

Rescuing History from the Orientalists: Syed Muḥammad Naquib al-Attas and the History of Islam in the Malay World

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Abstract

Exploring Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's interventions into debates regarding the history of Islam and the processes of Islamisation in the Malay World, this article argues that al-Attas's unique contribution to the Malay-Islamic historiography could only be fully understood by directing our attention to the problems of orientalism which al-Attas has sought to address. Al-Attas is critical of prevailing paradigms and methods of analysis adopted by orientalists which, to him, have obscured the circumstances that led to the venture of Islam in early modern Malay world. Aside from scrutinising al-Attas's attempts to correct and expose the errors committed by a select group of scholars and intellectuals, the article illuminates the new pathways that al-Attas explored to expand the frontiers of the history of Islam in the Malay World.

Keywords

Islam, orientalism, Malay world, history, methodologies, sources.

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The history of Islam and the processes of Islamisation in the Malay World have received wide attention from scholars in Asia and elsewhere as evidenced by a flurry of important works on the subject published in recent years.¹ Varying—and sometimes conflicting—interpretations have been presented and aired, and the points of contention are on issues pertaining to the question of origins and influences, as well as the backgrounds of persons and institutions responsible for the spread of Islam in this region, notwithstanding the collateral consequences which flowed from the shift in religious affiliations among the Malays. To this must be added a mention of the unending inquiries into the nature and validity of evidence available. While the old school orientalists have cast much doubt over indigenous sources that they claim to have been tainted by myths and legends, a new generation of scholars have begun to subject such sources to fresh scrutiny to reconstruct the spread of Islam in the Malay World.² Still, the predominant view has it that European, Chinese and Arabian accounts of developments in the Malay world provide us with a supposedly more dependable depiction of events and happenings in the Malay world especially in the early modern period when Islam first gained its adherents in the region.³

The Malaysian scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's recently published monograph, *Historical Fact and*

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1. Hui Yew-Foong, ed., *Encountering Islam: The Politics of Religious Identities in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013); Joseph Camilleri and Sven Schottmann, eds., *Culture, Religion and Conflict in Muslim Southeast Asia: Negotiating Tense Pluralisms* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012); and, Farish A. Noor, *Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).
 2. Ronit Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Tatiana Denisova, *Refleksi Historiografi Alam Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: UM Press, 2010).
 3. See, for example, Derek Heng, *Sino-Malay Trade and Diplomacy from the Tenth through the Fourteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

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Fiction,⁴ should be regarded as a major intervention into the debates surrounding the writing of the history of Islamisation among the Malays and of the religious transformations of a region which the Malays view as the cradle of their civilisation. The book marks a culmination of the author's decades of engagement on the subject and his efforts at reiterating certain cogent points that have not been deliberated upon at length by contemporary scholars. To readers unfamiliar with al-Attas's prodigious scholarship and lifelong commitment to revising the history of Islam in the Malay World, this book might seem out of place. Al-Attas is, after all, a Muslim philosopher whose central interests have always been in the realm of the metaphysics of Islam. If such categorisation is not enough to situate al-Attas within a vocation which he has never claimed as his own, historians and social scientists have been relatively lukewarm (if not outright dismissive) of al-Attas's contributions to the historical discipline in general and the historiography of Islam in the Malay World in particular. Mona Abaza and Geog Stauth, for examples, held that al-Attas is but an "anti-Orientalist Orientalist" or a prodigal son of the very group of elitist European scholars he had sought to demolish. In the same vein, Farish Noor locates al-Attas, his writings and ISTAC (Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization) squarely within the Islamisation programme sponsored for many decades by the Malaysian state. It is a programme that coloured al-Attas's writings in a manner that over-emphasised the role of Islam in shaping Malay history above and beyond other religions that predated it.⁵

4. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Johor Bahru: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Press, 2011).
5. Mona Abaza, *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 90; Farish A. Noor, "The Localization of Islamist Discourse in the Tafsir of Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, Mursidul Am of PAS," in *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, ed. Virginia Hooker and Norani Othman, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2003), 195–235; and Geog Stauth, *Politics and Cultures of Islamization in Southeast Asia* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2002), 187–228.

