nobles who had previously held high positions within the court structure became mid-level colonial administrative officials, while others, according to genealogical reconstructions in Wargadalem (2012), withdrew to interior regions such as the Marga Sembilan area (now Ogan Komering Ilir Regency) to avoid arrest and forced assimilation into the colonial structure.

This internal elite migration appears to have contributed to a dispersal of court descendants across various parts of South Sumatra, while simultaneously reducing the concentration of political-symbolic authority previously centred at the palace. In Anderson's (1983) terms, this process can be read as a fragmentation of the sultanate's "imagined community": whereas Palembang's collective identity had previously been closely associated with the figure of the sultan and the palace centre, the post-sultanate spatial dispersal of the elite may also have affected the spatial basis of that collective imagination, though without fully erasing it, as suggested by the later symbolic revitalisation of sultanate identity in 2003 and 2006.

At the same time, elites who collaborated with the colonial structure gained new social mobility through administrative positions, limited education, and economic access to the rapidly developing rubber, coffee, and palm-oil plantation sectors in the early twentieth century (Jurnal El Tarikh, 2024). This differentiation in elite responses, ranging from collaboration to withdrawal, can be interpreted as reflecting a broader spectrum of adaptive strategies under colonial rule rather than a simple binary of collaborator versus rebel.

Impact on the Sultanate as a Political Institution

As a formal political institution, the Palembang Sultanate underwent a process of gradual hollowing rather than a single, sudden abolition. This pattern is consistent with the finding that substantive power shifted entirely into Dutch hands by August 1823, while the sultan's symbols of honour, including insignia, military honours, an annual stipend, and the right to participate in certain civil and criminal courts, were retained (Kurniawan et al., 2023).

Such a hollowing strategy may have been politically more effective than outright abolition by reducing the potential for open resistance. By retaining the figure of the sultan as a symbol, the Dutch could claim continuity of the traditional order while substantively replacing it with a colonial structure. Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III's attempt to resist this domination ultimately failed, resulting in his exile to Manado and the complete dissolution of the sultanate as an institution in 1825 (Wargadalem, 2012, 2017).

This event can be interpreted as reinforcing the Gramscian argument that stable hegemony requires a combination of coercion and consensus. When the element of consensus, represented in this case by the retained symbols of the sultan's honour, appeared insufficient to contain aspirations for substantive political autonomy, coercive force was reactivated to definitively complete the process of institutional dissolution.

Critical Analysis through Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony

Gramsci's concept of hegemony (1971) offers an important framework for understanding why Dutch domination over Palembang did not rest solely on military force, but also on a systematic effort to win consensus among key groups within colonial society, consistent with the legitimization-motif cluster identified in Table 2. For Gramsci, hegemony is not pure domination through coercion (*dominazione*), but a combination of intellectual-moral leadership (*direzione*) that produces voluntary consent, with coercion remaining available as a reserve when consensus fails to be achieved.

In the Palembang context, the element of consensus was built through: preserving the sultan's symbols of honour, creating an illusion of continuity; recruiting local elites into the colonial bureaucracy, creating shared material interests; and narratives of progress and order associated with colonial rule, as evidenced in the administrative and educational channels discussed above. The element of coercion remained available and was reactivated when Sultan Ahmad Najamuddin III attempted substantive resistance in the mid-1820s.

What must be critically added to the standard Gramscian framework is that the process of hegemony in Palembang unfolded within a colonial context structurally different from the European context that originally informed Gramsci's ideas: colonial hegemony operated along firm racial and civil lines, and therefore never achieved full hegemony in the ideal Gramscian sense, more accurately described, borrowing from postcolonial critiques of Gramsci, as "dominance without hegemony" (Guha, 1997), in which coercion remained a permanent structural element never fully replaced by consensus, as evidenced by the Dutch need to maintain a military presence and strict administrative oversight over Palembang throughout the nineteenth century.

Critical Analysis through Michel Foucault's Power-Knowledge

The Foucauldian framework positions the Palembang colonial archive not as a transparent window onto the past, but as the product of a particular regime of power-knowledge that determined what could be said, by whom, and with what authority (Foucault, 1980). Administrative categories such as "orderly territory" versus "not-yet-orderly territory," or the legal distinction between "rebellion" and "legitimate resistance," are not neutral categories but technologies of power that determined which subjects could be considered legitimately entitled to claim political authority.

Foucault's concept of discipline (1995) is also relevant for understanding how the colonial bureaucracy in Palembang, through annual reports, censuses, and territorial administrative systems, created new forms of surveillance and normalisation that replaced the more personal and ceremonial forms of court power. The shift from power resting on the sultan's body and presence toward power resting on documents, administrative categories, and bureaucratic procedures reflects what Foucault termed the shift from sovereign power toward disciplinary-governmental power, which is more diffuse and difficult to localise in a single figure.

