The religious, the plural, the secular and the modern: a brief critical survey on Islam in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT The embedization of Islam in Malaysia has gone through a long and complex process that involved an interaction with three major world civilizations (Indian, Chinese and European) and two colonial systems (Dutch and British) during which many aspects of its practices were reconfigured. This paper provides a brief critical survey of the evolution of the said embedization process during which Islam and the Muslims in Malaysia were moulded by a series of sociological realities, namely plural society, secularism and modernity. This has resulted, we argue, in the creation of 'moderate' Islam in Malaysia, one that is quite different from the fundamentalist image of Islam profiled in the contemporary worldwide discourse on global Islam.

KEYWORDS: Embedization process, plural society, colonialism, modernization, Islam in Southeast Asia, Malay-Muslims in Malaysia, fundamentalism and resistance, moderate Islam

Introduction

The 11 September events brought to the global centre stage, yet again, Islam and the Muslims, to be scrutinized and analysed by academics and non-academics. In that process, Malaysia occupies an interesting position for a number of reasons. First, Malaysia has been perceived, even by the Americans, as practising 'moderate Islam' when viewed against the more violent-prone and fundamentalist-oriented Arab countries. Second, Malaysia is also perceived as 'a success story' of modernization by countries of the South - many of whom are Muslim countries - for successfully combining economic growth and political stability, not only within its majority Malay-Muslim population but also between the Muslims and non-Muslims. Third, Malaysia has recently played a central role in the reshaping of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), which has 57 member countries, by slowly shifting its orientation from a highly political to a more socio-economic one.

It is inevitable, therefore, with all these 'positive attributes' many countries of the South have proclaimed that Malaysia is a 'model' to be emulated. But it is no easy task to explain a success story for the simple reason that for every right explanation there is a possible wrong one. Besides, every right explanation is not an absolute one. Neither can the success be attributed to a single factor; and if it is a combination of factors, can we identify for certain which factors are critical in creating the success and why in this particular combination and not in another? The questions are endless.

In this paper we have decided that the best way to explain the current state of the so-called Malaysian success story, especially as a Muslim majority-country, is to present a critical survey of the making of Malaysian Islam. The presentation combines narrative and analysis to allow those who have had some knowledge about Malaysia to understand its present situation better. For those who are 'experts', this essay serves as an invitation for a critical discourse on Islam in Malaysia.
Therefore, the main aim of this essay is to outline briefly the history of Islam in Malaysia, a history we thought essential for an understanding of the current renewal of Islam, both within the Malay-Muslim world of Southeast Asia and, in particular, Malaysia. It, therefore, will analyse the special character and position of Malaysian Islam, from the coming of Islam to the Malay Archipelago in the 15th century, the Malacca Sultanate period, its status during the British colonial period and its subsequent developments after independence in 1957.

To assist us identifying the various sociological facets that characterize Malaysian Islam we have chosen and used in the essay a set of terms commonly used, both in academic and popular context, to label and describe the metamorphosis that Islam in Malaysia, and elsewhere, has gone through, namely, 'the religious', 'the plural', 'the secular', and 'the modern'. The conclusion is less of a conclusion but more of an observation that suggests that perhaps the term 'fundamentalism' may not be quite the appropriate one to describe Malaysian Islam, even though the global media has adopted and elevated the term as the main criteria to homogenize and label what is now called 'global Islam'. Instead, we are suggesting that the term 'resistance' portrays and captures better the contradictions and contestations that characterize Malaysian Islam from the day Islam arrived in this region until today – hence its perceived moderateness.

Arrival of Islam in the Malay world: 'the religious' meets 'the plural'

Scholars have offered a variety of explanations and arguments regarding the coming of Islam to the Malay world (Morrison 1951, Johns 1975, Al-Attas 1967, Fatimi 1983, Alatas 1985). The whole exercise is often referred to as 'theorizing' on the Islamization of the Malay World (Hooker 1983). There are two main schools of thought in the theorizing exercise; one favours the traders and merchants and the other the Sufis.

Many historical accounts have stressed the fact that Islam was brought by traders disparately from Arabia, Persia or India thus creating an interesting polemic on who actually brought Islam to the region (Morrison 1951). According to Fatimi (1983), Hassan B. Ahmad Muhallabi, writing towards the end of 10th century, reported that a thriving port, named Kalah or Klang, existed on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula, inhabited by Muslims from Persia and India. Arnold (1913), in his famous book Preaching of Islam, cited the account of Ibnu Batuta who wrote in the 14th century that 'long before this time merchants from the Deccan, through whose hands passed the trade between Musalman states of India and the Malay Archipelago, had established themselves in large numbers in the trading ports of these islands, where they sowed the seed of the new religion' (Arnold 1913: 21). In reviewing the role of those merchants in the area, Farid Alatas (1985) seems to be convinced that there is ample evidence, that Arabs, Indians, and Persians travelled to the Malay Archipelago and even inhabited some of the more important ports there as early as the 9th century. However, he emphasized the critical role played by traders from the Arabian Peninsula, particularly from the Hadramaut region, compared with that from South Asia, based on the evidence from nearly all the early religious texts, written between the 10th and 17th centuries.

Van Luer, a Dutch historian, also believes that it was traders who played the dominant role in Islamizing the inhabitants of the region (van Luer 1955). He argues that, at the end of the 13th century, rulers of some newly arisen coastal states in northern Sumatra adopted Islam. With the political decline of the ports across the straits, on Southern Sumatra, the new trading settlement, Malacca, developed quickly and was nourished in its growing strength by the powerful trade movement of the 15th century. The Malacca Sultanate dynasty then adopted Islam to use it as a political instrument against Indian traders and other non-Muslim opponents in and around the region.

The other approach emphasized the dominant role of sufis not merchants in preaching Islam to the inhabitants of the region (Johns 1961, Al-Attas 1967). Arnold (1913) claims that the different Muslim settlements of traders in the Malay Archipelago laid a of form political and
social basis. He identified that they were indeed sufs disguised as traders in the following manner: they did not come as conquerors, like the Spanish in the 16th century, or use the sword as an instrument of conversion; nor did they arrogate to themselves the privileges of a superior and dominant race so as to degrade and oppress the original inhabitants, but coming simply in the guise of traders they employed all their superior intelligence and civilization in the service of their religion, rather than as a means towards their personal aggrandizement and the amassing of wealth.

