

Al-Attas' Philosophy of History on the Arrival and Proliferation of Islam in the Malay World

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the philosophy of history of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas on the theory of the arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world, particularly in his work 'Historical Facts and Fictions'. This philosophy of history is consequent to al-Attas' critical research contained in his previous works such as 'Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of The Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago' (1969), 'Islam in the Malay History and Culture' (1972) and 'The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription' (1972). This study analyses these works and his other works to look into the aspects of history and historiography contained in the philosophy of history of al-Attas on the arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world in terms of their scope, sources and history methods. This study found that in terms of epistemology al-Attas has contributed in creating a theoretical framework and a novel approach to the philosophy of history of the history of Islam in the Malay world.

Keywords: al-Attas, Islam in the Malay world, philosophy of history

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is philosopher and historian of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries recognised in the East and the West. His profound knowledge in the field of theology, literature, philosophy and metaphysics and history as well as his experience in leading departments and faculties at the University of Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia earned him credibility to be appointed by the Government of Malaysia as Founder-Director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) (Wan Daud 2012a). He carried out his duties with full responsibility in ISTAC from 1989 until 2002. The works of al-Attas from 1959 until 2011 amounts to approximately 30 books. His works are very influential internationally so much so that they have been translated into various languages such as Indonesian, Persian, Arabic, French, German, Russian, Bosnian, Japanese, Hindi and Korean. The thoughts and methods of al-Attas are unwavering and his scientific framework is firm and does not change, basing them on knowledge and religious fundamentals. Based on this framework, al-Attas elaborates, purify and explain his vast knowledges in his books and one in particular and important is *Historical Facts and Fictions* which explains the Islamic world's views on the Malay world history in term of dating, philosophy and method to counter Western propositions on historiography of the Malay world (Alatas 2001).

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Historiography of the Arrival and Spread of Islam in the Malay World

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1969, 1972 & 2011) criticised the Western theories in philosophy of history and interpretation of the history of Islam in the Malay world by stressing that the West did not construct correctly the history of the Malay world. This stand is shared by Tatiana Denisova when she concluded that most Western writings deny the role of Islam in Malay civilization development. This idea rises question about what theory of knowledge (epistemology) did al-Attas use in interpreting the history of Islam in the Malay world?

To begin with, this paper wishes to highlight the general discussion on the theory and history of the arrival and propagation of Islam in the Malay world. Malay historiography classics such as *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Sulalatus-Salatin* contains notes of the arrival and spread of Islam. Among the most important contents are the names of the rulers and the era of their administrations, locations, names of individuals involved in preaching Islam to the Malay world and accounts about the calling to preach to the Malay which was a directive of Prophet Muhammad. In general, the essence of both classical sources indicates that proselytizing to the Malay world was a direct instruction from Arabia to the Malay world. Indian cities such as Mengiri (Monghyr/Munger) were merely a stopover before getting to the Malay world. The *da'wah* process occurred peacefully and was first and foremost aimed at the ruling class. Classical source namely *Hikayat Raja Pasai* clearly denied that the spread of Islam came from India or Iran as specified in Western Orientalists theories (Denisova 2011).

From travellers' accounts, Islam is known to advance into the Malay world in the 13th century in the regions of Sumatera, followed by other areas in the Malay world. Most Western scholars assert that Islam arrives in and spread to the Malay world from India by trading activities (Hamid 1982). Ismail Hamid also said that another area indicated as the location of origin from which Islam arrived was Arabia, as is the view of scholars like Crawford, Keyzers, Niemann and De Hollandar. In Western theories, in addition to trading activities, Islam was said to be spread to the Malay world through marriage, politics, the role of the Sufi order and the rivalry with the Portuguese (Alatas 1985).

The question is: do these theories interpret correctly the history of arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world? This question was answered by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas with his dismissal of such theories as inadequate in interpreting the history of Islam in the Malay world because the theories were built on the basis of supposition (conjectural premises) and the contents were clearly and visibly biased against the Islamic religion, culture and Arab influences.