The methodological implication of this framework, already applied in the coding procedure described above, is the necessity for historians to read colonial archives "against the grain," that is, against the intent of their authors, to expose the hidden assumptions of power behind seemingly neutral administrative categories.

Critical Analysis through Edward Said's Orientalism

Said's concept of orientalism (1978) helps explain the pattern of representation of the Palembang Sultanate in colonial discourse as a political entity inherently despotic, corrupt, and prone to anarchy without European intervention. Such a pattern of representation is not an objective reflection of conditions in Palembang, but a projection of the West-East binary that positions Europe as the standard of rationality, law, and progress, while the East, including the Palembang Sultanate, is positioned as its mirror opposite.

The selective emphasis on the practice of slavery and internal succession conflicts within the sultanate, without an equivalent juxtaposition with similar complexities in European political systems or colonial practice itself, reflects the orientalist logic that Said described as a systematic process of "othering": the East is defined by what it is perceived to lack relative to the West, rather than through its own internal logic.

What is notable as this article's critical contribution to Said's framework is that orientalism toward Palembang operated on a more local and "domestic" scale than the classical orientalism Said examined regarding the Middle East within large-scale European academic and literary discourse. In Palembang, orientalism worked through genres that appear smaller and more technocratic, including residency reports and administrative memoirs. Yet precisely because of their seemingly ordinary and bureaucratic nature, their influence on policy formation and the legitimation of power became more direct and harder to question than the literary and academic discourses more easily identified as biased representation.

Author's Synthesis: Toward a Model for Analysing Colonial Propaganda in Coastal Sultanates

Synthesising the three theoretical frameworks above, and drawing directly on the chronological and coding evidence in Tables 1 and 2, this article proposes a three-layer model for understanding colonial propaganda in coastal sultanates such as Palembang. The first layer is the material-coercive layer, encompassing military force and manipulation of the succession structure (the divide et impera strategy). The second layer is the institutional-administrative layer, encompassing bureaucracy, reporting systems, and colonial education that can be interpreted as forming part of an ideological apparatus in the Althusserian sense. The third layer is the discursive-epistemic layer, encompassing the production of historical narratives and categories of knowledge that shaped understandings of who was considered entitled to rule, in the Foucauldian and Saidian sense.

These three layers can be understood as operating not sequentially, but simultaneously and in mutually reinforcing ways: the 1821 military victory gave the Dutch greater capacity to shape the production of archives and official narratives; these narratives, in turn, could contribute to the legitimization of administrative policies that gradually hollowed out the substance of the sultan's power; while the hollowing out of that substantive power could further reinforce the narrative that the sultanate was inherently incapable of governing independently. Taken together, these relationships suggest a self-reinforcing interaction among coercive, administrative, and discursive forms of colonial power.

The novelty of this synthesis, in relation to hegemony-discourse approaches more commonly applied to Java, lies in its emphasis on the role of primary export economic structures, particularly tin and pepper, in shaping colonial interests specific to Palembang. Unlike Java, which became the base for large-scale export-crop production through the forced cultivation system, Dutch interests in Palembang were more focused on controlling trade routes and strategic natural resources. The Palembang case therefore suggests that colonial discourse may have been shaped by regionally specific economic and political interests rather than following a single formula across the Dutch East Indies. The proposition that such discourse differed systematically from that found in Java, however, requires direct comparative analysis and should be tested in future research.

Possible traces of this pattern can also be identified in contemporary popular debate over the status of the Palembang Sultanate's "abolition," which, on the interpretation offered here, may illustrate how elements of a nineteenth-century epistemic framework continue to inform some contemporary understandings of this history. This connection is presented as a plausible line of continuity rather than as a demonstrated causal relationship, given the limits of the source base discussed in the Method section.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes with four main findings that respond to the research questions posed, with the qualification that a substantial portion of the underlying primary evidence was accessed through prior scholarly mediation rather than first-hand archival consultation. First, Dutch colonial narratives represented Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin

II and the Palembang Sultanate through recurring themes of despotism, treaty betrayal, internal disorder, and inability to govern, while colonial intervention was increasingly associated with order and political stability. Second, these representations operated through recurring discursive strategies embedded in administrative reports, political agreements, official historical writing, and other institutional channels. These strategies can be interpreted in relation to broader political and economic interests surrounding Dutch control over Palembang, particularly its strategic trade routes and resources. Third, viewed through the frameworks of hegemony, power-knowledge, and orientalism, these narratives suggest an interaction between material coercion, institutional-administrative restructuring, and discursive-epistemic legitimation. The gradual hollowing out of the sultanate's substantive authority while retaining elements of its symbolic status illustrates how political domination and discursive legitimation could operate in mutually reinforcing ways. Fourth, possible traces of these colonial narratives can be identified in later historiography and contemporary public discourse concerning the status and historical memory of the Palembang Sultanate. However, the contemporary dimension remains interpretive, particularly because the available evidence does not establish a direct causal relationship between nineteenth-century colonial discourse and present-day collective memory.