Other scholars were more inclined to believe that Sufism played a decisive role in Islamizing the Malay world. Johns (1961), for instance, has argued that it is not usual to think of sailors or merchants as bearers of religion, as evidence from Malaysian and Javanese chronicles indicated. Indeed, only the sifi teachers were able to face the Shiva-Buddha mystics on equal terms as mystics, to teach the supremacy of the new religion. He also discusses the fact that it is characteristic of Sufism to accept non-Islamic elements as long as they do not contradict Qur'anic revelation, and furnishes as examples the use of the Sanskrit Dewata Mulia Raja instead of the Arabic Allah Ta'ala in the Terengganu inscription and the use of various sifi interpretations in the wayang kulit (Indonesian shadow-play theatres). Johns also mentions the establishment of sifi tarikat based on the different sects within, such as Qadariyah, Naqshabandiyyah, Shattariyah, and Suhrawardiyyah in the region. In fact, far from being otherworldly, these sifi orders played a specific part in the international centres of Muslim trade.

Important as these two schools of thought are in the discourse on the coming of Islam to the Malay world, one could not help but ask, what was the role of the people from the Malay world themselves, over the many centuries, in bringing-back the teachings of Islam after their Mecca trips (Geertz 1968, Roff 1967). Indeed, many of them stayed on to further their religious studies or to set up their own businesses in Mecca and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula. They were often referred to as Orang Jawi. We don't really know how big was this community of people from the Malay world who lived in the Middle East, then and now. A detailed study on the Malay diaspora in the Arabian Peninsula as well as in Egypt could reveal many interesting things and could lead to the possible revision of theories regarding the Islamizing of this region.

We would like to suggest, as a third possibility of how Islam came to the region, that the indigenous peoples of the Malay world could have been an important group in bringing Islam back with them from the Middle East, after making the trip for Hajj, and then staying on in Mecca to further their studies on Islamic theology. Upon their return they could have actively been involved in spreading Islam throughout the archipelago.

The sociological impact: embedding 'the religious'

Sociologically, Islam has had a tremendous impact upon the pre-colonial Malay world, especially in terms of spirituality, intellectual contribution and the establishment of new ground rules for social order through the adoption of the Syariah. We shall now turn to each briefly.

In terms of spirituality, the impact of Islam in the Malay world is not simply a veneer over the structure of the Malay-Indonesia society, as argued by some scholars, for it has played an enormous role in transforming both the 'body' and the 'soul' of the different societies in the Malay world (Johns 1961, Riddell 2001). In particular, Islamic mysticism of tasawuf has functioned as the strongest means of purifying the heart and intellect of the members of the Malay world societies. Through the efforts of sufs, who acted as preachers (mubaligh) to the king as well as the masses, the nature of Malay spirituality, as some Muslim scholars have claimed, has been elevated to a higher state. Foremost amongst the scholars was Al-Attas (1963, 1986). He argued that the highly intellectual and rationalistic Islamic religious spirit entered the receptive minds of the Malays of the archipelago and turned them away from all forms of mythology. Besides, he argues, the doctrine of One God, and man as essentially His creation,
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together with the equality of spirituality between man and man, gave the ordinary man in the Malay world a sense of worth and nobility denied him in pre-Islamic times.

He further argued that Islam brought spiritual refinement and knowledge to the people of the Malay world through an intellectual and rational impetus, not only to the courts, but also to the people in general, as evidenced by the fact that not all philosophical treatises were written solely for the pleasure of kings (Al-Attas 1986). The elevation of spirituality among the Malays led to the growth and proliferation of the sufi orders (tariqah), which stressed the importance of practising mystical teachings in an organized manner.

The intellectual contribution of Islam from the 15th to 17th century to Malay civilization has been most significant in providing the epistemological change, hence the establishment of a stronger Islamic-based social order in the Malay polity called KERAJAAN (Johns 1961, Day 1988, Hooker 1983: 17–19, Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1997). During that period, the Malay-Islamic literati, especially, mystical poets and writers, undertook both missionary and intellectual works to spread Islam. One of them was ‘Abd al-Ra’uf al-Sinkil (d. 1693) who is recorded as the first Malay translator of the Qur’an together with al-Baydawi’s commentary on it. However, prominent among these missionaries was Hamzah al-Fansuri (h. 1589/1604) a sufi poet and writer who belonged to the Qadariyyah Order. He was followed by another Malay sufi, Shams al-Din al-Sumatrani, Shikh al-Islam of Aceh, who was intellectually involved in the mystic doctrine of wahdatul wujud. His theosophical concerns were shared by another controversial Malay-Muslim sufi theologian, historian and missionary par excellence, Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1666).

Al-Attas (1986) explained that Nur al-Din al-Raniri’s thought had a tremendous impact in the Malay world because, firstly, he was the first man in the region to clarify the distinction between the true and false interpretation of sufi theosophy and metaphysics; secondly, al-Raniri was known as the first scholar to prepare a Malay translation of the best commentary on the creed by al-Nasafi; thirdly, al-Raniri’s Sirat al-Mustaqim is considered a classic, dealing with the essentials of Islam, and, finally, al-Raniri was also a highly celebrated Malay writer because of his book Bustan al-Salatin.

Without doubt, the most significant and central to governance in the Malay-Muslim KERAJAAN was the syariah (Roff 1985). One could say that Islamic civilization in the Malay world manifested itself by way of enacting the Islamic syariah holistically, that is, by applying syariah as the basis of social order. For example, the Malacca sultanate in the 15th century officially applied two forms of syariah-based law, namely, first, the Malacca Digest (Hukum Kanun Melaka) and, second, the Maritime Laws of Malacca (Undang-Undang Laut Melaka) (Liaw 1976). These two legal codes were complementary in providing solutions to all legal disputes. While the Malacca Digest embodied all matters of criminal and civil laws, family law, the legal power of the ruler, rules relating to proper conduct, particularly with regard to sexual matters, laws regarding slavery, and penalties for all offences. The Maritime Laws consisted entirely of rules, regulations, procedures and codes of conduct which were to be used at sea, obeyed and respected even by Muslim and non-Muslim outsiders and insiders (Drewes 1980).

