

# Heroism in Malaysia's History: An Analysis of the Curriculum Standard Textbook for Form Three Secondary School (Kssm)

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## Abstract

The importance of the subject of History can be seen through the efforts of the government via the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM) which made it a requirement to pass History to qualify students for obtaining the SPM certificate starting in 2013. Then, in 2014, the subject of History was introduced into the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) for Year 4 students. Because History is chronological and narrative in nature, the content of the syllabus is often seen as repetitive and overlapping with events and figures, causing students to fail and become confused in terms of mastery of learning. In line with technological advancements and mainstream currents, the names of figures studied in school such as Tok Janggut, Rentap, and others have 'faded' away. Conversely, today's youth increasingly idolize Western superheroes such as Superman, Marvel, and Spiderman from imaginative film adaptations. Therefore, in the context of nation and state-building, local heroic figures (Malaysian heroes) are essential actors in strengthening national sovereignty, defending the homeland, resisting colonizers, and instilling the spirit of nationalism. Local heroic figures can be identified in two categories: the royal group and the local community. This study aims to analyse the content of KSSM History textbooks and the extent to which these figures are used as drivers of nationalism through the appreciation of local heroes in KSSM History textbooks. This study uses a fully qualitative method with content analysis of textbooks related to aspects of heroism in local history. The findings of the study show that the heroic elements applied can produce Higher Order Thinking Skills (KBAT) in students and are important as preparation for students to master more challenging learning at the upper secondary level.

**Keywords:** Heroes, History Texts Book, Form 3, Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), Nationalism

## Introduction

In rapidly developing countries, the values and understanding of nationalism and national spirit should not be overlooked. Based on the National Education Philosophy, several key elements are outlined to produce holistic students encompassing balanced and harmonious characteristics in terms of intellect, spirituality, emotion, and physical well-being, based on belief and obedience to God. This approach aims to create Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable, skilled, virtuous, responsible, and capable of achieving personal well-being, while contributing to the harmony and prosperity of family, society, and the nation ([moe.gov.my](http://moe.gov.my)). This includes the aspect of historical education through the appreciation of local figures' contributions through the role of teachers, who are agents that contribute to students' abilities and

weaknesses in mastering skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving (Carlgren, 2013).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term heroic refers to "very brave" or "very great" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>), known for courage, noble character, and being the main character in films, flags, and more (<https://dbp.gov.my>). In the context of this paper, the term "heroic" refers to the qualities of heroism or bravery exhibited by historical figures in their struggle for independence and defense of the country.

Through textbooks provided by KPM, the principles of the curriculum and syllabus are translated, serving as the main reference in the teaching and learning process in the classroom (Mohd Nazri et al, 2014). After the abolition of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) in 2017, the implementation of KSSM began to be carried out in stages, starting at the Form One level. KSSM can be considered an upgraded system from KBSM, considering the goals of the Malaysian Education Development Plan (PPPM) for 2013-2025. KSSM is built on six main pillars: (i) communication, (ii) spirituality, attitudes, and values, (iii) humanity, (iv) self-skills, (v) physical and aesthetic development, and (vi) science and technology. These six pillars integrate critical, creative, and innovative thinking to develop human capital that adheres to noble values, is knowledgeable, skilled, and possesses critical and creative thinking (Azhar, 2022). It also explicitly includes elements of 21st Century Skills and Higher Order Thinking Skills (KBAT) (KPM, 2016).

The KSSM, resulting from a review of KBSM, ensures that all textbook content is revised and aligned with the changing times and the needs of society and the nation. Through delivery based on the 21st Century Thinking Practices (PAK21), it aims to develop knowledgeable human capital, particularly through mastering the subject of History concerning the heroic elements found in the KSSM Form 3 History Textbook. 21st Century Skills are said to be a set of skills and learning approaches required for students to compete in a student-centred digital era.

## Objectives

To examine the content of the KSSM Form 3 History textbook discussing the role of local heroic figures and their characteristics as tools for fostering nationalism among the younger generation.

## Method

This study uses a fully qualitative method involving an analysis of the content of the KSSM Form 3 History textbook along with library research to examine the contributions of local figures in the struggle against colonizers and in defending the sovereignty of the homeland. This method is essential in determining how far the content of the KSSM Form 3 History textbook can serve as an important tool in enhancing students' nationalism to deepen their understanding of History as preparation for taking the SPM examination.

