

## 6

# Milo

*Syahirah Abdul Rahman*

When you type in the terms ‘Milo’ and ‘Malaysia’ on Google search, some of the first results you will see are questions such as ‘Is Milo Malaysian?’ and ‘Why is Milo so popular in Malaysia?’ Milo, a chocolate malt-powder drink is a staple brand and beverage among Malaysian households. Despite this cultural background, Milo was invented by Australian chemist Thomas Mayne during the Great Depression (1929–32) and is currently produced by Nestlé, a Swiss company that is also the world’s largest maker of food and beverages. Despite Milo’s international citizenship, the beverage is held dear in the hearts of many Malaysians.

A typical Malaysian childhood involves memories of a Milo truck turning into the driveway of the primary school, kids lining up outside the truck in the hot sun, waiting patiently for Milo’s promotional staff to hand out tiny paper cups of the drink. The kids then would sit on the concrete floor in the school corridor, slowly sipping their Milo drinks, savouring every millilitre of their worth. The taste of that memory is so clear that if you were to ask a Malaysian person what is one of the best drinks in Malaysia, they would say Milo, and if you were to ask what was the best-tasting Milo, they would answer, ‘The one I had from the Milo school trucks.’

Milo, pronounced ‘mee-lo’ in Malaysia, comes in green containers. They are sold in corner stores and supermarkets and can be ordered at nearly all food and beverage establishments in Malaysia. There are countless variations on how to enjoy Milo. Children spread the chocolate powder on a slice of bread to make a Milo sandwich. Adults order a glass of Milo *dinosaur* at their local *mamak*<sup>1</sup> restaurant: a glass of iced milo with a heap of undissolved Milo powder on



Figure 6.1 Image of a commemorative Milo tin issued for Merdeka and Malaysia Day 2021.

top. The extent of Milo's entanglement in the livelihoods of Malaysian citizens is such that one refers to the containers' shade of green as Milo green. Despite Milo's popularity and rather expensive price tag, there is a rather peculiar perception of the Milo containers themselves – a reflection not so much of the brand's quality but more of the material that it is made out of: *tin*.

My drive to find connections between Milo, produced by a multinational corporation, and the commodity of its container, extracted from Malaysia – tin – was largely inspired by a growing list of academics who have observed the colonial spirits that haunt present material objects and urban life. For example, Deborah Cowen (2019) has tracked the connections between national infrastructures in Canada and the UK. She mapped the importance of the transatlantic slave trades which assisted in circulating capital around the world,

connecting national infrastructures with very different nationalistic narratives through identical histories of Indigenous dispossession and genocide. What Cowen's work reminds me of is the importance of untold stories in the making of capitalism. As economist Kalyan Sanyal (2014) has argued, there is a need to represent the neglected stories of the colonized; those who were integral in the makings of modern capitalism but whose roles have been disposed, marginalized and purposely ignored for the benefit of colonialism and imperialism.

More closely related to my present story of the Milo tin or, more importantly, its underlying commodity, tin, is Simon Naylor's (2000) work on the material culture of colonial commodities. Naylor focuses on tin cans, examining their importance to the networks of the British empire, its imperialism and modern-day globalization. In a similar vein, here I attempt to switch this focus around by highlighting the stories of the neglected in the British empire's conquest of tin, specifically, the stories of Malays in Malaya and, later, Malaysia. I share with Szeman (Chapter 1) a concern with the entangled colonial legacies that can be traced out behind 'ordinary' and 'everyday' consumer objects. In telling this story of tin, I hope to uncover the traces of colonialism in simple, taken-for-granted material objects that you see in your daily life. And thus begins the story of the Milo tin and its place in a small country in South-East Asia, Malaysia.

### *Kereta tin Milo*

Putting aside the physical and chemical qualities of tin, among Malaysian laypeople the perception of tin often comes with a rather negative connotation. Specifically, tin is perceived as a low-quality metal. The reason for this has much to do with the Milo tins themselves. Besides feeding the people of Malaysia, Milo has also made a fascinating cultural mark on a completely different aspect of the country: the production of cars.