Studies by Malaysian historians reveal the tremendous impact of Islam in the Malacca legal system by looking into both of these two legal codes (Liaw 1976). For instance, in the Maritime Laws of Malacca, the captain of a ship (maadini) was considered an imam (leader) and his subjects as ma’mum (followers). Similarly, the Malacca Digest contained many provisions based in the syariah in order ‘to follow injunctions in the Qur’an and enjoin good and forbid evil (amr bi al-ma’ruf wa-nahy ‘an al-munkar’). It has been observed as well that the Islamic influence was clearly felt throughout the legal texts and that many terms and concepts have been absorbed and widely used, such as imam, mu’allim, taksisr fufull, amanah, hak ta’ala, thayyib, ta’zir and mithqal.

It must be mentioned that in spite of the Islamic dominance in governance and social life of Muslims under the Malay-Muslim kerajaan there have been conflicting opinions about Islam
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and its relationship with pre-Islamic custom or adat (Mohd. Din Ali 1963). The continued practice of both the matrilineal-based Adat Perpateh and the patrilineal-based Adat Temenggong by the Malay-Muslims have created a measure of tension and conflict with syariah. Proponents of the adat tend to justify the position of adat as something not contradictory to the syariah. Besides, adat and other forms of pre-Islamic rituals, many of which have been considered as non-Islamic, still persist, such as magic, superstition, spirit worship, taboos, consultation of shamans (variously called, pawang, dukun and/or bomoh), and belief in jin and iblis (supernatural beings) permeates the life of many Malays, particularly in the villages (Endicott 1970). However, theologically, Islam has always recognized the existence of jin and iblis.

One can conclude that the coming of Islam to the Malay world constituted a new era in its history (Hooker 1983). Undoubtedly, Islam transformed many aspects of the pre-Islamic cultural practices and beliefs of the people and imbued it with an Islamic worldview, but it is an embedded version, not the ‘pristine form’ practised by the first community of believers in Mecca and Medina. Islam also brought changes in the sphere of Islamic knowledge, with Malacca exercising its special role as the centre of Islamic learning throughout the Malay world. Some have also argued that it was Islam that unified the Malay sultans in confronting the encroachment of western imperialism.

Islam under colonial rule: ‘the religious’ moulded by ‘the secular plural’

The advent of colonial rule brought about an interesting encounter between the ‘church’ (read Islam) and ‘the state’ (British colonial administration) only this time in a different empirical circumstance, between ‘Islam the religion and its believers’ and the ‘secular colonial state’. This took place in a modernizing context, one that was introduced and pursued by the colonial government. Malaysia is certainly not the first within the British colony to have experienced this. The South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Sikkim and Nepal), of course, had British rule much earlier than Malaysia.

Scholars who have studied British India, such as Bernard Cohn, have argued that colonialism involves more than just the conquering of physical space. More importantly, it involves the conquest of the indigenous ‘epistemological space’, or put simply, the dismantling of an indigenous thought system, hence disempowering it of its ability to define things, and subsequently replacing it with a foreign system, through a systematic application of a series of colonial ‘investigative modalities’. According to Cohn (1986, 1996) – an American anthropologist who studies the anthropological history of India – ‘an investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopaedias’ (Cohn 1996: 3).

In colonial Malay world, the colonial conquest of the epistemological space, through the use of various forms of investigative modalities, has resulted in the reconfiguration and reconstitution of the concept of KERAJAAN, one in which the ‘church’ (read Islam) and the state are fused (KERAJAAN in capital letters represents a fused church and state), to another version of kerajaan that separates the ‘church’ (read Islam) from the state (kerajaan in lower-case letters represents a separated church and state). The colonial and post-colonial use of the concept kerajaan is divorced from the Islamic content. This is not unexpected because when the British took over Malaysia, for instance, the whole exercise was informed by a notion of state and governance that had already been divorced from the church, as was the case in Britain. As a result, the indigenous church (read Islamic) component of pre-colonial KERAJAAN, has been systematically ‘traditionalized’ and perceived as a non-rational system, hence its position recast into a peripheral role in a larger modern-rationalist complex of a secular colonial state. The process of the transformation from KERAJAAN to kerajaan occurs in at least three critical spheres of
influence, namely, the general bureaucracy, judiciary, and education. Let us examine the Malaysian case as an example.

British colonialism in the Malaysia states has had a far-reaching impact on its society, in material and non-material form (Shamsul 1999, 2001, Alatas 1977). Despite the fact that the British did contribute to the improvement of Malaysian life, many criticize them for being responsible for whittling away the domination of Islam in Malaysian society. Al-Attas, for instance, criticized the presence of western imperialism, including the British colonialists, as attempting a consistent policy of separating Muslims from their religion (Al-Attas 1978).

The impact of British bureaucratic presence and policies can be clearly discerned in the following events (Harper 1999). First, the British began establishing itself through an indirect intervention in 1786 when Penang was acquired from Kedah, which later led to a widening of its direct involvement upon areas traditionally the domain of the Malay Sultans. British residents were stationed first in the Federated Malay States (FMS) and later in the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS). The Pangkor Treaty (1874), which was signed by the Malay sultans, gave full authority for the British to control Malaysia, stipulating that the Sultans receive and provide a suitable residence for a British Officer, to be called Resident, who was accredited to the Court, and whose advice must be asked and acted upon on all questions other than those touching Malay religion and adat (custom). It simply means that religion (read Islam) is clearly separated from secular matters such as politics, administration, law, economics, education and so forth. Islamic and Malay customs are under the jurisdiction of the sultans, the rest came under the British. Later, the British administration even violated the so-called ‘non-interference’ policy in Islamic and Malay adat. On this particular point, it is noted by historians that under the treaty, matters affecting religion and custom were under the jurisdiction of the rulers and their chiefs, even though they, in the end, were controlled and regulated by the British.

