

Religious Scholars (*‘Ūlāmā’*) And Political Leaders (*Umarā’*) In The Classical Malay Texts: A Comparative Religion Approach

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Abstract

This paper aims in analyzing the roles of religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) and political leaders (*umarā’*) during the Hindu-Buddhist and Islamic periods in the Malay Archipelago. Different roles have been entrusted to the religious authorities by the Malay rulers. During the period of Indian cultural and religious dominance, religious scholars had a special position at the court and played a significant role in maintaining the legitimacy of the king. Close relationship between religious scholars and the Malay rulers is also evident after the coming of Islam to the archipelago. Once again, religious authorities had been entrusted with a special role by the ruling elite. However, the new Muslim scholars took on a significantly different role with regard to functions from that of their Hindu-Buddhist predecessors. Analysis on the roles of both authorities will be made based on evidence found in two classical Malay texts namely the *Sejarah Melayu* and *Bustān al-Salātīn*. This paper concludes how, after the spread of Islam to the Malay Archipelago relationship between religious scholars and secular leaders changed drastically. Religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*) maintained a less direct relationship with political leaders compared to the role of the Brahmin of the *devaraja* cult. They merely acted as moral advisors to the rulers who would decide whether to accept or to reject religious advice presented to them based on the needs at that time.

Keywords: Malay Archipelago, devaraja, religious scholars, Hindu-Buddhist, Islam

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Religion has always played an important role in the establishment of traditional and modern government. History has recorded many instances of a close relationship between religious authority and political leaders. A good relationship between these two authorities would normally result in a stable government while on the opposite it could lead to chaos and the destruction of a country's rule. This type of relationship is always portrayed as complementing each other as well as competing between one another.

The interplay between religious and non-religious authority can also be observed in traditional Malay empires. Since the beginning of the first better-known Malay Hindu-Buddhist Empire of Srivijaya in Palembang in the 7th century, religion and religious authorities have always been involved in the running of affairs of state of the Malay empires. After the coming of Islam, again religious authorities played a significant part. They have been involved in various roles inside and outside the royal palaces in their capacity as the learned men of the empire. This is what we want to explore in this paper. The paper will analyze the roles of religious authorities based on the evidence gathered from selected classical Malay texts such as *Sejarah Melayu* and *Bustān al-Salātīn*. Two versions of *Sejarah Melayu* edited by A. Samad Ahmad (2000) and Muhammad Haji Salleh (1997) will be used for the analysis. As for the *Bustān al-Salātīn* this study will rely on the edited work by Jelani Harun (2004). A comparative study of the relationship between these two authorities during the Hindu-Buddhist period and Islam in the Malay Archipelago is also important in order to understand differences in their relationship during these two periods, before and after the spread of Islam in this region. In addition, knowledge of the history of the life and contribution of early Muslim scholars in the Malay Archipelago to the running of the state, will also be used for elaboration of and support for the evidence presented.

2.0 EARLY SOUTH EAST ASIAN EMPIRES: THE FIRST MODEL OF THE ROLES OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO

The origin of the early states in the Malay Archipelago can be traced back as early as the 4th century with the establishment of the Malay empires in Kedah, followed by the Srivijaya empire in Palembang, later on Mataram in Central Java and then Majapahit in Eastern Java (Pearn, 1963). These states follow an Indian model of kingship brought to the Malay Archipelago during a period of intensive exposure to Indian tradition and civilization in the Malay Archipelago. During this period, the Malays benefited immensely from advanced Indian knowledge and skills such as the writing skill as well as a kingship model of government. This Indian model of governance adopted by the early Malay empires depended on a close relationship between religious authorities and the ruler.

2.1 THE DOCTRINE OF *DEVARAJA*

The Indian model of kingship placed the king at the very top of the empire's hierarchy. Not only that, the king is bestowed with absolute power. He has the fullest right to govern and his decision must be adhered to and respected unquestionably (Soebadio, 1978; Heine-Geldren, 1942; Kulke, 2001). It further developed by giving an almost divine status to the king as a god-king, a *devaraja*. In other words, the king is considered as a representative of the gods on earth, who is given the mandate and freedom by the gods themselves to govern this world accordingly.