Hyperbolic and, to some extent, apocryphal, these criticisms are well worth considering, for they tell us much about the shifts in the present scepticism towards the Islamisation project in a globalised world than about al-Attas as a scholar of Islam. Yet, it is important to recognise that al-Attas's contributions in widening the frontiers of the history of Islam in the Malay world have so far remained unsurpassed by any contemporary local scholar based in the region.⁶ This holds true especially of his early works which, as Peter Riddell has perceptively observed, included a wide range of topics covering “Malay Sufism, doctrinal conflict among competing Sufi groups and scholars, and the transmission of Islamic thinking from the Arab World to Malay world.”⁷ However, Riddell's appraisal overlooks the fact that al-Attas was not only interested in reconstructing and revising substantive issues about Islam in the Malay World. Rather, at the core of his oeuvre is his concern with the ways in which the history of Islam and its believers in the Malay world has been approached. Al-Attas was and is still critical of prevailing paradigms and methods of analysis that have failed to portray the history of Islam in the early modern Malay world in the most accurate way possible. His entire career has been dedicated to correcting the errors committed by a select group of Orientalists and their problematic attempts at explaining the venture of Islam in the region.

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6. Even so, no extensive discussion of al-Attas's contributions to the study of Southeast Asian Islamic historiography is made in the colossal Festschrift in honour of his lifetime achievements. This does not in any way downplay the value and importance of the much needed Festschrift though such oversight is rather unfortunate, especially given that history forms the axis that binds most, if not all, of al-Attas's writings. See Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, eds., *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* (Skudai: UTM Press, 2010).
 7. Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesia World: Transmission and Responses* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2011), 234.

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Thus, to understand al-Attas's unique contribution to the Malay-Islamic historiography, we must direct our attention to the problems of orientalism which al-Attas has sought to address. Scholarly deliberations in Malaysia on the challenges posed by orientalism in Malay-Islamic historiography are, of course, not unique to al-Attas, and are found in the writings of Syed Hussein Alatas, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin and Syed Farid Alatas, to name a few in our time.⁸ Be that as it may, a comprehensive survey of al-Attas's writings tells us that he clearly stands above his peers in that respect. Since the beginning of his foray into the world of scholarship and up until the publication of his latest book, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, al-Attas has been consistent in providing not only critiques of orientalism, but also pathways to transcend it. Although al-Attas did not dedicate an entire monograph to orientalism as a distinct topic and object of study in its own right, he interwove it into the substance of his writings. In the following pages, I will illuminate and probe into these topics found in *Historical Fact and Fiction* and the larger corpus of his work to bring to attention a neglected aspect of his contribution to Malay-Islamic historiography.

The problem of orientalism

There are many definitions of the term "Orientalism" but the most influential and in keeping with al-Attas's ideas has been the one outlined by Edward Said. The Palestinian-American scholar defined "orientalism" in a number of inter-related ways, that is, as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in the European Western experience," as "a library of archive and information," as "a

8. For a review of works by Malaysian scholars on Orientalism, see Syed Farid Alatas, *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006).

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manner of regularized writing, vision and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient . . . The Orient is taught, researched, administered and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways,” and as “a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness and later, Western Empire.”⁹

Like Edward Said, al-Attas saw orientalism as a form of knowledge that essentialises Islam, stripping it of its worldly dynamism as both a faith and a lived experience.¹⁰ The orientalist were responsible for essentialising the history of Islam in the Malay world in ways that would tacitly cast it as a regressive period, or at least, a sterile phase in comparison to those years that preceded and followed it. In the Orientalists’ formulation, the coming of Islam signalled the rapid end of a cultural renaissance among the Malays as evidenced in the destruction of monuments, artworks and relics that were built during the times of the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms.¹¹ The orientalist also essentialised Islamisation in the Malay world by depicting it as merely a veneer overlaying a pre-existing system of beliefs. “Strip away the obvious accretions,” as the orientalist Richard Winstedt once wrote, “the names of Hindu deities, the thin Muslim veneer, and the essence of the ritual remains intact in Malaya today.”¹² From this point of view, the conversion of Malays to Islam was historic, but it was neither revolutionary nor disruptive in bringing about a total transformation of the religious beliefs of the Malays. Such essentialising is a lynchpin of orientalism, and it obfuscates the realities and complex of Islamisation, according to al-Attas.¹³

9. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 1, 3, 202, and 203.

10. *Ibid.*, 278.