The bureaucratic changes flow into the realm of religious administration, hence religious judicial matters (Yegar 1979). Despite the fact that the British introduced some reforms in the religious aspects of the Malay-Muslim society through the Council of Islamic Affairs and Malay Customs (Majlis Hal Ehwal Islam dan ‘Adat Melayu), this newly established institution excludes the role of Islam from all aspects of life except in limited religious affairs. Hooker (1983: 16–17), a well known British scholar on Muslim laws in Southeast Asia, argued that the British motivation was to limit the sphere of Islamic law to family law and to introduce their own secular legal system. The British policy for seclusion of Syariah became evident, for instance, in a court decision in the case of Ainan vs. Syed Bakar (1939). In this particular case, the issue was raised whether a baby, delivered by Ainan after a marriage of only three months, may be considered legitimate or not. The Syariah Court considered the baby illegitimate. Nevertheless, as a result of the implementation of the Evidence Enactment Law in the Malaya Court, the court ruled that the law that should be followed is the Evidence Enactment Law not the Syariah. Therefore, the disputed baby was considered legitimate by the civil law (Suffian Hashim 1962).

The religious administrative reform restricts the independence and jurisdictions of the Islamic judges, or qadis. Their power is limited compared with the civil judges. They are denied the power to arrest and punish offenders. The British administrators only permitted the qadis to become prosecutors in magistrate courts for criminal offences. This, in fact, is in striking contrast to the powerful position of qadis in the pre-colonial period of the Malay sultanates. This is not surprising because all the laws and regulations introduced during the colonial period are taken almost completely from the British laws. The late Professor Ahmad Ibrahim pointed out that the deteriorating position of the Syariah is mainly caused by the British misunderstanding of Islam as a religion, since the term ugama Islam has been equated with the Christian understanding of religion (Ahmad Ibrahim 1978). In addition, all the senior judges were appointed by the British Resident General with the approval of the High Commissioner and were trained in the British system of law, thereby making it natural for them to refer to and
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apply English law. As a result, the power wielded by the British in implementing legal policies led to the Malaysian view of the Syariah as a legal code which is confined to personal law.

In the sphere of education, Islamic education suffers the same fate of being peripheralized or transformed into a modern form (Roff 1967, Rosnani 1996). Before the British educational policy was introduced, Islamic education had been an extremely important homogenizing socialization tool, because it provides the means by which Islam continued to flourish among the Malays. The introduction of Arabic script, popularly known as tulisan jawi, has been the oldest Islamic traditional education in this country. Traditionally, Malay children began to learn the Qur'an at home (mengaji Qur'an) by way of recitation (membaca) and memorization (menghaful). Later, these children were sent to specific houses where religious teachers, known as Tok Lebai, taught the Qur'an and personal duties (fardu 'ain). For more advanced studies in religion, Malaysian parents sent their children to educational institution such as pondok and madrasah upper level, Malay-Muslim students used kitab jawi, a popular religious book written in the Malay language using the Arabic alphabet, as their textbook on different subjects, ranging from Islamic law (fiqh), kalam (usul al-din), Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir), and the prophetic tradition (hadith) among others.

Both pondok and madrasah play important roles in preserving the Islamic identity of Malays and providing them with the core of Islamic education. Some scholars hold the view that the essence of the pondok institution for Malay society can be described as ‘template’ for the cultural view of education in Malay-Muslim society. Beginning in the 19th century, Malay society witnessed the growth of madrasah, a differentiated version of the pondok system. It is more formal and organized in terms of administration and some schools even combined theological subjects and that of secular academic and vocational ones. Important among these schools was Madrasah al-Hamidiyyah in Limbong Kapal, Alor Star, Kedah, founded in 1906.

In this school, the curriculum included the study of fiqh, tasawwuf, tafsir, hadith and a comparative study of the four fiqh al-mazahib (for schools of syariah) at a more advanced level. It is interesting to note that in Sekolah al-Diniah, which was established in 1924 in Kampong Lalang, Padang Rengas, Perak, the school’s curriculum included mathematics, history, English and commercial subjects. More importantly, the students were also taught business, the techniques of rice planting, and of making ‘catchup’ and soap. Because of its advanced curriculum, Sekolah al-Diniah became popular. With 16 students enrolled in 1924, it had about 500 pupils in 1941 and opened at least eight branches of the school in the surrounding areas.

The strength of Islamic education, as illustrated above, began to deteriorate gradually with the direct involvement of the British in educational policy (Harper 1999). Several noted Malaysian scholars have admitted that during the British regime an element of secularism was introduced into Malay society, mainly through the establishment of secular schools (Roff 1967, Al-Attas 1978). The first attempt made by the British administrators in the sphere of education was to set up English medium schools in urban areas. Only a limited number of Malays were admitted and thereby assured of employment and a high post in the administration. Meanwhile, it is interesting to observe that the British also established Malay medium and Islamic religious schools in the rural areas. The purpose of these two types of schools, according to George Maxwell, the chief secretary, was to train ‘the sons of Malay fishermen to become better fishermen and the sons of Malay farmers, better farmers’. It is clear that the British preferred the English medium school and it became their policy that Malay and Islamic education remain of lower quality than English education. Even O. T. Dussek, a famous British educator who became the first principal of the Sultan Idris Teacher Training College (SITC) in Tanjong Malim, Perak, criticized the system of English education for failing to cater to ‘the needs of the country or the state of intellectual development, or to the social culture attained by the inhabitants’ (Roff 1967: 33)

Apart from the secularization process incurred by the English medium school, the British
administrators implemented the same policy in the Malay schools (Sekolah Melayu) by initiating the following action. First, the Qur’an could be taught in schools but had to be separated from the teaching of the Malay language. Second, education in the morning was concentrated on the teaching of the Malay language. The teaching of the Qur’anic lessons could be done only informally in the afternoon. Third, teachers’ allowances from the government were meant only for the teaching of the Malay language, while parents were obliged to pay for the allowances of those teaching Qur’an lessons.