The workability of this theory depends on several institutions. It cannot stand alone on the proclaimed authority of the king as it is. It requires support from other institutions to make it functional, as it should be. As can be seen from the above, this theory associates the power of the king with the divine power of gods. Thus, it involves religion, which is the only means to connect a human being with god. At the time, the Indian religions of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism were the religions, which could explain the sovereignty of the king.

The Indian concept of *devaraja* now combined elements of Hinduism and Buddhism in a unique and very complex South East Asian way. It developed at the time of the Funan, the ancient South East Asian Empire which was located on mainland South East Asia, and later was continued by its

successor Angkor. The legitimacy of the king as a divinely empowered godlike ruler is shown by the rituals necessarily conducted by a Brahmin priest, which can be seen during the proclamation of King Jayavarman II as the king of Angkor (Coedes, 1968). In addition to performing the specific *devaraja* ritual, which is conducted by a Brahman priest, the king will then choose a particular mountain as his sacred mountain. In this belief, the mountain is a symbolic structure and presentation of the universe with the city of god on its summit (Heine-Geldren, 1942). By presiding on top of this sacred mountain, the king can proclaim himself as the universal monarch – a king who adopted the imperial ideology with cosmic responsibility (Kulke, 2001). A temple will then be built on the mountain chosen and the king will communicate with the gods inside the temple through the services of a Brahman priest. This is to strengthen the authority of the king over his subordinates as well as to justify his desire to expand his territories beyond the border of his present territory.

The above highlights the indispensable relationship between religious scholars and the state. Put simply, the king depended on the authoritative knowledge of religious leaders to legitimize his role and supreme power as a god-king. Religious authority provided the necessary means to support the ruler's claim over his subjects. In other words, the Brahmins, who were the religious authorities in such empires, provide the means for the kings to exercise power by ensuring adherence to correct rituals. Failure to follow the rituals as stipulated in religious book will invoke the gods' wrath in many ways such as political and economic instability in the empires. Natural disasters such as flood, earthquake, and famine have always been interpreted as signs of the gods' unhappiness about the state of affairs of the empire.

The *devaraja* concept and cult have been adopted well by all early states in South East Asia including those in the Malay heartlands mostly located on the islands of South East Asia. The god-king model of government gives absolute power to the reigning king as he receives total obedience from human beings. It is a hierarchical concept. The doctrine was adhered to for hundreds of years until the collapse of the Hindu empire of Majapahit in the 16th century.

3.0 THE COMING OF ISLAM TO THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND POLITICAL LEADERS

The collapse of the Majapahit Empire brought about not least by the arrival of Islam signaled an important change in the religious-politico milieu of South East Asia generally and the Malay Archipelago in particular. It marked the end of Hindu-Buddhist dominated states and heralded the raise of a new model of religious-politico environment in the region. When Islam arrived in the archipelago first spreading slowly and subsequently more rapidly from the 16th century onwards, the influence of Hindu-Buddhist traditions and practices had not disappeared yet. Thus, early Muslim scholars in the archipelago at that time had to face the challenges and then come out with solutions on how to adopt and adapt those local practices with Islamic teachings harmoniously and where possible.

Archeological evidence shows that Islam had a presence in the Malay Archipelago in 11th century. The tombstone of a Muslim woman by name of Fāṭima bint Maimūn which was found in Leran, Gresik, near Surabaya in Eastern Java, bears the date 1082 C.E. (Fatimi, 1963). Then, in 1297 the tombstone of Sultan Malikul Saleh was erected in Aceh. A stone inscription, which is said to have been written in an extended Perso-Arabic script around that time, if not a century earlier and proclaiming certain Islamic laws was found in Kuala Berang, Terengganu on the Eastern Coast of the Malaysian Peninsula (Al-Aṭṭās, 1970).

The issue of the carriers of Islam to this region is subject to many debates with some scholars upholding the theory that Islam came directly from the Arabian Peninsula, while others suggest that it arrived via the South Asian subcontinent. However, this paper is not going to dwell on these conflicting views. Instead, its focus will be directed to the way a relationship between the new religious leaders and a state's leaders was developed as expressed by the evidence found in some traditional Malay texts, namely the *Sejarah Melayu* and *Bustān al-Salātīn* both of which probably originate from the 16th century C.E.