One has to go back to the 1950s, before the inception of Malaysia in 1963, and before the independence of Malaya from British colonization in 1957. Then, the majority of the population lived predominantly in agricultural villages. A legacy of this period is the term '*kereta tin Milo*' (trans.: Milo tin cars). The term was derived from a cultural phenomenon in which self-taught mechanics used recycled Milo tins

rather than genuine parts to shoddily repair vehicles. The cost of genuine parts was very high and, due to the lack of income, mechanics simply found creative methods to provide their services. They would take recycled Milo tins, repurpose them as replacement panels for the vehicles they were fixing, mostly cars, and shoddily repaint over the panels to hide the material they had used. These shoddy repairs were often exposed when an accident occurred to a repaired car. The damage would scratch off the new paint, thus exposing the original Milo name on the tin replacement panels.

Since then, '*kereta tin Milo*' is used pejoratively to describe cars that are cheaply made or unsafe. The most prominent usage of this term is in fact in relation to Malaysia's own home-brand automotive company, Proton. The stigma against Proton is not always necessarily on account of the technical features of the company's vehicles. Much of the negative connotation actually stems from an idolization of anything European-made, a sentiment that originates from Malaysia's colonial past. During colonial periods, Eurocentrism played an important part in exploiting native communities' wealth by downplaying the value of their skills in business. This, coupled with the lack of economic and development opportunities given to native communities, created a stereotype that anything European-made was immediately of high quality. Alongside this idolization was constant criticism of home brands, especially if they were made by the Malay community. Thus, the stereotype had been that Europeans were well educated, diligent, high class and skilled. Meanwhile, Malaysians, specifically Malays, were uneducated, lazy, low class and unskilled. This stereotype permeated even to non-living aspects of daily life, including brands and companies. As such, European cars were and are parallel to high quality, good engineering, innovation and safety. In contrast, Proton, a Malaysian brand, was simply *kereta tin Milo*.

Proton, short for *Perusahaan Otomobil Nasional* (National Automobile Company) was set up in 1983 as part of the Malaysian government's strategy to enhance Malaysian industries through the development of a national car. The then prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, saw the lack of technological development in Malaysian industries as a skills-based issue. It could be argued that Dr Mahathir's vision for Proton was personal in nature. The former premier had grown up under three forms of colonial occupation: by the British, the Japanese and the British again. He spoke passionately against

colonists and was open about his desire to overthrow the British economically, or at least to claim back from the British what they had taken from Malaya and Malaysia economically.

Despite having lived through Japan's brief occupation of Malaya, Dr Mahathir had a liking for the Japanese work ethic and planned for a national car brand to mimic Japan's success in overtaking American mass manufacturing in the automobile industry. Dr Mahathir saw Japan's success as representative of the ability of Asian countries to do well, and better than their Western, colonial counterparts, specifically the British. As such, the development of Proton was presented to Malaysians through two important policies, first, Look East, and second, Buy British Last. Both policies urged Malaysians to look to growing and successful Eastern countries such as South Korea and Japan as examples of economic success, rather than to the United Kingdom and/or other European countries.

Look East was instrumental in the development of Proton. Behind Look East was a bilateral trade agreement in which Mitsubishi was to invest in Proton as a National Car Project. Initially, Proton was financed through Heavy Industries Corporation of Malaysia (HICOM; a wholly government-owned company), which held 70% ownership of Proton, while Mitsubishi Motors and Mitsubishi Corporation each held a 15% stake, the ownership of which would be given back to Proton on completion of the bilateral agreement (Machado 1989). As part of the bilateral agreement, Mitsubishi would assist Proton in the designs of their first prototype cars, thereby contributing important technical and soft skills development needed for Malaysia's first home-grown automobile industry. Thus, Proton was founded not only as a means to develop a national car to stimulate the country's real economy, but was also used as a training ground to cultivate a generation of local engineers and to turn Malaysia from a consumption-based country into a production-based one. The history of this has much to do with the country's colonial histories, whereby the predominant ethnic group of Malaysia, the Malays, were disadvantaged educationally, due to the discriminatory British colonial policies.