In 1905, the British administration formed, for the children of the aristocrat, the elite Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK), located in a small town called Kuala Kangsar in the state of Perak. The formation of this prestigious college strengthened the British policy towards secular education in Malay society. MCKK was formed to educate ‘Malays of good families’ and to train them to fill subordinate posts in government services. Quite apart from its excellent academic achievements, it enhanced the separation of Malay traditional leadership from the masses. The process of secularization among the Malay students became more complex with the entry of English missionary schools. Although the British officially forbade Christian missionaries from operating missions in the British Malaya, the administration allowed these same Christian preachers to establish missionary schools in towns and cities. Malay children were encouraged by the British to attend these missionary schools even though some did enrol against the wishes of their parents.

It could be argued therefore, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, with the deepening influence of secular education in Malaysia, the value of a secular education had more appeal. Thus, with the consolidation of British colonial rule we witness the rise of both religious and secular schools, which dichotomized the dissemination of knowledge within the Malay society.

The brief description above serves as an attempt to put into context the evolution of the Malay-Muslim KERAJAAN into a colonial-constituted kerajaan, in which the latter becomes only a component of a larger complex of modern state bureaucracy, based on a rationalist European knowledge structure (Milner 1982, 1988, 1995). Sociologically, it involves the ‘disembedding’ of KERAJAAN as a form of political Islam and governance. It is then reconstituted and re-embedded into a new and different epistemological mould and transformed into kerajaan. The disembedding process was not without its own drama and trauma that took place within the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia. The question is how do we characterize the struggle that took place in the disembedding process: fundamentalist, resistance, radical, discourse, negotiation, contestation or oppositionism? There is almost an endless list of terms that we can think of to characterize Malaysian Islam during the colonial era. Here we prefer to characterize the Muslim opposition towards colonialism as a struggle between ‘The Religious versus The Modern’.

‘The religious’ versus ‘the modern’: colonialism and Muslim oppositionism

It is too easy nowadays to homogenize and label any form of opposition by Muslims to anything, justified or otherwise, as simply ‘fundamentalism’. There is a fundamental analytical flaw in such a labelling or approach, one that is informed by stereotype and gross ignorance on the part of those who prefer the label. Muslim communities around the world are as heterogeneous as any other religious and non-religious communities, divided by doctrines, cultural practices and a host of other factors. Layered on top of such divides has been colonial historical experience that involved European or Western influences, which in itself is a complex process and with an equally complex outcome, some of which are irreversible. If one were to begin to understand the complex and heterogeneous nature of Muslim communities and their equally complex responses to a variety of local and global issues, a structural-historical examination of the development of a particular Muslim community is imperative. The experience of Malaysian Muslims is no exception and we shall turn to it now.
In Malaysia and other parts of the Malay world, the ulama (lit. religious specialist), who were trained in traditional Islamic education, especially the traditional oral-based pondok-type, confronted and resisted the encroachment of western imperialism, articulated in the form of anti-colonial movement, with the spirit of jihad. At the end of the 18th century, there were a number of anti-British movements nurtured by this spirit. For instance, many local historians have concluded that the murder of the Perak Resident, J. W. W. Birch in 1857 at Pasir Salak, Perak, proved clearly that there was a strong resistance movement against the presence of the British, part of which was informed by religious ideas. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Muslim-Malays in Perak, where there were a number of religious schools, felt that the British administration would jeopardize the position of Islam. Harry Ord wrote a special memorandum in 1876 explaining Birch’s murder. His anxiety can be felt when he pointed out that Muslim fanaticism without doubt had been invoked against the infidel; in this particular instance, the infidel was the British.

In Terengganu, the anti-British movement, coloured by the spirit of jihad, became very prominent in the years of 1922, 1925 and 1928 after several well-known ulama opposed the practice of English land law, which contradicted the syariah’s (Islamic law) position on individual property. H. W. Thomson, the British Resident in Perak, who was assigned to study the upheaval in Terengganu, confessed the strength of the Islamic elements: ‘Religious feeling has always run very high in Terengganu and it is probable that the religious leaders made the most of every hardship case’.

The so-called Gerakan Pembaharuan (Reform Movement) in the then Malaya was dominated by the ‘Middle East Stream’ led by Shaikh Tahir Jalal al-Din, Sayyid Shaikh al-Hadi, Shaikh Abu Bakr al-Asghar and others (Roff 1967). They were strongly influenced by the modernist thought of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1879), Shaikh Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), and Rashid Rida (d. 1935). The influence of the Arabic newspapers al-‘Urwat al-Wuthqa and al-Manar on the thought of the Malay-Muslim reformists of this era can be seen when Sayyid Shaikh al-Hadi issued a monthly newspaper al-Imam in 1926. The impact of that newspaper was clearly felt in the Malay-Muslim community. Al-Imam was described as ‘a bomb shell on the quiet scene of Islam’. Al-Hadi warned his community about the need to reform their educational objectives and abandon superstitious practices (khurafat). Al-Hadi’s Islamic reformist thinking was not without critics, however. In the context of the highly religious and ethical Malay-Muslim society, his famous novel Hikayat Faridah Hanum (the Story of Earidah Hanum), which depicted liberal ideas like the emancipation of Malay-Muslim women and the sexual lusts of youth, made him a controversial figure. Shaikh Tahir Jalal al-Din echoed the same reformist ideas. His prolific writings in al-Imam (1906-1908), al-Ikhwan (1926-1931), and Saudara (1928-1941) were very religious in content. He insisted that Malay-Muslim society utilize the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions as the best solution to its backwardness. In fact, Shaikh Tahir attacked some ulama that were responsible for perpetuating several deviated adat (Malay customary laws) in the society.