It is a known fact that after the arrival and rapid spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, the existing Hindu-Buddhist empires started to decline and consequently disappeared from the region's political landscape. The vacuum was then filled up by the new Malay states under the leadership of Malay rajas who now had become Muslim sultans. It started with the kingdom of Samudra-Pasai in Aceh and later on spread to other Malay city-states and ports such as Malacca. The adherence to Islam of these states is said to have attracted Muslims from around the Islamic world to congregate in these Malay Muslim ports. These foreign Muslims came as traders and missionaries. Also, many local Muslims traveled outside the archipelago to and furthered their knowledge of Islam overseas. Other than traders, there were also Muslim scholars from the Islamic heartlands and the Indian sub-continent who come and spread Islam in the region.

3.1 THE ROLE OF KHALĪFAH

In contrast to the hierarchical relationship that existed between religious authorities and the king during the period of Hindu-Buddhist influence in the Malay Archipelago, a totally new relationship emerged with the arrival of Islam. With a new interpretation of the role and function of the king a more pragmatic relationship developed, and the structure of the Malay states during the Islamic period was transformed. The Malay Muslim ruler, who to this day may be called a *raja*, gave a new interpretation of the concept of kingship compatible with that of other Muslim rulers in the Muslim world and which is associated with the term caliphate. As a Muslim, the king remains an ordinary human being who, however, has been entrusted by God with responsibilities to govern his people and to ensure peace and prosperity of the people.

Islam disallows the submission of oneself to other human beings. In fact, throughout their life in this world Muslims should only submit to and worship Allah, the One and Only God. They are prohibited from associating other creations of God with Allah. There is no intermediary between God and human beings in Islam. Neither kings nor a priest can be the intermediaries. Every Muslim including the king himself must worship Allah directly and subject himself to His might. Therefore, when Islam became the main religion for the Malays from the 13th century onwards, the role of the Malay ruler as *devaraja* had become incompatible with the Islamic teaching of submitting to the One and Only God. This practice had to be abandoned when the Malay subjects and states had adopted Islamic ideology. Islam had reduced the absolute power of the ruler over other people to an institution solely responsible towards his people in terms of leading them in accordance with the rules stipulated in God's words of the Qur'an.

It should be noted however that by placing themselves as the leaders of the state and accepting the title sultan as well, the rajas claimed to have been bestowed with responsibilities to govern the land and the people by God's will.

Without the divine quality associated with the king, his status was now only that of an ordinary human being the difference that the king claimed to have been entrusted with responsibilities, which make him answerable to God in the hereafter. And, while previously any misfortune becoming the country and people was attributable to improprieties in the conduct of the *devaraja* cult, heavenly retribution was now postponed to the hereafter.

Different roles and responsibilities of the king also changed the way his relationship with his subjects including the clergy. During the so-called Indian period, the priests were an essential instrument for the king to conduct his rule. Muslim religious authorities on the other hand played a different role. They have the choice whether to involve themselves with a state's affairs as advisors or teachers to the ruler and his court or to move away from the worldly business of the royal court and live among the people as teachers and leaders of the *ummat*. *Sejarah Melayu* and *Bustān al-Salātīn* provide a description of the nature of its relationship and how it worked.

3.2 SEEKER OF KNOWLEDGE

Sejarah Melayu narrates some examples of the relationship between several sultans of Malacca and Muslim scholars who came to the palace to teach about Islam. For example, Sultan Mansur Syah of Malacca (1458-1477) was introduced by Maulana Abu Bakar of Mecca to the contents of a book on Islamic theology entitled *Durr al-Manzum*.

“After that, Maulana Abu Bakar descended from the ship with a copy of the book 'Durr Manzum'. His arrival in Melaka was warmly welcomed by Sultan Mansur Syah. He then invited him to his palace's hall. And so Sultan Mansur Syah studied with Maulana Abu Bakar. Maulana Abu Bakar shower the Sultan with a lot of praises for his intelligence and he gained a lot of knowledge from him. Soon after that, Sultan Mansur Syar ordered for the translation in Pasai..” (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1997, p. 120)

Another Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mahmud Syah (1488-1511) also learned from a Muslim scholar who most probably was of the Indian origin but had come all the way from Jeddah, in Arabia. His son, Raja Ahmad also studied under the guidance of this *shaykh*.