In 2018, when Proton, which was privatized in 2012, was bought out by the Chinese multinational automotive firm Geely, Dr Mahathir lamented that this sale of the national car disrespected Malaysia's painful colonial past and the reasons why Proton existed.

Dr Mahathir's personal concerns had always permeated into his political ideologies, which included wanting to move away from the colonial perception that Malays should remain as farmers. In an interview on the Najib Razak administration's sale of Proton to foreign hands, specifically a Chinese firm, he remarked emotionally that the move had felt like giving the Malays' economy back into the control of the Chinese. He lamented, 'Jika anda mahu jadi negara petani, menanam padi dan menangkap ikan, okey, kita akan buat' ('if you want this country to become a country of farmers, of paddy planters, and of fishermen; then okay, we will do it') (Aw and Goh 2018).

### *Sejarah tin di koloni British-Malaya. The history of tin in colonial British-Malaya*

Dr Mahathir's concerns were not unfounded, of course. Historical accounts have shown that growing up in colonial British-Malaya was unfavourable to non-aristocratic and non-royal Malays. Most Malays, such as Dr Mahathir himself, grew up in rural villages, far away from schools, businesses and other urban amenities. It is through these colonial histories that we may be able to learn about the irony behind the stigma that comes from the so-called low quality of Milo tins – because its underlying commodity, tin, happens to be one of the most valuable commodities in historical and modern times.

Firstly, beyond Milo tins themselves, tin is one of the most flexible and useful metals on Earth. Alloys of tin have various uses and are present in our daily lives in many forms, mostly in tin coatings to protect the surfaces of various household and industrial objects. In Malaya's colonial period, the demand for tin was so great that it assisted the British to attain unparalleled economic growth in the Industrial Revolution, tin being used in various forms of new manufacturing processes. Tin was in such great demand in the nineteenth century that it led to the British colonizing the lands that border present-day Malaysia. It is not so much tin, but the stigma of anything Malay-made that is the true subject of *kereta tin Milo* and Proton.

From colonial times, Malays have been stereotyped as lazy by British colonists who were displeased by Malay communities'

reluctance to work in the harsh conditions of the tin mines, set up sporadically across three main states of Malaya. The deep interior of the tin mines made living conditions difficult, exposing miners to diseases such as malaria and smallpox, while open-cast mines were exposed to the blazing hot tropical sun (Leam Seng 2019; Siew 1953). Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) has written that miners were forced into extreme dependency on their employers, through a series of exploitative employment conditions. The tin mine owners often enticed workers with opium, sold on credit in order to keep workers distracted from their hunger and illnesses and, more importantly, dependent on their employers. Employers have also been documented as encouraging miners to gamble their wages in a game of chance stacked against them, thus leaving the miners indebted to their employers and forcing them to work beyond their agreed hours and preferences.

Reflecting the long, entangled histories of racialized distinctions that were activated in the exploitation and indebteding of migrant labourers – a theme picked up in Part III, ‘Borders’ – miners who came from outside Malaya (for example, China) were often displaced from their families, their travel documents withheld by their employers, with the promise that these documents would be returned only after their travel expenses had been paid through hard labour. Prostitution dens and pawnbroking shops were also prevalent at tin mines, to distract miners from the harsh conditions of their employment. Many Malays of Islamic birth did not favour the conditions of the mines, as the consumption of ‘earthly pleasures’ such as drugs and prostitution is deemed the highest form of sin. As such, they would often reject work in the mines, which earned them the stereotypical epithet of being ‘lazy’.

