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.” 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 Muslim scholars, students - 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.

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 Orientarium was published in 1978, the same year that Naquib al-Attas’ 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 Malay academic Rudolf Aernoud Kern in a volume entitled The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago has managed to put together a collection of important writings by the prominent historians of Malay Studies, Denys Lombard, and Claudine Salmon. Rudolf Kern also renders similar observations in scholarships in 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 Orientarium was that it opened the door for a flood of works of many contemporary Islamist scholars, stands in the light of close scrutiny.

Evidence to the early presence of Islam in the Malay archipelago also testifies to this. In his important essay on the famous Trenggana 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 Trenggana 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 still today, even in the rites and rituals of some ethnic groups, used to signify the highest deity.

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 on a number of levels. Working within the communicative babybooster of the period, Kern explores the etymological roots and development of key concepts in Malay culture like kuasa (power), kuasaikan (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 with ease and why 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 written 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? (index). Kern also shows that the pre-Islamic past in the experience of Islam lived in the Malay world abounded. The very word “sembahyang” (prayer/kuasa) literally means to pay homage (sembah) to Hyang (the Primordial ancestor of pagon 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.

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.

References

Dr Farish A. Noor (Dr Badrol Hisham Ismail) was a visiting fellow at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), Leiden. E-mail: kernaas@hotmail.com


A typical headdress of a young man, probably a monk, found at Hadiillah, Bung-Cair. Formerly Kabul Museum.

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

By Farish Noor

There are two problematic elements in this thesis. The first is the claim that the coming of Islam represented a traumatic break from the past, despite the 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 written 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? (index). Kern also shows that the pre-Islamic past in the experience of Islam lived in the Malay world abounded. The very word “sembahyang” (prayer/kuasa) literally means to pay homage (sembah) to Hyang (the Primordial ancestor of pagon 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. 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.

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