According to al-Attas (1969: 25), the advent of Islam in the Malay world was brought by Arab or Arab Persian missionaries and they were responsible for spreading Islam in the Malay world based on the content of major writings on Islam in the Malay world. Their arrival came from a direction of either Arab or through India and China. Al-Attas (2011: 79) specifically pointed out that the advent and proliferation of Islam in the 12th until 16th century in the Malay world were carried and spread by the Arabs from the descendants of Bani Alawi of Hadramaut which is a bloodline of Hussain, the grandchild of Prophet Muhammad. Here, al-Attas explained the missionaries Arab identity is based on genealogy rather than ethnic tribes (Wan Daud, 2011). This was also supported by Wan Mohd Saghir (1999) through his reference to the book of *Shams al-Zahirah* by al-Sayyid al-Syarif 'Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Husayn al-Mashhur. Bani Alawi preachers propagated Islam in the Malay world covering Sumatera, Java, Sulu, Makassar, Mindanao, Brunei and the Malay Peninsula. They preached to the local rulers and established Islamic Malay governments particularly from the 12th until 16th century.

In constructing the history of the spread of Islam in the Malay world, al-Attas outlined several phases of advancement and provided essential features to each phase, the phases being the First Phase 579-805H / 1200-1400AD, Second Phase 803-1112H / 1400-1700AD and the Third Phase 1112H/1700AD onwards (al-Attas 1969: 29-30)

According to al-Attas, the characteristics of the first phase within the period 579-805H / 1200-1400AD basically involved the faith in oneness of God (*tawheed*) which was accepted by the Malays on the surface only without a deep understanding of the subject of faith. The Malay understanding of the subject of Islamic creed was still vague and mixed with their ancestors' beliefs which they had held so far. Islamisation of the Malay community in this phase was more due to the Islamic fiqh system that orderly organised their way of life (al-Attas 1969: 29). Wan Mohd Nor construed the first phase in al-Attas' theory as a stage involving morality, legal aspects and the basics of the faith (Wan Daud 2012: 45). These characteristics of the first phase help to interpret the arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world from classical Malay historiography sources and discovered artefacts such as the Terengganu Inscription Stone.

The second phase which was within the 803-1112H/1400-1700AD period was a continuation of the first phase. But the distinguishing feature between the two phases is the emphasis on intellectual activities discussed in greater depth the question of *tawheed*. *Ilmu Kalam* and sufi approaches in discussing aspects of faith and related concepts played an important role in accelerating the growth of Islam among the Malays (al-Attas 1969: p. 29). The characteristics of this second phase are also helpful in interpreting the arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world from sources of Malay manuscripts by Muslim scholars in that era. In discussing the Malay mindset in the 17th century based on *Durr al-Fara'id* manuscript, the study by Wan Mohd Nor and Khalif Muammar (2009) utilised the characteristics of the second phase as described by al-Attas.

Continuation of the phase occurred in the third one which was around 1112H/1700AD onwards during which the legal, academic activities and debates happened in earnest, particularly in Sumatra in the 17th century and Java in the 19th century. Important concepts such as rationalism, individualism, universality (internationalistic) already existing in the life of Muslim Malays and Islamic scholarly tradition continued to develop during the process of Westernization in the Malay world (al-Attas 1969: 30). Nevertheless, these concepts will deviate from their true meaning if Western approach is used to attain their intentions (al-Attas 2014: 183).

Al-Attas's Epistemology

In continuing this discussion, some questions about the context of al-Attas' epistemological theory needs to be elaborated to understand how historical events of Islam's arrival and proliferation in the Malay world were constructed by al-Attas. The first question, what is the meaning of history as meant by al-Attas?

