

BOOK REVIEWS

HISTORICAL FACT AND FICTION OR A HISTORY OF ISLAM IN THE MALAYAN WORLD

Historical Fact and Fiction,

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

(Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Press, 2011),

pp. 170+xviii. ISBN 978-983-52-0789-1,

paperback price 180 RM,

@ USD 45.00.

The English name of this book may give the impression that this book is about philosophy of history. Therefore, in order to make an indication to its actual content I made the following addition: “A History of Islam in the Malayan World”. This work, which will serve as an example to our historians, is aimed at embodying the general framework of the long history of Islam spreading in the Malay Peninsula and the Malay Archipelago of approximately 18,000 small and big islands. The Muslim world is now so far away from its identity and is in a state of incompetence, unfortunately not even writing its own history. This is also true for the region which is subject of study in this profound book; and as a result, others have interpreted our history from the point of view of their own. In this case we see more Western historians working on the Malay world such as Tomé Pires (1465? -1524 or 1540), William Marsden (1754-1836), Richard Winstedt (1878-1966), Ernst Ulrich Kratz (Emeritus Professor, SOAS) and Merle C. Ricklefs (1947- Professor Emeritus of the Australian National University). Although it is possible to count some of the new historians who are native to the region, they are mostly based on the Western studies we have mentioned. The most important of these is probably S. Q. Fatimi (*Islam Comes to Malaysia*, ed. Shirle Gordon, Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963), which the author of the present book under review criticizes and we encounter it in many footnotes and C. A. Majul (*Theories on the Introduction and Expansion of Islam in Malaysia*, Dumagnete City, Philippines: Silliman University, 1964).

In the majority of these studies, the arrival date of Islam to Malay speaking world is repeatedly placed in later periods. However, the frame drawn for the historical course of Islam in this world is very different. The frame drawn from the general course of history has a special significance in terms of determining the identity of a civilization and a culture, and therefore of a society. The author of this work, the eminent scholar, Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, criticized the adventure of Islam as portrayed by these scholars in the Malayan world (see especially p. x ff.), emphasizing this point constantly. He also tried to establish the true course of Islamic history in this part of the world based on historical sources and documents.

I had the opportunity to participate in the seminars given by the author on Malay culture and history when I was teaching at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, founded by Professor al-Attas, between 1991 and 1999. What he discussed in these seminars were very important and they were primarily related to the Islamic identity of the Malay speaking world besides on certain philosophical issues. Professor al-Attas's ideas have finally taken its place in the history with this work now that it has been published and become permanent for later generations. Al-Attas is a scholar who has a deep knowledge of history of the coming and spreading of Islam in the Malay world, and an in-depth experience in interpreting and evaluating historical sources. There is indeed no need even to emphasize the importance of the work in this respect. However, it may be somewhat difficult for those who has just been introduced to the history of Malay world to follow the course of ideas in this work. Some introductory information may be needed for this reason. In this respect, two works that we can recommend without losing the historical framework are already in the footnotes, and we have mentioned above the work of Fatimi. The other is Winstedt's *History of Malaya* (London: Luzac and Company, 1935 and Kuala Lumpur, 1982). We can add to them the sections on the Malay world of the book *Cambridge History of South East Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, volume 1) published by Nicholas Tarling. The most important drawback of *Historical Fact and Fiction* is the lack of maps. The existence of maps of certain periods could make the follow-up of historical events even easier. It is clear that identifying of places and geographical locations in events will facilitate to pursue the course of general history.

When we read this book within the light of this general information it will be easier to follow its arguments as there are three main chapters excluding the introduction of this book. The author did not give a title for each chapter and he rather preferred to separate them with Roman numerals. I found the first chapter to be the most important one. According to al-

Attas, it is necessary to consider Islamic civilization in general even in regional histories of the Muslim world. For this, we first need to define what we understand from this civilization. Then professor declares that "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 peoples have caused to emerge from within themselves." (p. xv) Now one more definition which is extremely important to al-Attas's main ideas is the following: "The process by which such emergence comes about is called Islamization" (Ibid). Here, al-Attas in his own words depicts Islamic civilization as a living civilization, which has given its pulse to the process of Islamization. Therefore, we should confirm that Malay civilization, as a history of Malay culture, is actually Islamic civilization.