11. Thomas Stamford Raffles to Rev. Thomas Raffles, Bencoolen, 10th February 1815, MSS. Eur. F202/6.

12. Richard Winstedt, *The Malay Magician: Being Shaman, Saiva and Sufi* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1982), 39.

13. Syed Naguib Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969), 5.

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Al-Attas, however, differs from Edward Said in one fundamental way. He does not conceive of orientalism as leading to the material domination of the Orientals through the colonial and postcolonial periods. In other words, al-Attas does not equate orientalism with colonialism or neo-colonialism per se and does not attribute the orientalist's jaundiced attitudes to the project of mission civilisatrice (civilising mission). While orientalist scholars like Snouck Hurgronje and Thomas Stamford Raffles may have employed knowledge in the service of imperialism and as a civilising and missionising tool, al-Attas believes that it is more crucial to recognise that their writings were guided and structured by a secularist worldview (*taṣawwur*) that was an outcome of the "tragic marriage" between a corrupted version of Christianity and the philosophies and cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.¹⁴ The influence and consumption of their writings by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars has resulted in the *secularisation* of knowledge, thus enabling the conditions for the rise of confusion and the loss of *adab*, a term defined by al-Attas as the loss of justice.¹⁵ More crucially, the orientalist's writings brought about a volte-face in the interpretations of Malay-Islamic history towards a secularist interpretation, an interpretation that assigns more significance to material factors as the driving forces of history than to religious and spiritual factors.

The orientalist also cast doubts over indigenous sources and interpretations relating to Islamisation and the growth of Islamic culture. John Crawfurd, for example, whose *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* is still regarded as a source of reference for the study of Malay

14. Syed Naguib Al-Attas, *Concluding Postscript to the Origin of the Malay Sha'ir* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1971), 50–51.

15. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization [ISTAC], 1993), 106.

history, observed that Malay manuscripts such as the *Annals of Kedah* is but “a dateless tissue of rank fable from which not a grain of reliable knowledge could be gathered.”¹⁶ Doubt towards all subjects and knowledge foreign to their own traditions is the starting point of the orientalists’ inquiry and their methods of inculcating doubts were manifold. The most common was that they tended to support each other’s conclusions, thereby creating an aura of authoritativeness that would, in the last analysis, rule out other alternative indigenous postulations and facts. This can be most vividly illustrated in the case of discussions by A. Teeuw’s writings on the origins of Malay *sha‘ir* and H. S. Paterson, C. O. Blagden and G. W. J. Drewes about the inscriptions on the Terengganu stone.¹⁷ Al-Attas held that the aforementioned scholars’ doubts about the fact that Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī was indeed the originator of Malay *sha‘ir* and that the dates that were inscribed on the Terengganu stone were defective developed from their presumption that pre-existing orientalist interpretations were trustworthy, even if they required some minor modifications. One presumption thus led to another and, along with the orientalists’ lack of knowledge of Arabian calligraphy, semantics and the Muslim sciences, the end product was the invention of the idea that indigenous sources are unreliable. To al-Attas, such doubts are:

. . . not knowledge—the more so when it is “inconclusive”; when acceptance of its belief is based on articulate vagueness pretending to clothe itself in the garb of reasoned “general grounds”; when it is led towards the precipitous abyss of falsehood by blind “feeling”; when it contradicts itself that there is no reason to doubt and yet still doubts; when in fact it does so not because of the problematic nature of the historical situation, which it invariably

16. John Crawfurd, *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands & Adjacent Countries* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1856), 362.

17. Syed Naguib al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sha‘ir* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1968), 3.

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makes out as a scapegoat for failure to achieve positive knowledge, but because of the scholar's own ignorance of the limits of his own knowledge of the subject.¹⁸

He highlighted that Drewes, for that matter, had never seen the stone in its physical state and made his theoretical formulations based on his predecessors' assumptions and through incomplete pictures of the stone made available to him.