Al-Attas (2007) explained that any discipline of knowledge is subject to the Islamic worldview which is *Ru'yat al-Islam lil Wujud* which he interpreted as a holistic view of life or perspective on the nature of the universe, which includes the world and the hereafter, outward and inward, the seen and unseen world, which is *kulli* (universal) and *juz'i* (particular). When a subject is based on Islamic worldview, the way of thinking and studying lies within the scope of this worldview. This determines the meaning, approach and sources for the subject. In terms of the meaning or definition of the knowledge, Islamic worldview determines that true knowledge (*haq*) is knowledge that leads people to recognize themselves and know their final destination (al-Attas 2014b). This is an understanding of knowledge in Islam which is clearly different from secular Western cultures. By this understanding, true knowledge (*haq*) is not only the knowledge of religion as understood by most members of the society nowadays, but also other knowledge in various fields. Based on this understanding of knowledge, al-Attas stressed that the subject of history must also be viewed through universal view to get a fair interpretation of history (al-Attas 1972: 1-2). Thus, statements that are accepted as true and a fact are when they are derived from the 'truth which was sent down' or Revelation (al-Attas 2007: 6-7). This is explained further by reference to the fact and the truth that not all facts are true. True fact is

when it is interpreted and acknowledged by Islamic worldview (Wan Daud 2011: 7). Facts taken into account as an objective must be coupled with values (al-Attas 2011: xii). This clearly shows that, to al-Attas, historical knowledge is a science that brings people back to the truth and that man is capable of achieving confidence in knowledge and this is contrary to the beliefs of agnosticism, relativism and subjectivism (Wan Daud 2011).

Al-Attas outlined some basics that need to be grasped by historians as a precondition for an accurate and balanced interpretation of the history of Islam in the Malay world which are true knowledge, approach and comprehensive way of thinking:

Rational estimation is not mere conjecture. It pre-supposes in the historian an authoritative and genuine knowledge of the religion under investigation, its worldview, its symbol and their correct meanings; its adherents and their cultural and traditional ways, its religious and intellectual tradition, and sound imagination and method of rational and empirical analysis that commends itself to the intelligence (al-Attas 2011: xiv).

In this case, true knowledge on the history of Islam in the Malay world includes a clear understanding of the Islamic religion, the fundamental concepts that form its worldview and the Islamic civilization terms that describe the characteristics of Islamic civilization. This is very important to understand in interpreting the history of Malay Civilisation because "Malay Civilisation is an Islamic civilization" (al-Attas 2011: xv). Malay Civilisation grew with the advancement of Islam in the Malay world and the modern Malay language (Malay-Arab) and the Jawi script (Malay-Arab) are proofs to the role of Islam in the Malay world.

The next question is what are the sources of al-Attas' knowledge of history? Generally, the source of knowledge received by al-Attas are from four channels: the senses (empirical), the mind (rational), *khobar saddiq* (genuine reports) and intuition. The treatment of knowledge from rational activities and the acquisition of knowledge from the senses are not accepted true as such but there are values which determine their truth which is Revelation (al-Attas 2002: 7). Meanwhile, in accepting ideas and achieving confidence in the ideas, al-Attas used intuition. But the definition of intuition is not as understood by most people in general. The intuitive process involves works through the activities of the mind to solve a problem and this serious process is a process of preparing the soul to accept the meaning or knowledge from Allah (Wan Daud 2011: 11). Al-Attas' construct of the history of Islam in the Malay world are through the understanding and knowledge about Islam as a religion that forms civilization. Through this understanding and knowledge, al-Attas explained the features of the universal nature of Islamic civilization which welcomes the diversity of culture and bind this diversity into the Islamic creed and Islamic law (al-Attas 2011: xiv-xv). This means that as long as it does not conflict with the principles of Islamic faith and shariah, it is accepted as part of the Islamic civilization. Furthermore, in constructing the history of Islam in the Malay world, al-Attas used the definition of the term "Malay" and observations on the intellectual and cultural achievements of the Malays particularly in language and literature. Wan Mohd Nor said al-Attas also used "experience, personal knowledge" in interpreting the history of Islam in the Malay World (Wan Daud 2011: 3). Several primary sources of the Malay world which became his references in constructing history of Islam's arrival and proliferation in the Malay world were *Silsilah Raja-Raja Palembang*, *Syjarah Raja-Raja Cirebon*, *Silsilah Gresik* (al-Attas 2011). These primary sources were of the Malays, Javanese, Sulus and Moros (Wan Daud 2011). Al-Attas later on compared the obtained information with *Silsilah Bani Alawi* which is *Syjarah Bani Alawi* to identify and verify the identity of Arab preachers in the Malay world.