"Malay" is the name of a people living since the ancient times in the Jambi region of north east of Sumatra Island. We encounter this name the Chinese sources as "Mo-lo-yeou" which is close to the Malay name in the original Malay language as "Malayu" (Bahasa Malayu). This tribe was using the Old Malay version for communication, an undeveloped language before Islam. However, Malay language has become a common language of this whole region as it has developed by borrowing many words with the arrival of Islam from Arabic and through cultural interaction from other languages in the region. In particular, Malay language, which became a commercial language with the passing of trade channels to the Muslims, became a means of communication adopted by all other tribes and became a means of spreading Islam also. One of the reasons why Muslims preferred Malay language for teaching Islam is this language as it was undeveloped at the time was not replete with pagan concepts, like the other languages of the region, since it remained away from the Indian, Tai and Chinese-Buddhist cultural influences. Thus, the Islamic concepts were taken directly from the Arabic and purely facilitated the placement of Islam in the minds without reviving the pagan effects.

The oldest sources for Islamic history in the Malay world are first shortly known as *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (The Chronicles of Pasai Rulers), entitled originally *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai*, and second *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay History). The original authors of these two works are not fully known. *Hikayat Raja Pasai* is the earliest work written in Malay language on the history of Samudera-Pasai, first Malay Muslim kingdom. Merah Silau, the first Muslim sultan of the Samudera-Pasai kingdom (Sultanate), is mentioned with different names and titles, thus leading to some confusion. According to this work, the Samudera-Pasai Sultan, later called Melik Salih, namely Merah Silau, sees in his dream the Prophet (p.b.u.), and accepts to be a Muslim when Islam is told to him. It is estimated that the work was composed in the 14th

century; but according to al-Attas, some of the events described in it strengthen the possibility that it took place before the 13th century (pp. xvii). Sometimes in the work truth may be mixed with imagination; but sometimes there are also real events that we can perceive as legends today. For example, Merah Silau sees an ant on the size of a cat and seizes it and then eats it. That is why he names this region Samandra. Although Western researchers accept this as myth, al-Attas argues that such ants can be found at that time; he then suggests that the word comes from “semantra” (big ant) which is formed by the combination of the “*semut*” (ant) and “*raya*” (great) words, which later turned into “Samandara”. This is because Western sources converted “t” to “d”, in the name of this place and hence the name of the island of Sumatra has also moved away from its original roots (pp. 10-12). Thus, al-Attas denies that the name Samudera, which Western historians advocate, is derived from the word “samudra” meaning “ocean” in Sanskrit. As evidence of this, it is shown that some works of the Islamic historians of the early centuries, there is mentioned very large ants in northern Sumatra. For example, in the book *Acâibu'l-Hind* of Bozorg ibn Shehriyar, written in the 10th century, such great ants are mentioned (p. 12).

What makes the *Hikayat Raja Pasai* interesting is in fact its introduction which is not mentioned by Western historians. Accordingly, the work begins with a hadith before telling the events. In this hadith, the Prophet (p.b.u.) orders his companions to “go to Samudra and spread Islam there” (p. 2). Historians alleged that this hadith is a fiction; but al-Attas rightly accepts the hadith in its intent to be authentic because we know that the Prophet encouraged his companions to go to different parts of the world to spread Islam. Hence it is possible that, since the words of the first companions and their followers, who tried to bring Islam to the Malay world between the years 700-750, were not recorded, and as a result the narrators of this hadith were not also recorded. Thus, only the words of these hadith were preserved among the first Muslim Malays. We already know that the Arabs had already established good trade with the Sumatra Island. It is not possible that the Prophet (p.b.u.) has not heard of the island of Sumatra because he himself was also engaged in trade. As a matter of fact, even the Qur'an speaks about products such as camphor which are brought from these regions through trade (see 76 / al-Insan, 5). Camphor is a fragrant oil obtained from camphor wood, Latin name “cinnamomum camphora”. According to al-Attas, the name of this oil is derived from the Arabic word “kefere”, because in Arabic “kefere” means “cover up” as it is known. For, camphor is covered in the tree's trunk and this oil is obtained from the trunk. The oil accumulates in the leaves and branches of this tree which grows in tropical regions such as Sumatra. Then the

oil gradually crystallizes in the tree's trunk. Both the branches and the trunk of the tree are distilled with water vapor to obtain camphor. On the other hand, we find another possibility that the word may have passed to Arabic from its original name in Malay, which is “kapur barus”. We know that Arabic does not have the sound “p” and from other languages when a word with this sound is transferred it is converted to “f” hence “kâfur”. On the other hand, I would like to emphasize that it is not possible not to join al-Attas's interpretation of the hadith mentioned at the beginning of the book *Hikayat Raja Pasai* (pp. 2-4). From this, al-Attas reaches the conclusion that in the island of Sumatra the first Muslim kingdom was founded between 750 and 800. The important clues that confirm this conclusion are mentioned in the first chapter with convincing evidence.