The other problem with orientalism, according to al-Attas, is the decoupling of the Arabian-Islamic influences in Malay life and thought. Because the orientalist saw many things through Indic spectacles and regarded developments in the Malay world as largely shaped by influences from India, they refused to acknowledge the roles of other figures and collectives that played an equal or greater role in the making of Islamic communities.¹⁹ The distinct roles of Haḍrami Arabs are often neglected in most studies of Islamisation, and in the isolated instances where prominent personalities from this social group are mentioned, it is often the case that their ethnic backgrounds are ignored or that their inventiveness is downplayed. Further, the orientalist also drew dichotomies between what they conceived as the "Malay language" as opposed to what was labelled as "foreign." The Arabian influences upon the Malay language were regarded as corruptions to the Malay language. By doing this, the orientalist sought to downplay the importance of words and terms adopted from the Arabic lexicon into the Malay language and pave the way for the creation of a language that is free from Islamic elements.²⁰

18. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription* (Kuala Lumpur: Museums Department, 1970), 7.

19. G. W. J. Drewes, "New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia?," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkkunde* 4, no.124 (1968): 433-459.

20. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, "Pendita Za'ba: Satu Penghorma-

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There is also a prevailing tendency among the orientalists to postdate the crucial events connected to Islam in the Malay world and to construct periods and phases in ways that is in congruent to their biased view of Islamic history. In al-Attas's view, dates, periods and phases in history should not be taken for granted because they symbolise a particular way of organising historical data that have implications on how the present is understood. As the Chinese historian Prasenjit Duara has observed, periods and phases confer "meaning on individual identity."²¹ The orientalists' dating and periodising of events often coincide with the propagation of colonialism and Western modernity in the region. Proceeding from that basis, the orientalists argue that Islam would not have made much of an impact in the Malay world and that the momentum of its spread would not have been quickened if not for the presence of the Europeans who came to institutionalise their ideas and practice of colonial mercantilism and secular values. In other words, the Europeans and not the Muslim missionaries were vital factors in laying the conditions for Islam to flourish.²²

Finally, al-Attas underlines the orientalists' inclination to judge Islam in the Malay World and the writings that have been produced by Malay writers based on categories that are familiar to them. The orientalists couched Malay literature as consisting of poems, romance, epics, or folklore meant for mere entertainment. Because of this, they could not discern that these works functioned as missionary texts just as they were a source of relaxation and enjoyment of the listeners. The orientalists' greatest failure here, according to al-Attas,

tan," in *Bahasa dan Kesusasteraan Melayu*, ed. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan Malaysia, 1976), 4–5.

21. Prasenjit Duara, "Transnationalism and the Challenge to National Histories," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 30.

22. Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement*, 31.

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was that they were unable to analyse local texts and practices on their own terms and in their true essence.²³

Transcending orientalism

Is there a way out of orientalism? Al-Attas's answer to this vital question that has been repeatedly raised by followers and detractors of Edward Said is not to dwell on a drawn-out critique of orientalism and thereby give significance to the very knowledge that ought to be decentred in the first place. Nor does he claim to "indigenize" or even offer "alternative discourses" to the histories written by the orientalist and their interlocutors. His antidote to orientalism lies instead in transcending the limits of orientalist thought by reconstructing the histories of Islam and Muslims in the Malay world. This requires a few steps and, with these moves, al-Attas provides us with the means, even if in relatively unelaborated forms, by which the history of Islam in the Malay world could be rescued from the orientalists.

First, there is a need to understand in clear terms just who the orientalists are and their respective positions in regard to Islam in order to avoid the fallacy of nativist fundamentalism that would lead to unjust attitudes towards useful knowledge and indifference towards writings by persons foreign to one's culture and origins. On this score, al-Attas approach is analogous to the medieval Islamic philosopher, al-Ghazzālī (1058–1111), whom he held in high regard. Confronted with the challenges of Hellenistic philosophy, al-Ghazzālī advocated a middle course between a total rejection and assimilation of the Hellenistic corpus into the study of Islam. In the same vein, al-Attas did not share the view among many critics that orientalism was a necessarily European phenomenon or that orientalists shared common attitudes

23. Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir*, 13.

towards Islam because they all hailed from Europe or that all of the orientalist's findings and arguments are to be rejected. This is the slippery slope of Occidentalism or "Orientalism-in-reverse" that al-Attas is conscious of. There is nothing ethnic about orientalism except for the fact that the practitioners of that form of knowledge share common epistemological starting points—secularism and the assumption that the Orient is inferior—which characterise most but not all Western scholarship. Hence, even a non-European scholar could be regarded as an orientalist if his/her analysis of Malay-Islamic historiography is guided by the predetermined notions and bias against the contributions of Islam and Muslims in the Malay world and the will to secularise Islamic histories. The effacement of vital facts and memories of Islam and Muslims, the excessive scepticism towards indigenous perspectives and sources and the obsession with the exotic, as well as the belief in the regressiveness of the Orientals and *the tainting of theories with settled aversion towards Islam* forms the essential rubrics of the Orientalist endeavour.²⁴