Al-Attas also referred to the classical Malay world historiography namely *Hikayat Raja Pasai* and *Sejarah Melayu* in constructing events such as the arrival of Islam in the Malay world, the first Muslim King of the Samudera-Pasai kingdom and the origin of the name of Sumatera.

Similarly, the book *al-Dahr Nukhbat fi 'ajaib al-Barri wa al-Bahr* written by al-Dimashqi and translated by Fuat Sezgin in his book *Islamic Geography* and *Akhbar al-Sind wal Hind* written by Solomon Sarafi were among Arabic texts which were referred to by al-Attas in constructing the history of Islam in the Malay world such as in the relation between Arab and Malay Muslims and the Samudera-Pasai Kingdom. Chinese reports collected and translated by Western scholars such as W.P. Groeneveldt and E. Bretschneider were referred either to support the reports from Arabic texts or add information that was not available in them. A Chinese report by Chau Ju-Kua which was translated and annotated by F. Hirth and W.W. Rockhill was also discussed by Al-Attas because it was a reference to most of the scholars in setting the time framework of Islam historiography in the Malay world. Meanwhile, studies by scholars like S.Q. Fatimi, R.O. Winstedt and C.A. Majul were also referred to and discussed by al-Attas in interpreting the arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world.

Meanwhile, the approach used as a historiography methodology of al-Attas and in other academic fields is the *tauhid* approach that unites empirical (sensory methods) and rational (mind) approaches with the traditional sources (*naqliyyah*) and *aqliyyah* (Wan Daud 2012) al-Attas asserted that *tauhid* approach or method that combines empirical, rational, deductive, inductive, subjective and objective methods has been applied by glorious past scholars of Islam (al-Attas 2012). They did not partition academic methods as their thoughts system was built within the framework of Islamic worldview whose primary source is Revelation (al-Attas 2014: 3).

Islam as World History and the Great Man Idea

Resultant from the Islamic worldview framework that forms al-Attas' methods and knowledge sources, he considers history as an important discipline because it contains examples and lessons for humanity (Wan Daud 2012). In writing the history of Islam, al-Attas emphasized an approach which revolves around *Islam as World History* because of the nature of Islam as a universal religion that forms the scope of historiography or the way of looking at history as reformation of mankind through the Messengers, unity, cohesion in diversity and continuous contribute and meaning for all mankind (Muhammad Dom 2002; Wan Daud 2011). Therefore, al-Attas used the theory of Human Excellence, "*The Great Man Idea*" in interpreting the history of the arrival and propagation of Islam in the Malay world (Wan Daud 2011). This theory suggests a key player in the construction of history and al-Attas explained it through the terminology '*sejarah*' (Malay word for "history") which originates from the Arabic word '*shajarah*' (al-Attas 2011: 72). Through the elaboration of the terms *sejarah/shajarah* which means traceability and genealogy, al-Attas explained that the important players in the history of Islam in the Malay world were the missionaries and the Malay rulers who have traceable family roots or genealogy. Those who had their genealogy or family roots known were only Arabs who were descendants of Prophet Muhammad through his grandsons Hassan and Husain (al-Attas 2011: 73). In the history of the Malay world construct, the missionaries and the rulers who had this genealogy were descendants of Imam Ahmad Isa al-Muhajir, from the descendants of Husain.

Islamic Worldview

Based on the Islamic worldview *Ru'yat al-Islam lil Wujud* which determines that definitions, approach and sources for knowledge are subjected to Islamic thought framework, al-Attas employed the tradition of selecting Muslim Rulers within Islamic teachings to solve the identities and titles of early Muslim Rulers of the Malay World (Wan Daud 2011: 6). In this case, al-Attas asserted that the earliest Muslim ruler was not Merah Silu and the title used was not Sultan Muhammad. He suggested that early Muslim Rulers in the 9th and 10th centuries AD used the title "al-Malik" as reported by al-Mas'udi and carried titles which showed their ancestry. In

this case, al-Attas suggested that earliest Muslim ruler in Sumatran Islamic government was al-Malik al-Muhammad al-Taymi al-Qurashi (al-Attas 2011: 25).

