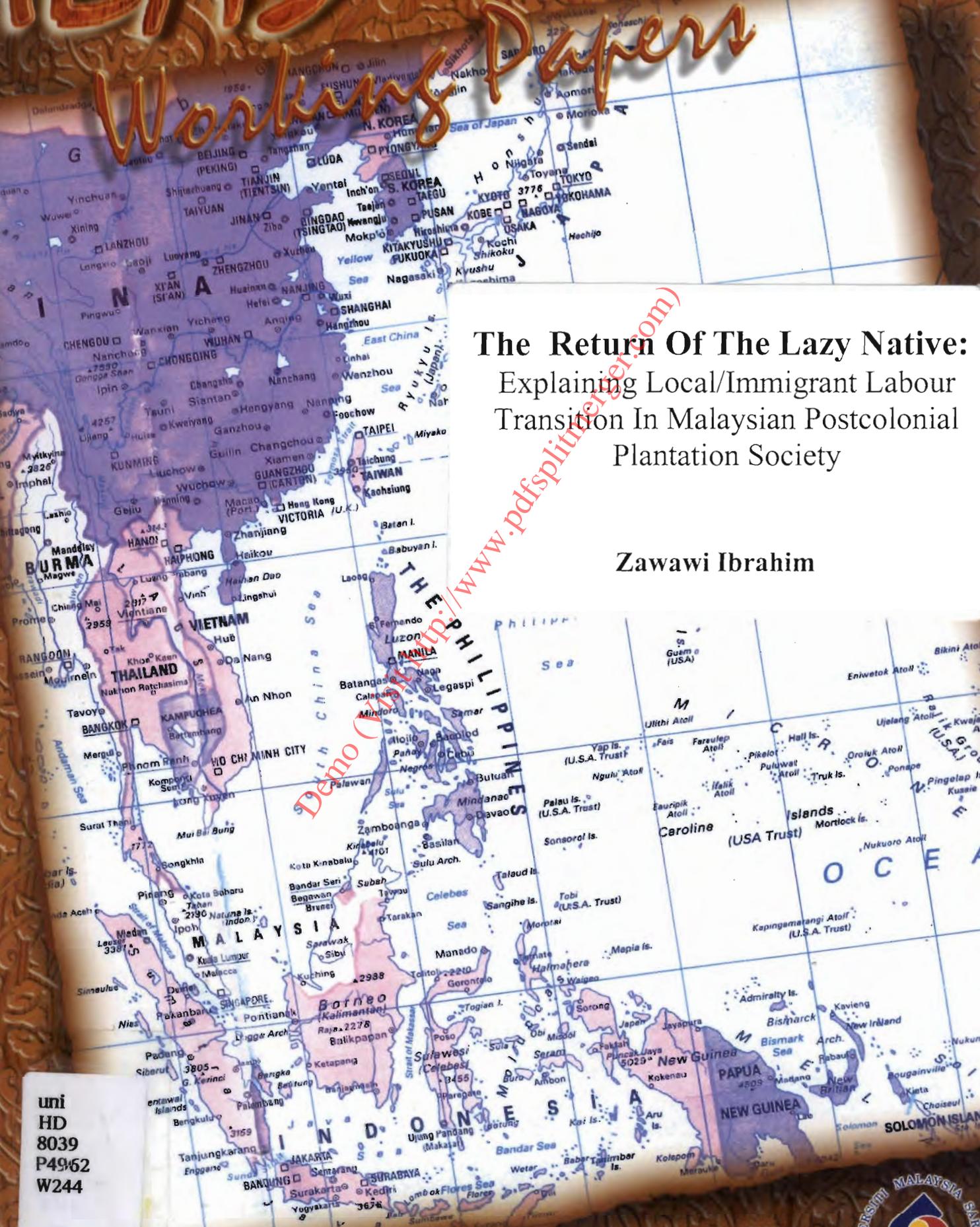


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The Return Of The Lazy Native: Explaining Local/Immigrant Labour Transition In Malaysian Postcolonial Plantation Society

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the Return of the lazy native
***(Explaining Local/Immigrant Labour Transition in Malaysian
Postcolonial Plantation Society)***

by

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To date, *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977) remains the earliest and perhaps the most important critical local scholarship on the discourse of western orientalism . Even though the original contextualisation of the above critique is colonial capitalism, its relevance continues into the present postcolonial situation. In both, the contestation is almost similar even though the identity of some of these ‘players’ may have changed. Hence, the recent postcolonial discourse on “ labour shortage” facing the Malaysian plantation industry which sees the “return of the lazy native” is essentially about capital deliberating on familiar ground., i.e on the virtues of two different fragments of labour , one local and the other , the cheap and expendable immigrant labour coming in droves from across the Straits of Malacca and the surrounding low-wage sectors of the Southeast Asian region. This paper is an attempt to share some of the ‘knowledge’ derived from anthropological fieldwork and the utilization of “ multi-sited ethnography” undertaken in selected Terengganu plantations of Peninsular Malaysia, as a way to critically engage in these issues. Ultimately, it seeks to move and empower an alternative discourse on the above local/immigrant labour “ transition question” to the one currently provided by the orientalist explanation.

INTRODUCTION: the myth dispelled?

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native* , the author, Syed Hussein Alatas , argued at great length to dispel the image of the lazy native, a negative perception of Malay labour propagated by western orientalists. He asserted that the image of the lazy native emerged in the context of 19th century colonial expansion when capitalist exploration reached a stage “when the capitalist conception of labour gained supremacy. Any type of labour which did not conform to this conception was rejected as a deviation. A community which did not