Because of this non-racial definition of Orientalism, al-Attas exhibits a balanced and judicious acceptance of certain aspects of knowledge from the orientalists from Europe and elsewhere. Orientalism is to be rejected and corrected only when its errors get in the way of a true depiction of Malay-Islamic society and history. The works of orientalists must be credited in instances when they exhibit a perceptive and in-depth understanding of the histories of the Islam. For example, al-Attas acknowledges Van Leur's famous thesis that "Hinduism, as the Malay-Indonesian practiced it, was merely a superstructure maintained by a ruling group above an indifferent community."²⁵ Other Orientalists for whom he has

24. Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, xiii.

25. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970), 186.

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high regard include Bertold Spuler, Henri Pirenne, Hamilton Gibb, Toshihiko Isuzu, A. J. Arberry, Mortimer Wheeler, and Richard Winstedt. In the first few pages of *Historical Fact and Fiction*, al-Attas wrote at length that:

European historians of the Malay Archipelago comprising prehistorians, ethnologists, archeologists, philologists, sociologists and other scholars belonging to the social sciences, have meticulously researched and brilliantly elaborated their cogent findings with such diligent and inspiring scholarship that evokes due praise. We much sincerely acknowledge their wonderful intellectual contributions and affirm what is true in their interpretation of our history which they have gradually set in the crucible agreed among themselves.²⁶

To this must be added the proposing of new and more grounded theories of the origins of Islam and the spread of new forms of knowledge in the Malay world through the agency of Muslims. To theorise, according to al-Attas, is not to engage in mere conjecture or speculation, which is prevalent among a select group of scholars. Theories are supposed to be verifiable but not irrefutably verified. Any effort at theorising about the processes of Islamisation must begin with the premise that the spread of the faith was unique in its own way and should not be spuriously compared with other religions that came prior to it or other ideologies that came after. Islam first laid its roots in the hearts and minds of the Malays. It follows then that a theorist of Islamisation must understand first the exceptional nature and unique character of the coming and spread of Islam. It is exceptional because, unlike the propagation of Hinduism and Buddhism in the Malay World, which led only to the conversion of the literary elites whose acceptance of those faiths was only skin-deep, Islam brought about a mass

26. Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, xi.

conversion of the body and the spirit among the Malays.²⁷ But how did al-Attas arrive at this?

To him, such theories could only be conceived if historians free themselves from “the epistemology and methodology of the social sciences” which would inevitably lead to their confused understanding of Islamic civilisation.²⁸ No specifics are given about who these historians are and what branches of the social sciences he openly disapproves of, but it may be speculated that al-Attas is referring to his contemporaries, especially those Malaysian scholars in the 1970s, who were enamoured with sociological (read orientalist) theories on Islamic civilisation. Al-Attas views these theories as problematic because they consist of value-driven judgements. Influenced by such theories, Malaysian scholars promoted a developmentalist and evolutionary theory of Islamisation. In brief, proponents of this theory believed that all societies move from one stage to another in a linear fashion, that is, from the traditional or primitive stage to a modern and industrialised era. Islamisation in the Malay world is couched as a transitory stage to modernity, a supposition which al-Attas plainly rejects, as we shall see later.²⁹

Having freed themselves from the taint of social sciences, theorists of Islamisation and Islamic history must acquaint themselves with a whole mass of indigenous and non-indigenous sources, which can provide evidence for origins, and spread of Islam. According to al-Attas,

It seems to me that before one can formulate any theory—historical or otherwise—one must, on the basis of the *facts* gathered from what one knows and on the basis of *inferences* and *implications* about the

27. Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement*.

28. Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, xiv.

29. See, for example, Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernization, Religion, Social Change and Development in South-East Asia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), 24.