Malaysia, then made up of several Malay kingdoms (now known as the Malaysian states), was referred to as Malaya, and in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century as British-Malaya. Malaya fell within the South-East Asian Tin Belt, and the tin produced there was categorized as Straits tin, comparable to and competitive against the tin produced in Cornwall in the UK) and Pulau Banka in Indonesia. From the 1800s to the early twentieth century, the South-East Asian Tin Belt was the most important tin-producing region of the world, producing 54% of the world’s tin (Schwartz et al. 1995). British geologist Joseph Carne (1839) documented tin

production and consumption in Great Britain. He wrote of the East India Company's operations in exploiting price negotiations against Straits tin producers, only to resell to China. It is important to highlight that Chinese tea imports had been integral to the survival of the East India Company, saving the company financially and establishing it as a major political authority over British colonies. Instrumental in the East India Company's control over Chinese tea was the trading of tin with China, produced in colonial British-Malaya.

The Industrial Revolution was also instrumental in Great Britain's decision to make a more prominent colonial mark in Malaya in the nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution caused a great demand for tin as a material, thus pushing its price up considerably from the late 1840s to late 1890s. Before the Industrial Revolution, the price of tin was fixed, but its extraction in colonial countries such as British-Malaya meant that metal traders needed a faster way to communicate their contract prices to their international trading partners. The London Metal Market and Exchange Company (LME) was set up in 1877 for this purpose. It acted as one of the first advanced international financial institutions, using technologies such as the telegraph to assist in the faster communication of stocks and commodities trading for Great Britain and its international partners.

Demand for tin shot up beyond the needs of domestic consumption (in Great Britain, that is, as domestic consumption in Malaya was ignored in the colonial account of things). As a result, the British established an even greater colonial presence in Malaya, inviting mass migration by their Chinese trading partners to set up enterprises there specifically for tin trading and production. British-Malaya became even more of a lucrative colonial settlement for the British, its tin attracting British general investors to exploit the Malayan tin mines. Malaysia's first stock market, the Singapore Stockbrokers' Association, established in conjunction with Singapore in 1930, was set up specifically to assist global flows of investment into Malayan commodities. Of course, the arrangements of the stock exchange greatly discriminated against Malayan home enterprises, which were not given equal opportunities to trade on the exchange – although the domestic population had been largely displaced from commercial and economic activities, such that few of them could be entrepreneurs in the first place.

Tin, among other commodities extracted from Malaya, was so important to Great Britain that it helped to finance the British during the Second World War. Professor Richard Stubbs, quoted in prominent Malaysian economist Jomo Kwame Sundaram's (1986) *A Question of Class*, mentioned that in 1951 Malaya earned US\$400 million in government income, much of this derived from commodities exports. Eighty-three per cent of this amount was redirected to London to finance post-war reconstruction in Great Britain and to service international balance of payment deficits.

Despite the riches that tin brought to Great Britain in the past, and to the UK today, back in the early 1900s the Malay communities were pushed further away from commercial areas of British-Malaya. As part of the British colonial strategy, Malays, who made up the majority of Malaya's population, were purposely left out of economic spaces. This was done through several measures, the most important of which were discriminatory practices in education, which would have provided students with professional skills needed for higher-paid employment and/or entrepreneurial and business opportunities. Instead, the British wanted the Malays to stay in rural areas, focusing on agricultural jobs such as farming and/or fishing. This can be exemplified by the statement of the British Chief Secretary of Federated Malay States, George Maxwell, who said that the strategy to educate Malays was 'to make the son of the fisherman or peasant a more intelligent fisherman or peasant than his father had been, and a man whose education will enable him to understand how his own lot fits in with the scheme of life around him'.

As a result, when Malaya gained independence in 1957, income disparity between the Malays and other ethnic groups of the country was extremely high, with Malays accounting for 75% of poor households. Studying the number of graduates from the University of Malaya, Malaya's only university at the time, is telling with regard to the racial imbalance in education. For example, between 1960 and 1970, the numbers of Chinese and Malay graduates with a Bachelor of Science degree from the university were 1,488 and 69, respectively (Abdul Khalid 2014). For the Bachelor of Engineering, the numbers of Chinese and Malay graduates were 408 and 4, respectively. The disparity is jarring when one considers that Malays made up 70% of the local population, followed by Chinese (20%), Indian (5%) and others (5%).