In the wave of Islamic reformism, Malay-Muslim society continued to be engaged in heated polemics between the reformists and the traditional ulama. The latter, which was categorized as Kaum Tua (traditionalist), began to feel threatened by the greater influence of the former who identified themselves as Kaum Muda (reformist). As a result, the Kaum Muda charged the Kaum Tua as the real obstacle to Malaysian progress and even the destroyers of Islam. In response to these charges, the Kaum Tua labelled the Kaum Muda as deviants and communists. Despite certain negative elements resulting from the conflicts between the two religious groups, the efforts of Muslim reformists must not be ignored (Roff 1967). Their achievements are as follows: first, they succeeded in elevating the intellectual horizons of the Malay-Muslim society through ijtihad (juridical opinion) and reducing taqlid (imitation) based upon the critical understanding of the Qur’an and the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition). Second, educational reforms were made in the religious schools by correcting the content of the curriculum.
Utilizing Islam as an ideological platform for nationalist movement is common throughout the Muslim world, including by Malay-Muslims in Malaysia (Milner 1988). Movements placing Islam at the forefront of the Malay worldview entered another historical phase just before Malaya achieved her independence in 1957. Broadly speaking, this period witnessed the emergence of the two patterns of struggle: radical and moderate. For example, Haji Wan Ahmad bin Wan Ngah, a famous ‘alim from Perak, was classified as a radical fighter who advocated the idea of Pan-Islamism. Haji Wan Ahmad urged Malaysian pilgrims to strengthen the spiritual bonds with Turkish pilgrims during the Haji (Pilgrimage) season. He even strongly urged the Malay-Muslims to substitute British colonial rule for the Turkish administration.

Another interesting development during this period was the formation of Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya or PKMM (Malayan Malays Nationalist Party) in 1945. Both Mukhtaruddin Laso and Dr Burhanuddin al-Hilmy formed PKMM to oppose British colonialism in Malaya. Although some elements of socialistic thinking were found in the leadership, PKMM succeeded in preserving its image as a Malay-Muslim political party that had the support of the majority of Malaysian Malay-Muslims. Through PKMM, Dr Burhanuddin al-Hilmy began to introduce elements of Islamic political thought.

Meanwhile, British administrators made another attempt to maintain their rule by proposing the idea of the Malayan Union in 1946. The proposal was perceived as degrading the sovereignty of the Malay-Muslim society and their Sultans (royal families). The ulama and the Malay-Muslim nationalists protested against the proposal by organizing several mass demonstrations. The Malay-Muslim ulama carried out their own protest by launching a ‘long march’ of 46 miles on foot on the northern highway from Seberang Prai to Alor Star, the capital state of Kedah, to protest the proposal. The demonstration made a tremendous impact on Malay-Muslims in British Malaya because the ulama took the opportunity to ‘advertise’ their anti-Malayan Union campaign by distributing free food, including rice, to villagers and pupils from small towns who were watching the procession.

The tense situation surrounding the Malayan Union Malay-Muslim response led to the formation of UMNO (United Malays National Organization) in 1946 (Andaya & Andaya 2001: Chapter 7). UMNO began as a loose grouping of negeri-based Malay-Muslim political associations. It was formed in response to the urgent need for Pan-Malaysian unity to oppose the British Administration’s imposition of the Malayan Union in 1946. Some have argued that the participation of the ulama in UMNO was a show of solidarity and not an acceptance of UMNO’s ideology. The majority of the ulama expressed their dissatisfaction with UMNO’s ideology, which made Islam second to ethnic Malay nationalism and expressed its opposition to the so-called Malay leftist leaders. The establishment of Hizb al-Muslimin (HAMIM, the Muslim Party) in 1948 marked a clear effort to give greater emphasis on the role of Islam. Ideologically, the basic aims of HAMIM were to achieve independence, building an Islamic-based society and creating a dar al-Islam (Islamic state) in Malaysia. In addition to these goals, HAMIM expressed its readiness to cooperate with other Malay-Muslim political parties and also Islamic movements outside the country. HAMIM’s activities gained widespread support from the Malay-Muslim community.

Identifying HAMIM as the biggest threat to British imperialism, the British invoked the 1948 Emergency Law by detaining seven leaders, including the party chief, al-Ustaz Abu Baqir. Ma’had Ihya’ as-Sharif, which based its operation in Gunong Semanggol, Perak, advanced the cause of the Islamic struggle in Malaysia, through the formation of the two Islamic organizations: Pusat Perekonomian SeMalaya (PEPERMAS, the Centre of the Pan Malayan Economy) and Majlis Agama Tertinggi Malaya (MATA, the Supreme Religious Council of Malaya).

Basically, the main aim of PEPEERMAS was to demand the rights of Malays in the economic sphere while pushing for a governmental body, elected by the people, to administer the economy. MATA, on the other hand, was intended to handle matters pertaining to the religious aspects of Islam, i.e. arrangements for Haji, collection and distribution of zakat (tithe) and fixing
the date for the ‘id (Muslim feast). MATA also demanded that the rulers surrender their
supreme Islamic powers and that elected representatives be given seats in all councils,
legislative, executive, and state, in order to safeguard Islamic interests.

_Persatuan Islam SeTanah Melayu_ (PAS or Pan Malayan Islamic Party) was formed in 1951,
marking another historical development for Islam in Malaya (Funston 1976). PAS was actually
formed by the religious section within UMNO that decided to break away from the party.
Ideologically, PAS demanded the creation of an Islamic State. As a popular political party, PAS
managed to maintain its influence among a majority of traditional ulama and ustaz (religious
teachers) and students from the traditional religious schools who were mainly influenced by
Islamic culture. In spite of the fact that PAS has not succeeded in its struggle to create an
Islamic state, its influence remains a major force in Malay-Muslim politics.

Undoubtedly, after PAS launched its Islamic struggle in Malaya, UMNO became PAS’s arch
rival. As has been noted, it was, however, UMNO that became the premier Malay political
party and it successfully formed an alliance with the Chinese and Indian political parties, MCA
and MIC, respectively. The coalition was called the Alliance Party and in the first national
election in 1955 proved very successful. Indeed, out of 52 contested seats, the Alliance won 51
and has continued to control the political scene since 1957, admittedly in a larger and expanded
coalition called the National Front party. In confronting PAS ideology, UMNO leaders rejected
outright PAS demands that Islam should shape matters of state. Likewise, UMNO leaders
expressed their Islamic orientation through the Alliance Memorandum to the Reid Constitu-
tional Commission, which advocated that Islam be considered the religion of the country, but
that religious freedom is guaranteed and the country be considered a secular state.