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relevant past or even present, that can be *deduced* from those facts, make positive statements of the nature of justifiable assumptions or even postulates in order that the theory may take definite shape.³⁰

Often regarded as unreliable due to stories that are deemed as imaginary, Malay texts should be revisited and read more closely for they provide clues to some processes at work in the making of Muslim societies in the region. The method he advocates in analysing these varied sources is by way of semantic analysis of the concepts used in these texts. Here, he is indebted to the works of the Japanese Islamicist, Toshihiko Izutsu, who argued that an analytic study of the key words within a given language could aid scholars to attain “a conceptual grasp of the *Weltanschauung* or world-view of the people who use that language as a tool not only of speaking and thinking, but, more important still, of conceptualizing and interpreting the world that surrounds them.”³¹ By analysing the keywords and concepts which were found in the works of early modern Muslim mystics and scholars such as Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī and Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī and of texts such as the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* and *Sejarah Melayu*, al-Attas shows how Islam had brought a shift in the worldview of the Malays towards adopting a more reasoned and scientific approach to life and belief.³²

Al-Attas also places a high degree of importance on material remains such as tombstones to determine dates of conversion and other important events. Beyond that, it is only proper for a historian to compare Arabian, Persian, Chinese,

30. Al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sha‘ir*, 5.

31. Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 11.

32. Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Faṣṣūrī*, 142ff.; idem, *Islām: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, reprint 1992); and idem, *The Concept of Education in Islām: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement Malaysia, 1980).

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and European accounts with indigenous sources and not to give more importance to one source over another except in instances where historical accounts found in any of these sources defy known facts, logic and sound reasoning. Writing in the tradition of the Muslim historian Ibn Khaldūn, al-Attas proposes that imagination and intuition must be used to predict and explain certain events and trends through these sources, and why certain personalities did what they did in a given context.³³

By utilising these methods of approaching the sources, al-Attas is at pains to point out that with Islam came manifold and unprecedented changes in Malay societies. The coming of Islam, as he forcefully points out, “was the most momentous event in the history of the Archipelago.”³⁴ In the realm of literature, Malays were introduced to new genres of writing such as the *sha‘ir*, which was already well-established in the Arab-Persian world before finding its way into the Malay world. The person responsible for this was none other than the *Ṣūfī* mystic Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī, whose prose and poems represent not only a rupture in “the field of Malay mystical literature, but also in the field of Malay literature in general.”³⁵ While orientalist saw Ḥamzah’s works as unoriginal and were replicas of texts that could be found in other parts of the Muslim world, al-Attas maintains that “Ḥamzah was not merely translating what these Sufis had written, and connecting these translations together to form an intelligible whole; he also demonstrated that he had a total grasp of their ideas and put them, for the most part, in his own phraseology.”³⁶ Hence, Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī, and not Munshi Abdullah, should be regarded as the father of Malay literature.

33. Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, 1–41; and idem, *The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription*.

34. Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement*, 2.

35. Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Faṣṣūrī*, 178.

36. *Ibid.*, 14.

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The planting of the seeds of the Islamic culture in the Malay world also contributed to the enrichment of the Malay language, according to al-Attas's Islamisation theory. The vocabulary and terminologies found in the Malay language expanded with the mass conversion of the Malay literati into Islam. In fact, the language was transformed into becoming a vehicle for philosophical discourse and this had inspired the founding of new forms of creative writing and upgraded the use of Malay from the language of seamen and the market to the language of scholars and the learned. Other consequences of the transformation in the Malay language were the change in the naming of days and months in the calendar used by the Malays and the adoption of terms and writing styles derived from the Arabic script. This in turn had the effect of linking and exposing the Malays to a wider community of believers that has established their fame and foothold into much of the world. The Malay civilisation grew in size and opulence because of this sense of being a part of a once flourishing civilisation until the advent of formal colonialism.³⁷

One other step that is essential to transcend the problems of orientalism is to redefine certain terms that have been used to explain the history of Islam in the Malay World. Three terms—modern, Islamic civilisation, and Islamisation—preoccupy al-Attas throughout his career. He held that the term “modern” used by contemporary scholars explains the European experience but not the Islamic societies in the Malay world. To be modern in the European sense is to revolt against the teachings of the Church, to uphold reason and oppose faith based on unfounded fact. The term “modern” in European history implies the spirit of individual freedom and a humanistic and internationalistic outlook on life. The

37. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1984), 40–41.