In the first chapter, in order to follow al-Attas's history of Islam in the Malay world one needs to be familiar with Malay historical sources. I had great difficulty in distinguishing Malay Islamic history from the paragraphs which he wrote to refuse western historian even though I had repeatedly heard from Professor al-Attas his explanations on this issue and I asked him questions concerning this and he responded to my questions also. The question that comes to mind here is: would it not be easier to understand this history if it was written in another way? I cannot but answer this question as “yes”. But then, in which way? In this case, I think that it would have been easier to follow al-Attas if the refusals had been collected in a separate chapter and the history of Islam in the Malay world was only given in this chapter. We can summarize the conclusion reached in this chapter by al-Attas as follows: Sultan Muhammad, the first ruler of the Samudra-Pasai kingdom, descended from the line of Quraysh and was probably a sayyid, meaning he came from the descendants of the Prophet's grandsons from Ali and Fatima. According to Masudi's *Murûj al-Dhahab* (Beirut: Dârul-Fikr, 1973, volume 1, pp. 167-9), in the west of India, which today lies within the borders of Pakistan's Sind province, in the emirates of Mansura, Multan and Mangir, around 10,000 Arabs from the line of Quraysh had settled in the year 911. The ruler of this place was Abu Munzir Umar ibn Abdullah al-Qurayshi. One of the two sons of this ruler was Muhammad. Now this Muhammad was brought by a group of emigrants coming from this region to spread Islam to Sumatra with the orders of the Sharif of Mecca and in turn with direct order from the Khalifa. He was thus instated in office as the first sultan of Semudra to become the leader of Muslims.

The *Hikayat Raja Pasai*'s writer confused the legendary Malay king Merah Silau with Sultan Muhammad as Malik Salih, as the writer probably wanted to incorporate some

Malay narratives with the newly emerging Islamic identity in order to be able to identify the newly formed Islamic community. We understand this also from the Arabic inscriptions on the tombstones found in archaeological research in Sumatra which apparently belonged to Muslims in the first period. However, since these writings are much distorted, they cannot be read clearly today. One thing the Western historians have missed from the eye is that they cannot examine the genealogy books of the sayyids. For at the beginning of the 20th century these tombstones were still legible, and Seyid Alevi ibn Tahir ibn Abdullah al-Haddad al-Hadremi studied these tombs in a very detailed way and read recording his readings in the work *al-Madkhal ila Ta'rikh al-Islam bi Sharq al-Aqsa*. According to this, before Sultan Muhammad there was the Islamic state there and at the beginning there was a Sultan named Malik Kamil. This is because one of the gravestones belonged to Sultan Malik Kamil. All this shows that if such resources are sought we will have clearer information on the history of Islam in the Malay world. Therefore, as it was assumed, Islam was brought to the Malay speaking world not through India and Iran, but directly by the mystics of Mecca, Medina and later by the sayyids of Yemen, who had settled in Hadramawt region. Of course there must have been a lot of Arab and Muslim groups who came via India and Iran and settled in this part of the world also. But the influence of these groups on Malay culture was not as great as the influence of the Yemeni sayyids.

In the first chapter, which ends with this conclusion, the author summarizes the influx of the sayyids coming from Yemen Hadramawt district to show how this takes place in the Malay world using mainly as his historical sources the sayyid family trees in genealogical works. The second chapter is thus focusing on pre-Islamic Malay culture and trying to show how Islam passes from the islands to Malay Peninsula and how Malaka becomes Islamic center. Islam spreading in this way has acquired many centers such as Johor, Kelantan, Patani and Brunei. The third section is a review of the general sayyid genealogies. As I mentioned above, the first part is especially important for us to learn about the history of Islam in the Malay speaking world. To make the work better understood, the point we want to reiterate to the reader is the following: This work can be very beneficial if it is read by a general Malay world of history. In this respect, we can say that the work must be translated into other Asian languages as well as into Arabic.

Alparslan Açıkgenç
Professor Emeritus
Uskudar, Istanbul