It could be said any discussion on Islamic-Muslim oppositionism in Malaysia during the
colonial period has to take cognizance of the fact that the Malay-Muslims as a community was
not then a unified and homogeneous social entity. They were divided along negeri divisions,
theological and non-theological issues, educational background, political party affiliations and
notions of nations-of intent (Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1997). Each of these factors led to
different forms of response and resistance both towards colonial rule as well as between
themselves amongst the divided or pluralized Malay-Muslim community. Some were informed
by fundamentalist teachings of Islam, a few by radicalism as an approach in devising political
strategies and actions and the rest were simply resisting Westernized, secular colonial rule
(Suffian Hashim 1962). Plurality and not fundamentalism characterized the Malay-Muslim
response and resistance to colonialism. This structural pattern did not change very much after
Independence of 1957. Indeed, what we observe is the strengthening of kerajaan by modern
institutions that moulded and conditioned the social life of Malay-Muslim and Islamic cultural
practices in Malaysia. We shall now examine briefly how this was successfully done by the
Malay-Muslim dominated post-colonial government.

_The modern’ dominates ‘the religious’: post-colonial Malaysian Islam_

The Malaysian Constitution became the single most important modern institutional tool that
moulded and conditioned Malaysian Islam, thus defining its socio-political space in Malaysian
government and politics. This delineation of the ‘Islamic/Muslim’ socio-political space, as we
observe today, into a rather special space, is rooted in a straightforward constitutional provision
in which every Malay person is automatically defined as a Muslim. In other words, religion
(read Islam) became the ethnic identifier (read Malayness) for the Malays. Malay politics, for
instance, has inevitably become an intra-Muslim factional contestation. On the other hand,
inter-ethnic politics, between Malays, Chinese and Indian, has often become a struggle within
the ‘identity-cultural politics’ sphere.

The special position of Islam, as provided in the Malaysian Constitution of 1957, is as
follows:
• Islam is the religion of the Federation;
• Although Islam is the religion of the Federation, there is no head of the whole Federation. The King continues to be the head of the Muslim religion in his own negeri and it is provided that he shall be the head of the Muslim religion in Malacca, Penang, in the Federal Territory and in Sabah and Sarawak. Each of the other states has its own ruler as the head of the Islamic religion in that state.
• Negeri law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the Islamic religion.
• Other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the Federation. This means that every religious group has the right: to manage its own religious affairs; to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes; and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with the law.

In spite of being given a special position, for all intents and purposes, Islamic law is subordinate to the civil law. It is limited in its scope to family law and Muslim religious offences, hence the Syariah courts have a limited jurisdiction (Peletz 2002). There is no provision made in the Malaysian Constitution for the jurisdiction and powers of these courts and for the appointment and discipline of their judicial and legal officers. It is therefore clear that, in Malaysia, Muslim laws are not applied to the whole community nor are they applied in their pure form. It is also to be noted that various negeri legislations in Malaysia, in the main, deal with the administration of Muslim laws and not with the substantive Muslim laws (MacKeen 1969. Azizan Abdul Razak 1978). It could be said that the position of Syariah law is a symbolic and not a substantive one. It fulfils a bureaucratic purpose but not as a set of laws that function to inculcate fundamental Islamic values and way of life. Furthermore, because the administration of Islamic matters and Malay customs is not centralized at the Federal level but under the jurisdiction of each negeri religious bureaucracy and its ruler, the interpretation of some parts of the Syariah laws differs from negeri to negeri (Ahmad Ibrahim 1978). This ‘independence’ is fiercely guarded by each negeri to an extent that there were occasions, not so long ago, that the commencement date of the Ramadan fasting differed in the negeri because each used different methods to ascertain the arrival of the new moon, some using astronomy and others chose physically to sight the new moon. It could be said that the legal position of Islam in post-colonial Malaysia is characterized by fragmentation and pluralization, which is ‘colonial-modern’ and not ‘Islamic’ in origin.

The plurality of Islamic teachings and legal practices in Malaysia is further complicated by an equally pluralistic Islamic education system available in the country. Interest in Islamic education has been dominated by the thought that such education has a direct bearing on the future of the ummah, or Muslim community. Accordingly, the federal government and the negeri governments have developed an official policy for Islamic education. In the national education system, since 1956, Islam is taught as a single subject, namely as ‘Islamic Religious Knowledge’. It was, however, not a compulsory subject. It was observed that the subject has three major weaknesses: first, the absence of a comprehensive examination on the subject in an integrated manner – including cognitive, attitudinal and practical knowledge – has made it a ‘lightweight’ subject; second, there is an absence of a coherent and integrated syllabus of Islamic Religious Knowledge, including the ritual aspects such as prayer, zakat, pilgrimage and some other basic articles of faith; and, third, there is an absence of comparative religious study. In short, the subject is seen as a mere lip-service on the part of the federal government, hence the ironic situation that Islamic religious knowledge is absent of any Islamic religious instruction.

At the negeri level, both pondok and madrasah began to lose their influence in many parts of the country, particularly in the Malay-Muslim dominated negeri of Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah an Perlis, in the 1950s and 1960s. Apart from weaknesses in the curriculum, Malays
parents are less willing to send their children to these schools because their children can get better job opportunities from the education offered by the government. It seems that only those who have failed from the national education system would enrol in these schools. In other words, Islamic religious education had less value compared with other secular subjects. In the 1970s, however, with the revival of interest in Islam, and eventually in the 1980s through a conscious effort at ‘Islamization’ conducted by the Malaysian government, Islamic religious education, both at the federal and negeri level, received an unprecedented boost. The number of government-funded primary and secondary religious schools increased manifold. The tertiary Islamic education expanded, Islamic faculties in local public universities were enlarged and new Islamic university colleges were established to cater for the enlarged student population specializing in Islamic education. This reduced considerably the number of Malaysian students enrolling in Islamic tertiary institutions in the Middle East and South Asia.