The theoretical implication of this study is that the Gramscian framework of hegemony may require contextual qualification when applied to colonial settings. In the Palembang case, colonial domination does not appear to have rested on consensus alone, but continued to depend on coercive, administrative, and racial-structural forms of power alongside processes of legitimation. The findings also reinforce the relevance of reading colonial archives "against the grain" as an important methodological approach in postcolonial historiography, particularly when administrative and historical documents were produced by actors directly involved in the exercise of colonial power.

The findings may also have practical relevance for local history education in South Sumatra by encouraging more critical engagement with colonial sources and greater attention to the perspectives from which historical narratives were produced. They may likewise inform the interpretation of cultural heritage sites such as the Kuto Besak complex and the Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin II Museum by encouraging narratives that recognise the contested character of colonial representations rather than reproducing simplified oppositions between colonial "progress" and indigenous "backwardness."

Further research is recommended to expand comparative studies of colonial propaganda in other coastal Sumatran sultanates such as Jambi, Siak, and Aceh in order to test the extent to which the three-layer model proposed in this article, consisting of material-coercive, institutional-administrative, and discursive-epistemic layers, is generalisable or specific to the Palembang context. Given the source limitations acknowledged above, future research should also undertake direct primary archival investigation at KITLV Leiden and the Nationaal Archief to independently verify and enrich the findings of this study, which still rely substantially on mediated primary materials, published secondary literature, and existing philological studies.

REFERENCES

- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Trans.). Monthly Review Press.
- Amran, F. (2020). [Review of the book *Kesultanan Palembang dalam pusaran konflik (1804–1825)*, by F. R. Wargadalem]. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 176(2–3), 442–444. DOI: 10.1163/22134379-17602014
- Andaya, B. W. (1993). *To live as brothers: Southeast Sumatra in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*. University of Hawaii Press.
- Andaya, B. W., & Andaya, L. Y. (2015). *A history of early modern Southeast Asia, 1400–1830*. Cambridge University Press.
- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia. (n.d.). *Kesultanan Palembang dalam pusaran konflik (1804–1825)* [Library catalogue]. <https://perpustakaan.anri.go.id>
- Azizah, F. P., Sudarman, Hakim, L., Syabilah, N. 'A., & Fariza, N. A. (2024). Palembang city in time: A history of social and cultural change. *El Tarikh: Journal of History, Culture and Islamic Civilization*, 5(2), 94–103. DOI: 10.24042/jhcc.v5i2.17560
- The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Palembang. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved September 14, 2026, from <https://www.britannica.com/place/Palembang>
- École française d'Extrême-Orient. (2017). *Kesultanan Palembang dalam pusaran konflik (1804–1825)* [Book description]. <https://publications.efeo.fr>
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Eds. & Trans.). International Publishers.
- Guha, R. (1997). *Dominance without hegemony: History and power in colonial India*. Harvard University Press.
- Hanafiah, D. (1995). *Kuto Besak: Upaya Kesultanan Palembang menegakkan kemerdekaan*. Sriwijaya Post/Pemda Tk. I Sumatera Selatan.
- Kartodirdjo, S. (1993). *Pendekatan ilmu sosial dalam metodologi sejarah*. Gramedia Pustaka Utama.
- Kompasiana. (2025, January 13). *Benarkah Kesultanan Palembang Darussalam sudah dihapus...?* <https://www.kompasiana.com>
- Lindblad, J. T. (2002). The outer islands in the 19th century: Contest for the periphery. In H. Dick, V. J. H. Houben, J. T. Lindblad, & T. K. Wie, *The emergence of a national economy: An economic history of Indonesia, 1800–2000* (pp. 82–110). Allen & Unwin.
- Reid, A. (1993). *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce, 1450–1680: Vol. 2. Expansion and crisis*. Yale University Press.

- Ricklefs, M. C. (2008). *A history of modern Indonesia since c. 1200* (4th ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rochmiatun, E., Maryam, M., & Gusela, N. (2023). The impact of the Palembang war and Dutch colonial domination on socio-economic changes in Palembang in the XIX-XX century. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 10(1), Article 2188775. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2188775>
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Scott, J. C. (1985). *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. Yale University Press.
- van Sevenhoven, J. I. (1971). *Lukisan tentang ibukota Palembang*. Bhratara. (Original work published 1823)
- Wargadalem, F. R. (2012). *Perebutan kekuasaan di Kesultanan Palembang (1804–1825)* [Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Indonesia]. Universitas Indonesia Library.
- Wargadalem, F. R. (2017). *Kesultanan Palembang dalam pusaran konflik (1804–1825)*. Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia.