



Responses to Industrial Imperialism

By Eman M. Elshaikh

When confronting imperial power, people responded in creative ways that go beyond collaboration and resistance. Local knowledge and customs enabled some to resist imperialism with invisible yet effective tactics.

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The anti-imperialist vegetable

If you think about a struggle against imperialism, you see images of weapons and uprisings. Foods like corn or cassava usually aren't in the picture, but we'll soon find out why they should be. While armed struggles were forms of resistance to empire, they weren't very common in the modern period. New imperial powers had greater technologies and deadlier weapons. Colonized peoples, most of whom were peasants, couldn't fight them with weapons. There were subtle ways to resist the empire. Corn and cassava¹ were two of them.

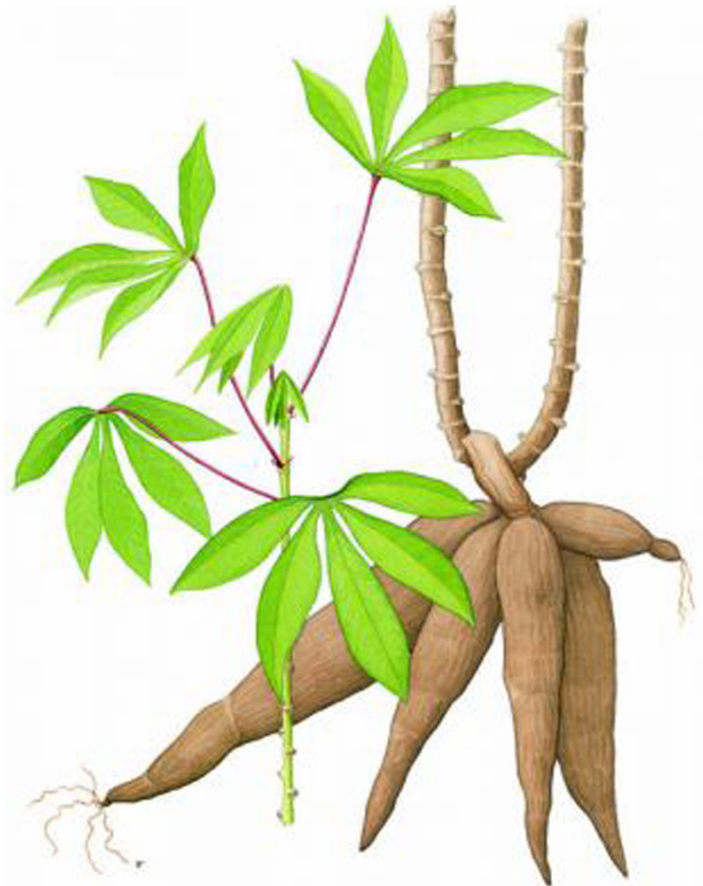
Colonial states relied on income from fixed farming areas. They could reduce costs by using the forced labor of native people who stayed in one place.

But that all unravels when those local populations don't stay put. After all, they weren't getting any of the profits and only needed enough food for themselves. Crops like corn and cassava grow in a way that allowed growers to move around. Indigenous people sometimes migrated and changed their farming patterns to evade colonial oppression. Cassava, in particular, made this easier because it required relatively little labor for a pretty big return. Mobile groups could plant cassava and pretty much just walk away. A couple of years later, a community could come back and dig up the high-calorie tubers (it's kind of like a potato). They could also eat the leaves in the meantime. Cassava gave indigenous people a cheap, easy way to feed themselves while resisting colonial systems of forced labor. Colonizers tried to brand cassava and corn as "lazy" crops for native people who wanted to avoid work—but these crops helped them resist empire. Like activists.

Aggressive and bloody? No. Effective and more common? Definitely. Let's contextualize with the many different ways people responded to imperialism.

Anti-imperialism before decolonization

In the late nineteenth century, most of Southeast Asia came under either British, French, or Dutch control. This imperialism disrupted existing lives and societies affecting both empires and their subjects. Colonizers controlled wealth, status, and survival. So, people had to be careful and strategic about how they engaged with imperial power. But the people of the colonies—the "colonial subjects"—had some ability to shape their own lives. More than individual survival, they also wanted to maintain their dignity and culture. The case studies in this article will show how some communities in Southeast Asia responded to the new, industrial imperialism that began in the late nineteenth century.



Crop illustration diagram for cassava plant, also called yuca in some regions. By the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, CC BY-NC 2.0.

¹ Tapioca pearls, (the fun part of boba tea) come from cassava. Cassava can also be used to make bread flour and several other foods.



European colonization of Southeast Asia. By Rumilo Santiago, CC BY-SA 4.0.

French Indochina

French Indochina was the colonial name for French-occupied areas in Southeast Asia. In the late nineteenth century, the French invaded the places now called Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. European missionaries and merchants had already established some presence there.

But colonial maps can be misleading; conquering territory is not the same as truly controlling it. Although the local royal families technically accepted colonial rule, the French were met with constant mutinies and peasant uprisings, which are easily recognizable as resistance. Others—and that was most people—just tried to survive and thrive within a difficult system.

For instance, many Laotian villagers pretended to collaborate with the French while resisting at the same time. The French believed they were using local leaders to control villages, a key strategy in colonial empire-building. But the villages often put fake notables forward, who had no real power. Meanwhile, the real leaders secretly ran villages according to Laotian interests, rather than what the empire wanted. The French had no clue.



Saigon Governor's Palace about 1875, later renamed Norodom Palace after Norodom of Cambodia, who signed a treaty agreeing to French protection. Public domain.

Another example comes from the city of Hanoi in Vietnam. French construction projects brought in large numbers of rats. The French offered to pay the locals for killing rats, demanding to see a rat's tail as proof. The locals began to just clip the tails off of live rats and release them back into the sewers to breed. The French paid large sums of money to the locals and ended up with an even worse rat problem!

Not everybody resisted French rule. Some minority groups, like the small Christian population, saw French rule as a way to get ahead, especially by joining the military. Others escaped colonial oppression by fleeing into the hills, where the imperial government had trouble reaching. As with the cassava example earlier, deep local knowledge of the environment was an advantage the French didn't have.

Even the French education policy backfired somewhat. It tried to make Southeast Asians embrace French values and culture. It worked to some extent, but it also gave many indigenous peoples intellectual tools to resist French imperialism. Colonial subjects formed networks and shared new ideas about revolution and resistance. Two great examples are Nguyen Thai Hoc, who founded the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in 1927, and Vo Nguyen Giap, who led the Vietnamese in a battle against the French in 1954.



Map of French Indochina. National Museum of the United States Air Force. Public domain.



Võ Nguyên Giáp and Phạm Văn Đồng in Hà Nội, 1945. Public domain.

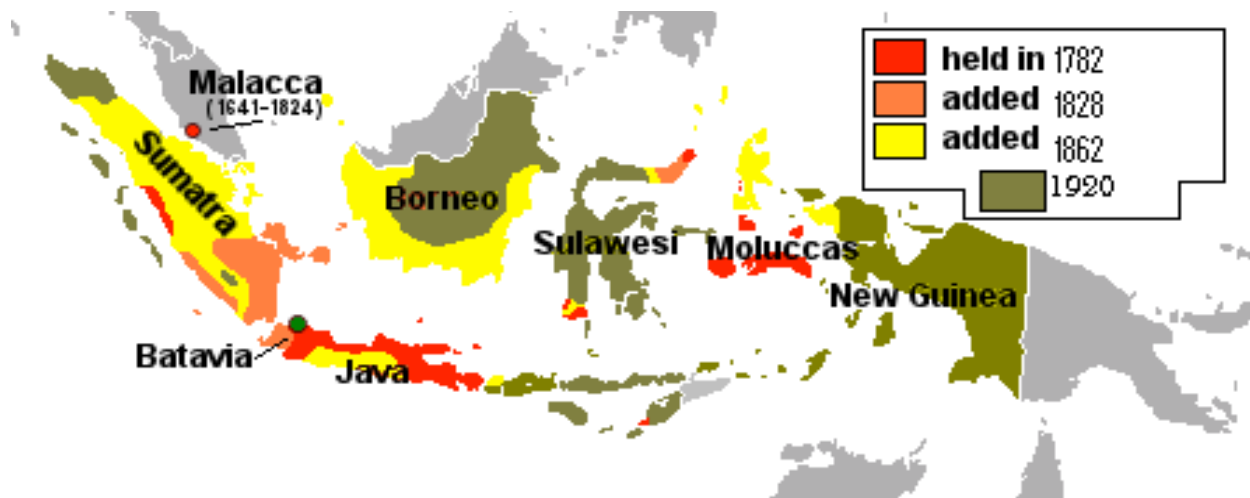
Dutch East Indies

Dutch colonialism in modern-day Indonesia began with the commercial activity of the Dutch East India company. But both the company and the Dutch government struggled to control this very diverse region.

On the island of Java,² some Javanese aristocrats agreed to serve the Dutch in exchange for keeping some wealth. Those of lower social status could also gain some political rights in various ways. Many learned to speak Dutch, converted to Christianity, or adopted Dutch customs. These are examples of *accommodation*, where people adapt to colonial rule. They can benefit from it without entirely giving up their own culture or values.

But some Javanese aristocrats didn't love this, like Raden Mas Adipati Brotodiningrat. Brotodiningrat protested against Dutch rule by stealing a curtain from a Dutch colonizer. The curtain was a symbol of the separation between the colonizer and the colonized. Brotodiningrat's act of disobedience signaled that the Dutch held no real authority over him. A heated court battle followed this minor crime, giving Brotodiningrat's act of disobedience great publicity. This inspired aristocrats to fundamentally question colonialism and its morality.

² Java is an island that is part of today's Indonesia.



Map of the Dutch East Indies showing its territorial expansion from 1800 to its fullest extent prior to Japanese occupation in 1942. By Red4tribe, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Religious and spiritual beliefs also helped people subtly resist colonial rule. There was a large revival of Islam during this period. Muslims were making their annual pilgrimage to Mecca—called the Hajj—in growing numbers, thanks to European transportation. Other local systems of belief revolved around mystics and holy people. What these all had in common is that they celebrated a higher authority than the colonial government.