Against the historical backdrop of tin in Malaysia, it is ironic that tin was and is used pejoratively against Proton, even though the metal had been instrumental in Great Britain's growth as an empire, courtesy of its colonization of Malaya. Although the British made considerable financial gains from the tin mines of Malaya, all that was left domestically was a legacy of racial stereotyping backed by the legacy of discriminatory practices. In 1983, when Proton was set up by Dr Mahathir in his mission to push the Malay communities upwards in income and skills, it is little wonder that the company was stigmatized. How could a Malay-made car be good? They were not like the Europeans, who had years of engineering training. Malays had been farmers and fishermen after all, according to many. How could they possibly make cars?

### *Tin Milo okay apa ...: Milo tins aren't so bad ...*

In 2020, Proton celebrated the thirty-fifth anniversary of its first *kereta tin Milo*, the Saga. Like Malaysia, Proton has grown considerably, from becoming an important skills-growth firm for Malaysian engineers to being one of the biggest producers of cars in the world. Despite the many criticisms, the firm has been instrumental in many Malaysians' lives, as important as the Milo tins that its vehicles are supposedly made of. During its years as a national car company, Proton was protected by government policies in the form of protective barrier taxes against foreign car purchases, the burden of which were borne by Malaysian consumers.

During Dr Mahathir's premiership from 1981 to 2003, tariffs on imported cars were as high as 300% in order to protect Malaysia's national cars, or what the former premier called a 'symbol of national dignity' (Jaipragas and Woon 2018). As P. Gunasegaram (2017) analysed, Proton's protective barrier cost Malaysian consumers additional taxes averaging 30,000 Malaysian ringgit (approximately £5,600 at 2020 exchange rates) per vehicle purchased. As soon as tariffs on imported cars were relaxed following the end of Dr Mahathir's administration, Proton faced a sharp decline in sales, costing dearly in terms of government expenditure to maintain the firm. Proton was privatized in 2012, as the Najib Razak administration found the national car company's maintenance to be a burden

on the government. Later, the company was sold to Geely, thus losing its title as Malaysia's national car company.

Despite the changes in Proton, what has remained the same is the global importance of tin as a commodity. From the Milo tins, we have traced the commodification of a simple object that we take for granted, tracing it back into what Simon Naylor (2000) calls the circuits of capital. Today, tin trading is still extremely important to the UK economy. This can be exemplified by the 1.24 million lots (one 'lot' is five tonnes) of tin futures traded on the LME each year. Further, LME Tin (the official trading name of tin on the LME) is listed as one of the most expensive metals among all non-ferrous metals traded on the LME. As of January 2022, LME Tin was traded at the bid price of US\$44,190 per tonne. However, the most actively traded tin contracts on LME are the three-month futures contracts, which were established because, when the LME was established, three months was the time that it took for tin to be shipped from Malaysia. As shown by Kalba (Chapter 18), London-based financial exchanges have always been intimately connected to imperial exploitation, despite traders' disavowal of their role in labour exploitation, violence and resource extraction. If one were to ask, however, how much of this wealth can be attributed to a small South-East Asian country called Malaysia, where the name of its national car is viewed derogatorily by its own people, mocked for its quality that is 'as good as a Milo tin', they would simply say 'I don't know'. As we have learned in this story of the Milo tin, the ghosts of colonialism have never really gone away. In fact, its spirits continue to live on, making distinctive marks in the lives of those who have been colonized, those whose stories are often neglected. With this story, I hope to have engaged readers to think of these histories that continue to exist in our daily lives, now in the most trivial forms, in actions as simple as consuming a glass of chocolate drink at a local twenty-four-hour *mamak* restaurant.

### Further resources

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### Note

- 1 Mamak restaurants are 24-hour Indian Muslim food establishments institutional to the Malaysian culture.