## Previous Studies

To date, there has been no research addressing the teaching of history and topics related to heroes and Malay figures. A recent study by Najwa Abdul Aziz (2024) et al., titled "Frequency of Textbook Use with Teaching and Learning Strategies in Primary School History," discusses teaching and learning in primary school history and highlights the dependence of history teachers on textbooks. Teachers also use it as the main reference and deliver lessons using various techniques and methods.

A study by Lau Yi Yi (2020) et al., titled “Content of History Textbooks and its Relationship with Student Knowledge,” shows a correlation between the content of history textbooks and students' knowledge levels. This indicates that quality textbooks are crucial as they can enhance students' knowledge levels, thereby addressing issues related to the perception that History is a boring, difficult, and less favoured subject.

Agus Mulyana, in “Narratives of Nationalism in Indonesia and Malaysia’s History Textbooks,” makes a general comparison between the contents of Indonesian and Malaysian history textbooks, differing in language, time, and colonial experiences. However, both history books instil elements of nationalism in students.

Furthermore, Mohd Samsudin & Shahizan Shaharuddin, in their article titled “Education and Teaching of History in Malaysian Schools,” discuss the content of the Form 5 textbook and suggest improvements, emphasizing the understanding of Malaysian history while addressing the relevance of Malaysian history to educational objectives.

Additionally, there are studies touching on the aspects of the History curriculum and History subjects such as Zunaida Zakaria (2015), Khairul Ghufuran Kaspin et al. (2018), M. Kaviza (2019), and others that have yet to consider heroic elements as the primary study focus. Therefore, from the literature review above, there has been no in-depth study analyzing the Form 3 History textbook, discussing aspects of heroism of the Malay struggle against colonizers, and relating this to contributions and appreciation of nationalism through values that students can obtain.

## Discussion

As a subject that is chronological in nature, specific methods must be employed to facilitate students' memory and understanding to avoid factual confusion. Although PAK21 has been implemented as an effort by KPM to enhance educational achievement, through the review of the education curriculum, ongoing monitoring, and reforms to ensure the education system today remains relevant to current needs (Syed & Mohd Isa, 2020), questions arise regarding how prepared teachers are to apply this in the learning process. A study shows that PAK21 is generally accepted by practical teachers (Muhammad Ayisy & Mohd Ashraf, 2019). So, what about teachers who have served longer? How prepared and receptive are they? This question aligns with Wright's (1982) observation that history teachers are still more inclined to use traditional or stereotypical methods in delivering their knowledge. This tends to provoke a less positive response among students, leading to boredom, repetitive teaching, and consequently causing them to lose interest in mastering the subject as they fail to remember the names of figures, dates, and years of events. Moreover, for this Form 3 History Book, students need to understand timelines, various scenarios, and events in the formation of the nation and nation-state.

This study focuses on the Form 3 textbook as the primary source because it includes numerous discussions about local heroic figures, serving as the first source and reference for teachers in schools. Additionally, Form 3 is chosen because students are considered more capable of understanding the chronology of Western power's arrival in the country, detailing interventions, the arrival of Western powers, local resistance, and the efforts and strategies employed to wisely confront colonial powers based on the textbook topic. This study is important to identify students' abilities through the perspectives of textbooks and teachers in helping students master topics related to heroism. As an analytical and chronological subject, this level is also crucial as preparation for Form 3 students to master the overall topic of nationalism development in Malaysia for the next, more challenging levels, which are Form 4 (understanding nation-building) and Form 5 (Malaysia and the future).

Although this topic is not directly related to upper secondary levels in SPM, it is essential for students to master this topic as a foundational understanding of nation-building and related issues at Forms 4 and 5. Based on the KSSM Form 3 History Textbook, there are two categories of local heroes: the local community and the royal group, which encompass almost all states in Malaysia. For this paper, the role of the local community led by community leaders is highlighted as they lead the struggle against British colonizers. Starting with the Pangkor Treaty (1874), Clause 6 states that the Sultan of Perak is required to accept a British Resident as an administrative advisor, and the role of the king is merely as an advisor concerning Islam and customs. This event opened the way for direct British intervention, starting with administration and extending to all aspects of local community economics and social aspects. This is considered a dark point in Malaysian history, as mentioned in this textbook, which sparked discontent among the royal group, local figures, and the public. The detailed contents of this textbook covering eight topics are as follows:

Chapter 1: Arrival of Western Powers.