As in Indochina, Javanese peasants dodged colonial oppression by moving around or leaving. This was an important weapon used by otherwise powerless people. Peasants moved between Javanese and Dutch ruled areas. They understood that staying in one place long enough to be counted might trap them into forced labor and high taxes. They also resisted colonial regulations by purposely failing to comply, such as inaccurately reporting on land or crop yields.



A Javanese aristocratic woman. National Museum of World Cultures, CC BY-SA 3.0.



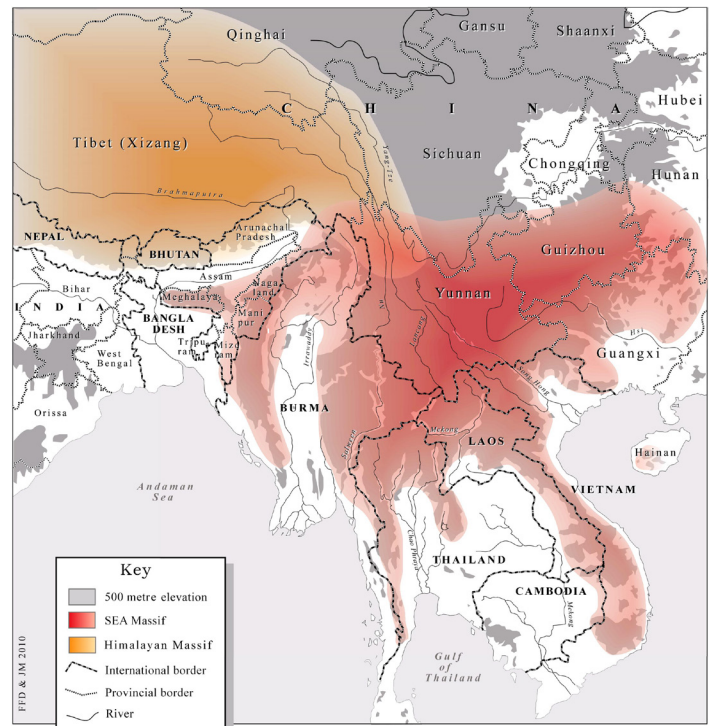
Javanese children studying the Quran during the Dutch colonial period. National Museum of World Cultures, CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Southeast Asian Highlands

The Southeast Asian highlands in Burma, Malaya, and Borneo are perhaps the strongest example of resistance to colonial rule. The British and other colonial powers had a lot of trouble controlling the people who lived here. These communities were incredibly mobile and were dispersed across a highland region roughly the size of Europe!

Many native peoples here moved around to avoid taxation and forced labor. They resisted being included in colonial censuses,³ colonial writing, and record-keeping in general. It was a kind of an “if you can’t count me, you can’t rule me” strategy. By some reports, peasants even vandalized or burned down offices of official records.

Compared to their Southeast Asian neighbors, these communities were more loosely organized. Colonizers found it hard to pin down local leaders or aristocrats who would work for them. The British tried to throw elaborate feasts to win favor with the local peoples and establish connections. However, the locals resisted by simply not showing up.



The Southeast Asian Massif (in red) and part of the Himalayan Massif (in yellow). Jean Michaud, *Journal of Global History*, public domain.

³ A census is an official count of the population, along with other demographic information.

Creative resistance

English writer George Orwell, who witnessed the occupation of Burma, described how local peoples could resist anonymously. They would cause accidents by spitting at or tripping British colonizers or insult them from far away. Colonized people often had special language codes or inside jokes to share their feelings of dissent.

People were incredibly creative in how they resisted imperial power. Large rebellions are easily recorded in history. However, these subtler forms of resistance are difficult for historians to learn. Colonized people often expressed themselves in ways that weren't easily understood by colonial powers and are still largely misunderstood by scholars.

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The author of this article is Eman M. Elshaikh. She is a writer, researcher, and teacher who has taught K-12 and undergraduates in the United States and in the Middle East and written for many different audiences. She teaches writing at the University of Chicago, where she also completed her master's in social sciences and is currently pursuing her PhD. She was previously a World History Fellow at Khan Academy, where she worked closely with the College Board to develop curriculum for AP World History.

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Cover: H Bas Relief Mural at Hoa Loa, Hanoi Hilton Prison - Hoa Loa Prison was originally used by the French colonial system to detain what they considered to be Vietnamese criminals, which meant anti-colonial activists. The prisoners themselves named the prison Hoa Lo meaning 'fiery furnace'. After the French left it was used to contain a new type of prisoner - during the American War as it is called in Vietnam (as opposed to the Vietnam War as it is known in the west) US air force pilots were detained here as the facility was used as a prisoner of war camp. During this time the prison got a new nickname: the Hanoi Hilton. Memoirs by former inmates, both Vietnamese and American, speak of torture, murder and medical neglect. © John S Lander/LightRocket via Getty Images

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