

Rethinking the Islamization of the Malay World

In his highly influential work the *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (1963), Syed Naquib al-Attas argued that “the coming of Islam, seen from the perspective of modern times, was the most momentous event in the history of the Malay archipelago”.¹ Naquib al-Attas’ qualification of the coming of Islam to the Malay world in such terms is understandable, when bearing in mind that in the work of the man - who later became the intellectual mentor to a whole generation of Islamist scholars, students, and activists in the country - we find traces of a form of reversed Orientalism and that he aimed for a radical break between the Malay pre-Islamic past and the Islamic presence in the here-and-now.

Forum >
Southeast Asia

By Farish Noor

There are two problematic elements in this thesis. The first is the claim that the coming of Islam represented a radical break with the pre-Islamic past. The second is the implicit claim that Islam arrived in its totality and was presented to the Malay world as a complete, totalized discourse with clearly identifiable boundaries of its own. Neither of these claims, implicit in the works of many contemporary Islamist scholars, stands in the light of close scrutiny.

Yet to engage in any debate of this sort today would mean getting oneself involved in a highly contested dispute that has also taken on a broader political dimension. The rewriting of the pre-Islamic Malay past has become a matter of political interest and it is no accident that the revisionist attempt to re-inscribe the story of the Malay peoples took off in the 1970s when the anti-Orientalist debate also engulfed the Malay academic world. (Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was published in 1978, the same year that Naquib al-Attas’s *Islam and Secularism* was published in Malaysia by ABIM)

What complicates matters further is the lack of reliable material and resources with which one could arm oneself, should one decide to join in the fray. It is therefore timely and fortunate indeed that the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) has managed to put together a collection of important writings by the prominent historian and scholar of Malay Studies Rudolf Aernoud Kern in a volume entitled *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*.

For years, the writings of people like Kern were vilified and condemned on the grounds that they were tainted by Eurocentric and Orientalist biases. One of the saddest (and surely unintended) consequences of Said’s *Orientalism* was that it opened the door for a flood of anti-Western polemics by non-Europeans. They used it as a justification to demolish the entire order of knowledge that had been constructed during the colonial era. While it is true that during the nineteenth to early twentieth century much of the scholarship of the West about the rest of the world was indeed shaped by a jaundiced view of all things Asian and Muslim, it is equally important to state that much of that scholarship was also carried out with great care and attention to detail. In a radical gesture of throwing the baby out with the bath water, post-colonial scholarship in many ex-colonial states has ended up rejecting anything and everything written by Westerners. Almost

overnight, the works of people like Kern were discredited for containing traces of ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, and prejudice towards Islam and Muslim culture. Sadly, the rejection of the Western canon merely led to the creation of other equally hegemonic and static discourses that were rooted in notions of essentialism and authenticity. Many of the writings emerging in the ex-colonial societies were equally biased, essentialist and in some cases downright inaccurate and caricatural.

The republication of Kern’s essays therefore comes at an opportune moment as the debate on an Islamic state and Islamic society is once again current in Malaysia. His essays show that the coming of Islam to the Malay world and the Islamization of Malay society was indeed a long, complex, and highly differentiated process that did not take Islam and Muslim identity as fixed and stable categories. Kern’s close readings of early Malay and Indonesian Muslim texts, social rituals, and rites clearly show the plasticity of Islamic discourse that has lain at the core of Islamic civilization itself. The spread of Islam was due in part to the fact that, Malay society - being a discursive economy - was open and flexible and its borders were porous and ever shifting.

Evidence to the early presence of Islam in the Malay archipelago also testifies to this. In his important essay on the famous Trengganu stone - which today is still referred to as proof of Islam’s arrival to the Malay peninsula in the fourteenth century - Kern notes that the impact of Islam was subtle. The Trengganu stone bears an inscription in the Jawi script. While this has been used time and again as a reference point to mark the immaculate arrival of Islam in the Malay world, few have cared to point out that the inscription itself does not mention the word “Allah” but rather refers to God as “Dewata Mulia Raya” - a phrase that is fully Sanskrit in origin. Kern is trying to show that Islam’s early arrival did not come as a forceful impact that marked a traumatic break from the past, despite the claims of many an Islamist scholar today.

Kern renders similar observations in his writings on the Islamization of Aceh, South Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Sulawesi, and the Malay peninsula, going to great lengths to show the degree of overlap and interpenetration that took place in these diverse social settings at a number of levels. Working within the communicative architecture of the period, Kern explores the etymological roots and development of key concepts in Malay culture like *kuasa* (power), *kewibawaan* (authority), *sakti*,

derhaka (treason) and others to show just how the formation of Islamic socio-cultural, political, and legal discourse was developed according to the needs and circumstances of the contemporaneous local environment. Kern also points to the local genius of the Malays, who had adapted Islam to their culture and vice-versa, in a process of cultural cross-fertilization enriching Malay culture and Islamic civilization at the same time.