“A ship from overseas then docked in Melaka. In the ship, there was a learned man, whose name is Maulana Sadar Jahan, a very pious one. Sultan Mahmud Syah made him his teacher and soon his prince Raja Ahmad was also asked by the Sultan to study under him ...” (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1997, p. 191)

Another interesting example which highlights different type of relationship between these two authorities compared to the past Indian period, is best described by the following incident recorded in *Sejarah Melayu*.

“After that, Sultan Mahmud Syah went to study the book of Maklumat from Qadi Yusuf. But he had become senile. If people flew kite above his house, he would tell that person to fly it higher. When he found that person, he would tell him to reel his kite and say: "Why are you so rude to pass by my rooftop?" That was how he is, and thus he cannot become a judge anymore. His son, Qadi Munawar Syah soon became the judge.

Then Sultan Mahmud Syah went to Maulana Yusuf's house riding an elephant, accompanied by all of his entourage. Once Sultan Mahmud Syah reached the gate of Maulana Yusuf's house, his assistant told to the guard of Maulana Yusuf's gate, “Tell Maulana Yusuf that His Highness Sultan Mahmud Syah has come.”

Then the guard told Maulana Yusuf. Maulana Yusuf responded by saying, “Close the door. What is the purpose of Sultan Mahmud Syah coming to the house of a needy?”

The response of Malauna Yusuf were passed by the guard to Sultan Mahmud Syah. For that, Sultan return to his palace. When the night falls, all assistants were instructed to go home. When no one is around, Sultan Mahmud Syah with one assistant went out. He himself carried the book.

Once Sultan Mahmud reached the gate of Maulana Yusuf's house, he asked from the guard of Maulana Yusuf's door. “Tell Maulama Yusuf”. He then continued by saying, ‘Mahmud the needy is coming.

Later the door was open because only the needy should come to another needy's house. Then Maulana Yusuf immediately went out and brought Sultan Mahmud Syah inside to sit. Afterwards, Sultan Mahmud begins his study with Maulana Yusuf.” (Muhammad Haji Salleh, 1997, p. 161)

This is an outstanding example to show the nature of the relationship between religious authority and the Muslim ruler during the early period of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Since Islam is about equality among all human beings, Maulana Yusuf had stressed the importance of equality in Islam. He is very steadfast in his beliefs as a Muslim by indirectly telling the ruler that he should be humble in his dealing with others. Showing off his might and power when coming to the Maulana's house to seek knowledge is seen as inappropriate. Only when the ruler changes his attitude towards the Maulana and shows the humility becoming a good Muslim, will he be accepted as his student.

Apparently, Sultan Mahmud understood the message sent to him by the Maulana when he first called on the Maulana moving about in state, by refusing to allow him even to enter his yard. He

had to return to his palace and try again as a very different person. Without any trappings of worldly power suitably humbled, the Sultan now walks while carrying the book himself and comes to the Maulana's house without his entourage only accompanied by one servant. Only then, was he accepted to study the book *Maklumat* with the Maulana. It must be said that not many Malay rulers understood this challenge to their authority and accepted that the authority of Islam was equal to theirs, even if only in the dark of night. The story also shows that at that time at least religious scholars wanted no close dealings with any worldly power. There are however other examples too when Muslim scholars associate themselves with the royal palace and become the official advisors to the Sultan even holding an official post as Shaykh of Islam in the palace, a post created especially. At least two Muslim scholars in the history of the Malay Muslim empires were bestowed with this title. They are Shaykh Shamsuddīn al-Sumatrāni (d. 1640) and Shaykh Nuruddīn al-Rānirī (d. 1666). Both served with the Sultans of Aceh.

3.3 RELIGIOUS ADVISORS

Bustān al-Salātīn, which was composed by Shaykh al-Rānirī in Aceh during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Thani in the first half of the 17th century, provides evidence of this relationship during the early period of Islam in the Malay Archipelago.