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coming of Islam in the Malay World too ushered in rationalistic, humanistic, and internationalistic outlook but that phase is not considered “modern” in the European sense because it did not entail a revolt against the Church and the exercise of individual freedom above and beyond the interests of the Muslim community. The “modern” in the light of the history of Islam in the Malay world should be understood as a process that brought about a revolution in the spiritual, cultural, and material spheres of Malay life and thought towards embracing the idea of the unity of God (*tawhīd*), the upholding of the spirit of the *shari‘ah* (religious law), and the fusing of the practices and ideals of *taṣawwuf* (spirituality).³⁸

As for civilisation and Islamisation, al-Attas sees both terms as constituting twin processes. To him, no proper definition of these terms has been attempted. Viewing these processes as dynamic, complex, changing, and inter-related, al-Attas stresses that the Islamic civilisation could only be realised by eradicating societies of the godless elements and irrational practises which run contrary to the religion of Islam. That process does not entail a complete rejection of past legacies but incorporation of the old and the new into a unified system. To quote him at some length here for the reason that his definition is clear and self-explanatory:

I define Islamic civilization as a civilization that emerges among the diversity of cultures of Muslim peoples of the world as a result of the permeation of the basic elements of the religion of Islam which those people have caused to emerge from within themselves. The process by which such emergence comes about is called Islamization, which is the liberation first from the magical, mythical, animistic and ethnic cultural tradition incompatible with Islam, and then from secular control over one’s reason and one’s language. Whatever basic and praiseworthy elements of the pre-Islamic civilization that bind

38. Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 170.

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people together and are accepted as compatible with Islam become part of Islamic civilization. It is a living civilization whose pulse describes a process of Islamization, not in the dialectical sense of an evolutionary 'development', but in the sense of a progress involving every generation of Muslims towards realization of the original nature and spirit of Islam as something already established in history; in the sense of an unfolding of the theoretical and practical principles of Islam in the life of the people; in the sense of an actualization of the essentials and potentials of Islam in the realms of existence. This progress, unfolding, and actualization depend upon the levels of knowledge of Islam, of intellectual and cultural attainment of the peoples in which the progress, unfolding and actualization occur. Islamic civilization is therefore a manifestation of unity in diversity as well as of diversity in unity. In terms of cultural history Malay civilization is an Islamic civilization.³⁹

Conclusion

Al-Attas's impact on the study of the history of Islam in the Malay World is evident from the frequent references to his works in most books on the subject. His influence upon the present generation of Islamic thinkers in the Malay World is undoubted and the Islamisation programme, of which he was a pioneer and leading expert, has gained the attention of thinkers and intellectuals beyond the Southeast Asian borders. This notwithstanding, very little attention has been given to explicate on his concerns with regard to the problems of historical writing, methodology and analysis particularly on the issues he took up against those works that were borne out of the biases of orientalism. The ways in which al-Attas sought to transcend these problems and critique the suppositions of the orientalist remains a neglected topic even by his most ardent admirers and followers.

39. Al-Attas, *Historical Fact and Fiction*, xv.

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Many reasons could explain such a state of affairs, the most plausible would be the continual assumption that al-Attas's most enduring impact resides only in the realm of Islamic philosophy and metaphysics. Another reason could be the attitudes which most local scholars have had in regard to the writings of home-grown scholars and intellectuals. As I have indicated elsewhere in a study of Dr. Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, a pervasive assumption that exists among Malay scholars offers little by way of conceptualising, theorising, and explaining the various transformations in local societies. Lacking in the theoretical sophistication as well as the methodological rigour that are felt to be present in the works of their South Asian, Arabian and African counterparts, the works of Malay scholars such as al-Attas are often mined solely for facts and figures, literary styles, and linguistic conventions rather than for wide-ranging insights and relevant generalisations.⁴⁰

Thus, it is only timely that we step out of this intellectual quandary. One of the crucial steps towards that direction is to revisit and scrutinise the works of local scholars such as al-Attas to open up new vistas in the study of Islam in the Malay World. Indeed, it is in the history of Islamisation in this part of the world, the relating of stories about personalities and collectives that have sowed the seeds of Islam, the uncovering of sources that have by far been neglected and misunderstood and the dismantling of the fallacies of orientalist scholarship that one finds al-Attas's most profound insights and his most lasting accomplishment.

40. Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, "A Theory of Colonialism in the Malay World," *Postcolonial Studies* 14, no.1: 7.