In all these cases, one detects a common sensitivity and awareness of the fact that Islam’s entry into the Malay archipelago was not a forcible one, but rather a “penetration pacifique” that came in gentle waves which adapted themselves to the local socio-cultural terrain. This would also explain why Islam managed to spread itself from the lowest sections of society upwards, and why the ruling courts and royal houses finally allowed themselves to come under the sway of this new faith from abroad.

If anything, Kern disproves the oft-repeated assertion that Islam had spread across the world at the point of the sword and that the expansion of Islam was motivated by the desire for territorial conquest and imperial rule. More so than any writer today, Kern had shown that Islam in the Malay world has from the very beginning been pacifist, accommodative, and tolerant of cultural diversity and difference. How else could one explain the lingering traces of the pre-Islamic past, with us still today, even in the rites and rituals of Islam themselves? (indeed, traces of the pre-Islamic past in the experience of Islam lived in the Malay world abound. The very word “*sembahyang*” (prayer/to pray) literally means to offer homage (*sembah*) to *Hyang* (the Primal ancestor of pagan times). One cannot help but wonder if the Malay Muslims of today are aware of how close they are to their pre-Islamic Other in their daily rituals.

Credit must also go to the editor of *The Propagation of Islam*, Alijah Gordon, for her masterly handling of the work. This MSRI publication stands head and shoulders above most of the publications that have come from other publishing houses in the country. Alijah’s scrupulous editing, careful annotation, and the abundance of footnotes rich with valuable data make the book a joy to read for any serious scholar with a deep abiding interest in the subject. Most important of all, her handling of the text and her selection of other accompanying articles by the likes of G. W.J. Drewes, Charles Ralph Boxer, Denys Lombard, and Claudine Salmon have added a much needed touch of

sanity and balance in a debate that has seriously gone off the rails in the Malaysian context over the past few years. Drewes’ biographical essay on Kern sheds much needed light on the man and his personality, while the other essays in the second part of the book take the argument of Kern further by looking at the process of Islamization in other parts of the archipelago that fell outside the orbit of Kern’s scholarly interest.

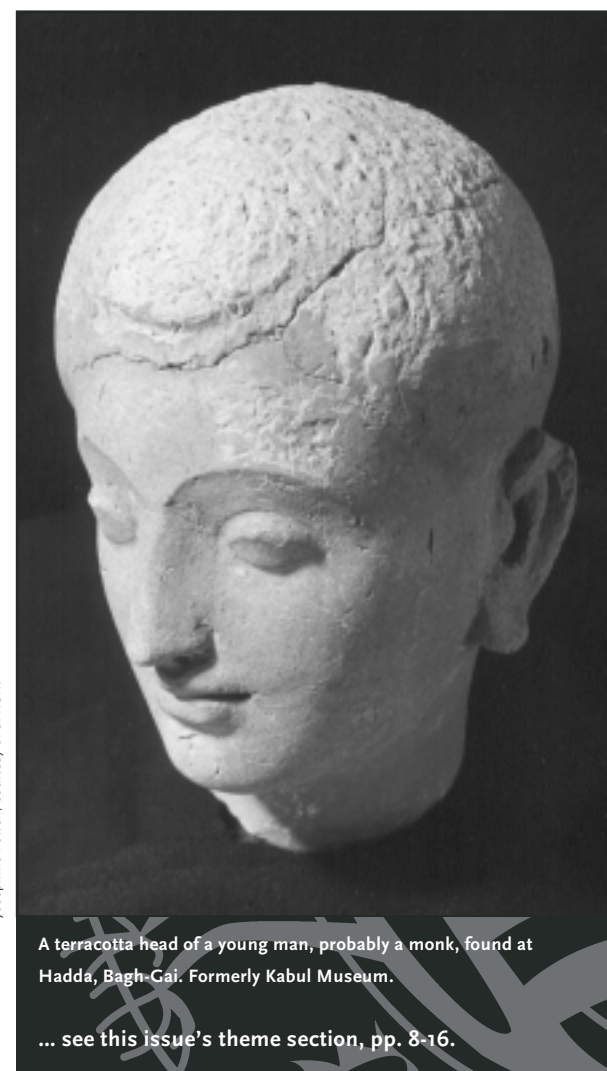
The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago is wonderfully comprehensive and lucid, doing justice to the man who pioneered the study of Islam and Islamization of the Malay archipelago. It is hoped that with the publication of this book the debate over the question of Muslim identity in Southeast Asia can be reactivated, but then on the right track. <

Reference

- Gordon, Alijah (ed), *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*, Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) (2001), 472 pp., No ISBN

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A terracotta head of a young man, probably a monk, found at Hadda, Bagh-Gai. Formerly Kabul Museum.

... see this issue’s theme section, pp. 8-16.

Notes >

1 See: Syed Naquib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, (1963).