Although there has been a series of interesting discussions concerning the government’s definition of Islamic values, the federal government continues its Islamization efforts by initiating the setting up of Islamic institutions of various kinds (Shamsul 1997). For example, in July 1983, the first Malaysian Islamic Bank began operation. This bank is intended to provide an alternative financial system, which is run according to Islamic law. In the same year, the International Islamic University (IIU) was set up to implement the concept of integrating knowledge with morals. Later, the Syarikat Takaful, an Islamic insurance company, emerged as an alternative to present insurance companies. In intensifying Islamization in the economic sphere, the federal government restructured the poorly organized Yayasan Pembangunan Ekonomi Islam (Malaysian Islamic Development Foundation). The ongoing process of Islamization in the administration has been monitored by the Islamic Consultative Council, one of the powerful committees formed by the Prime Minister to propose policies on the Islamization programmes.

Overall, the Malaysian government’s Islamization programme not only brought Islam into the mainstream national economy and helped to increase religious consciousness amongst the Malay-Muslim middle class but also profiled Malaysia among the Islamic countries as an economically successful and politically stable multicultural Islamic nation that should be emulated by the rest in the Islamic world (Shamsul 1997: 216–222). To the non-Muslim countries Malaysia was perceived as the type of Islamic country that they prefer to befriend and conduct trade with – religious but modern and moderate. The endorsement by the USA that Malaysia is a successful moderate Islamic country is no small feat in view of the fact that most of the Islamic countries were lumped together as potentially terrorist-producing countries by the Western media and some of the Western governments. The question on everyone’s mind is what makes it possible for Malaysia, but not other Muslim countries, to be a ‘moderate’ one. The answer perhaps is not simply only in the combination of historical and structural factors that have been presented thus far, which have moulded Malaysian Islam into its present form, but is rather analytical in nature, to which we shall turn in our conclusion.

Conclusion

Many scholars who have studied Malaysia have found that it is rather awkward or unsuitable to stick a homogenized label onto Malaysian Islam, such as ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘extremist’, let alone ‘violent’, because, from the above account, it is quite clear that, the Malay-Muslim community in Malaysia is as heterogeneous as any other religious and non-religious community, divided by doctrines, cultural practices and a host of other factors (Esposito 2002, Peletz 2002). The heterogeneity has been, partly, the result of the meeting and fusion of at least three major civilizations and two colonial systems in the last 2000 years. Indeed, the colonial historical experience that involved European influences has had complex and complicated
effects, some of which are irreversible, not only upon the Malay-Muslim community but also the non-Muslims.

However, in recent times, especially, after the onset of the so-called 'global Islam', the rich, beautiful and often perplexing complexity of Malaysian Islam has been ignored or lost in the cacophony of Western-initiated anti-Islam and anti-terrorist slogans, worldwide. With or without the influence of 'global Islam', the Malay-Muslims, as a community, have undergone interesting social changes, especially, after the ethnic riot of May 1969 and, subsequently, the introduction of the pro-Malay-Muslim affirmative action policy, called the New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced and implemented in 1971. In a redefined political and socio-economic scenario, dominated by a long period of economic prosperity and growth, many from the Malay-Muslim community turned to religion to seek refuge from the perceived negative influence of overt materialism. The Islamic revival movement of the 1970s and 1980s emerged from such circumstances (Shamsui 1983).

The followers of this movement have been perceived as overly, and overtly, concerned about so-called 'Islamic fundamentals', often articulated visually, such as the wearing of turbans for men and hijab for women or other forms of apparently strict dress codes. Sometimes, the strict observation of the halal rule when it comes to food consumption has also been cited as another of those 'fundamentals'. Even the overuse of the greeting assalamualaikum (lit. peace be upon you) sometimes has been quoted as yet another fundamental that Malay-Muslims nowadays cannot do without. At a different level, the proliferation of prayer places in government offices and factories has also been used as an indicator of increased fundamentalism.

However, such developments cannot be attributed only to the so-called fundamentalists group. It emerged from a combination of activities conducted not only by the Islamic interest groups but also by opposition political parties as well as the government itself. For instance, the government has had its own Islamization policies, introduced and implemented since early 1980s, which involved a host of activities in the spheres of education, economy, administration and the arts, which were supposed to be informed or based on Islamic principles. In other words, there is a conscious and conspicuous Islamization at the level of structure and agency amongst Malay-Muslims since the Islamic revival era of the 1970s, both at the observable and structural levels (Shamsul 1983, 1997).

The impact of these Islamization efforts did not, in general, led to increased militant activities amongst Malaysian Muslims, as the dominant non-Muslim world would expect. It is articulated mainly at the discourse level. Violence was never part of the strategy in the Islamization process. As a result, many observers have labelled Malaysian Islam as 'moderate' in approach, especially when compared to the more overtly violent methods used by some prominent Middle Eastern Muslims groups, such as the Hamas, and if viewed against the activities of Muslim terrorists involved in the 11 September events (Said 1997, Esposito 2002, Peletz 2002).

If not fundamentalism, then what has been the motivating factor behind the fundamentalist-like behaviour of Malay-Muslims? Perhaps if we were to take into consideration how 'the religious' Islam, whose original home is not in the Malay world, became embedded into 'the plural' Malay world and, later, became relegated to or categorized as a non-rationalist entity in predominantly 'the secular' and 'the modern' colonial and post-colonial Malaysia, we would notice that from day one the non-indigenous Islam has inevitably entered into a situation of contradiction as a result of the pluralized nature of the society in general and the Malay-Muslim community in particular.

In his excellent recent study of religious courts and cultural politics in Malaysia, Peletz made some very interesting observations on the nature of Malaysian Islam, in particular, the dynamics of intra and inter-religious factors and the intersections between 'the religious', 'the plural', 'the secular' and 'the modern' (Peletz 2002: 277–290). Peletz emphasized repeatedly the
importance of an understanding regarding the depth and breadth of the ‘embeddedness’ of Malaysian Islam within the many civilizations and colonialisms that existed before and after Islam came to the shores of the Malay world, an opinion not dissimilar to our own (Shamsul & Aziz Azmi 2004).

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