Since one of the sources of al-Attas was *khobar saddiq*, he accepted hadith of the Prophet Muhammad telling his companions to preach to Sumatra in *Hikayat Raja Pasai* as true and genuinely uttered by the Prophet. For al-Attas, there is no reason for historians to reject the Hadith because the Prophet as the ruler of a government must have received information on trade regions visited by Arab traders and the instruction to preach Islam to the Sumatran region was to ensure Muslim control of the economy (al-Attas 2011). Furthermore, knowledge of the Arabs about the Malay world has long been known before Islam through trading activities (al-Attas 2011: 2-3). Al-Attas also affirmed that Arab settlements had existed in the Malay world in northern Sumatra in the 7th century AD based on sources from Tang dynasty which confirmed that the Malay world was not unfamiliar to the Arabs, including during the time of Prophet Muhammad Islam as ruler of the Islamic State.

Empirical and Logical Methods

First, the integration between empirical method (sensory) and clear logic used by al-Attas in proving that the existence of the Malay world region had certainly been known by the Prophet Muhammad as the ruler of the Islamic state at the time. This method was also applied by al-Attas in proving Islamization activities in the Malay world had occurred since the early period by Arab proselytisers of Imam Ahmad Isa al-Muhajir descendants from Hadramaut (Wan Daud 2011: 5). This is proven by al-Attas through his explanation of the uniformity of the modern Malay language (Malay-Arabic) such as in the names of the days of the week, uniformity in Jawi script (Malay-Arab), names of local Muslims in the Malay world, the uniformity of Arabic pronunciation by Muslim Malays, and the very existence of many Arab population in the Malay world from the descendants of the Prophet. All of these show that Islam was propagated in the Malay world by those who had the same background, teaching method and pronunciation (al-Attas 2011: 135-142).

Second, al-Attas used empirical-logical method in proving Malik al-Salih was not the first Muslim ruler, through the discovery of a tombstone found in Blang May on which the date of death was recorded as 607H/1210AD which was the tombstone al-Malik al-Kamil (Wan Daud 2011: 5). In addition to the tombstone of al-Malik al-Kamil, there was a tombstone of his kin named Ya'qub, the date of death was 630H/1232AD, a person responsible for propagating Islam in Gayo and West Sumatra regions (al-Attas 2011: 17). Consequent to these discoveries, al-Attas explained that al-Malik al-Salih was not the first ruler in Sumatra as he died in 696H/1296AD.

Third, al-Attas used this logical-empirical method in verifying the origin of the name Sumatera which was Semutra from Semut Raya through the story recorded in *Hikayat Raja Pasai* about Merah Silau witnessing ants as big as cats. He explained that through the spelling by referring to reports of Arabic texts in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries and non-Arabic texts (Wan Daud 2011: 5). al-Attas also referred to the Arabic text account of '*Ajaib al-Hind* which confirmed the existence of giant ants in northern Sumatra especially in the Island of Lamri.

As a conclusion, al-Attas' epistemology encompasses sources, methods and scopes of philosophy of history of the arrival and propagation of Islam in the Malay world. Through his discussions, these three aspects which were constructed within the framework of Islamic worldview evidently produced a different interpretation from the previous ones about the history of the arrival of Islam and its proliferation in the Malay world. A lack of historical documentation in the Malay World requires a highly rational approach which is based on a strong premise to explain the role of Islam in the Malay world. Clearly, the strong premise here is the true understanding of Islam and its advancement as a civilization, essential for analyzing Islamic history in the Malay world. Through *Islam as World History* and *The Great Man Idea*, al-Attas has provided a theoretical framework and methodology for historians to apply in

philosophy of history of Islam not only in the Malay world but also everywhere, especially in regions which lack historical documentation materials.

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