Chapter 2: Administration of the Straits Settlements.

Chapter 3: Administration of the Federated Malay States.

Chapter 4: Administration of the Unfederated Malay States.

Chapter 5: Western Administration in Sabah and Sarawak.

Chapter 6: Effects of Western Administration on Economy and Society.

Chapter 7: Resistance of Local Communities.

Chapter 8: Wisdom of Malay Kings and Nobles in Facing Western Challenges.

Based on the above topics, three topics in this textbook discuss in depth the names of local heroes facing the British. For example, Chapter 7: Resistance of Local Communities includes the names of fighters or heroes who fought to defend the country from colonizers, starting from Peninsular Malaysia to Sabah and Sarawak, including Dato' Maharaja Lela, Tok Janggut, Haji Abdul Rahman Limbong, Yamtuan Antah, Dol Said, Dato' Bahaman, Sharif Masahor, Mat Sator, Mat Salleh, and Rentap. They can also be categorized as community leaders in their respective regions. This movement sparked a spirit of nationalism among the people, especially when oppressed, exploited, and deprived of their rights while facing various changes due to colonial actions. This encompasses administrative, economic, and social aspects of local communities. Previously, loyalty and obedience were solely to the king, but after the arrival of the West, that power transformed into the introduction of positions that replaced the king. Although indirectly, the king's position at that time was nothing more than a mere puppet, as he only held power in two aspects: Islam and customary matters.

While this textbook mentions the people's compliance with the strategies and technologies held by the West, such efforts were somewhat 'disturbed' by various series and levels of resistance conducted by the local community. For example, in Sarawak, Rentap's resistance against the British, represented by Brooke, was only successful in overcoming the British in the third attack in 1861, after upgrading weapons, namely the "Bukit Sadok" bronze cannon, and increasing the number of troops. This also illustrates an element of heroism, even though the local communities were ultimately defeated by the British. Therefore, teachers explaining this aspect need to emphasize the valour of these figures who fought fiercely, sacrificing their lives for the sake of ensuring that future generations enjoy true independence.

Not to be overlooked in Sabah and Sarawak, the communities there, recognized as diverse ethnicities and beliefs, had to face the British, represented by the British North Borneo Chartered Company and the Brooke Family. For instance, in Sarawak, Brooke destroyed longhouses and forced the Iban people to

relocate, making it difficult for this ethnic group to initiate swidden farming. Meanwhile, in Sabah, the Murut people had to contend with harsh treatments from the BBBC, such as imposing taxes or fees for married couples wishing to live together and develop forest areas contrary to their beliefs, which were ancestral lands (History Textbook: 2020, 183).

This aspect deeply illustrates the factors and forms of local community resistance, beginning with the 'moderate' stage to the 'extreme' stage using weapons due to several agreements violated by the British. Among the values that can be instilled through this element are the importance of unity in facing external interference in administration, defence, heroism, fighting spirit, and wisdom in decision-making, as well as the importance of safeguarding the sovereignty of the nation, and taking lessons from not yielding to any external elements that disrupt the administration of the country. Most importantly, all these values can form elements of Higher Order Thinking Skills (KBAT) through critical and analytical understanding, suitable for the needs and preparation of Form 3 students to master the entire topic of nationalism development in Malaysia for the next more challenging levels, which are Form 4 (understanding nation-building) and Form 5 (Malaysia and the future).

### Conclusion

The content of the KSSM Form 3 History Textbook is seen to have the potential to produce students with critical and analytical thinking to delve into and help students understand the context of the past, recognize patterns and cause-and-effect relationships in historical events, and develop the ability to analyse sources and evidence of heroism present in local communities. Directly, it can promote thinking about identity, culture, and values in the context of national and state development. By understanding history, students can also develop more mature thinking regarding contemporary issues and future challenges that lead to historical events, such as the 3R issues (royal-races-religion) that, if students are not educated from an early stage in school, could lead to racial riots and so forth in Malaysia. Therefore, teachers need to be capable of explaining to students the importance of local heroes, the knowledge of self-defence they possess, technology, and other skills that were somewhat impossible to master during the colonial period. Furthermore, the British themselves had to confront the royal group and local communities using deception, tactics, and more advanced technology, leading to the compliance of local communities with the British, albeit with honourable defeat.

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