“Wa ba‘du dhalika, fi sab‘ata ‘ashara min Syahir Syawwal. And after that, on 17th of Syawwal – I was commanded by the Highness – Sultan Iskandar Thani Alauddin Mughayah Syah Johan Berdaulat zillu ‘l-Lahi fi ‘l-‘alami, lazdana daulatuhu ayyaman mas‘udan wa tala zilluhu fi ‘l-‘afaqi mamduda. May happiness always be with him and may his leadership be strengthened in all his countries, to write a book in Jawi language which consist of the language of the dwellers of seven heaven and the seven earth. And also on the history of the past and future Kings.” (Jelani Harun, 2004, pp. 2-3)

The above narration shows that Shaykh al-Rānirī was instructed by the Sultan to compose a book in Malay (*Jāwi*) about this world as well as the hereafter. This book, which was later given the title *Bustān al-Salātīn* discusses the origins of the world, issues of the hereafter as well as the history of many Muslim rulers among them the history of the Acehnese rulers and their kingdom. The author stresses that he followed the instruction given to him by the Sultan when composing the *Bustān*.

“And we humbly receive the instruction from the Highness and has little knowledge and little understanding towards Jawi Language, eventhough he believes in Allah the God of all universe” (Jelani Harun, 2004, p. 3)

Apart from advising the Sultan on matters related to Islam, the Shaykh al-Islām (Head of Islamic Affairs) was expected to perform other tasks within his expertise. In this case, Shaykh al-Rānirī as the Shaykh of Islām of Aceh had been instructed to compose a mirror of conduct for the ruler and hence his subjects.

Something similar happened to the Shaykh of Aceh during reign of Seri Sultan Taj al- ‘Ālam Sultānah Şafiyat al-Dīn Shāh (1641 - 1675), the first female head of the state for Aceh in history and successor of Sultān Iskandar Thani, when al-Rānirī was instructed to explain in writing to the people of Aceh the decisions taken by him against the followers of the Wujūdiyyah (Belief in Unity of Existence). This treatise had the title *Tibyān fī Ma‘rifat al-Adyān* (Al-Atṭās, 1986).

Besides writing specifically under the orders of the Malay Muslim ruler, al-Rānirī also wrote other works on Islam throughout his tenure of appointment as the highest religious authority in Aceh such as *Şirāt al-Mustaqīm*, *Durrat al-Farā‘id bi Sharh al-‘Aqā‘id*, *Hujjat al-Şiddiq li daf‘ al-Zindīq*, *Hidāyah al-Ḥabīb fī al-Targhīb wa al-Tarhīb* and *Asrār al-Insān fī Ma‘rifat al-Rūh wa al-Raḥmān*. His talent as a prolific writer can be seen from these titles which do not confine themselves only to one branch of knowledge in Islam but several such as Islamic Jurisprudence (*‘Ibādat*), Islamic theology (*‘Aqidah*), Islamic Mysticism (*Taşawwuf*), *Ḥadīth* and many more.

Al-Rānirī's acceptance of an appointment as the official religious advisor to the Sultan is not a task, which sits easy with every Muslim scholar in the Malay Archipelago at that time. In fact, he

represents a minority of early Muslim scholars in the Malay Archipelago who associated themselves with the palace.

Among those standing apart, are names such as Hamzah Fansūri (d. 1500 c.a.), Abdul Ra'ūf Sinkili (d. 1693), Abdul Şamad al-Palimbānī (d. 1790 c.a.) and Muhammad Arsyād al-Banjārī (d. 1812), whose writings have influenced the minds and thoughts of the Malays until today and who represent the important legacy of early Malay Muslim's scholarship in the archipelago which did not seek association with secular power, even if the *rajas*, now sultans, carried the mantle of God's shadow on earth.

They had a different understanding of the meaning of Islam for the *ummat* and adopted a different approach in propagating Islam in the Malay Archipelago. They preferred not to have a formal relationship with the palace as this gave them greater freedom in expressing their thoughts and acting in accordance with their conscience as Muslims.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Traditional Malay texts provide evidence of a pragmatic relationship between religious authorities and political leaders during the early period of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, which is quite different from that pivotal public function the clergy played in the Hindu-Buddhist period. Early Muslim religious authorities in the archipelago adopted a different role with regards to their position at the royal palace. Some of them decided to join the palace and work with the ruler directly and officially, while the majority preferred to stay away from the centre of worldly power and live outside and with the people in villages. Both are acceptable forms of relationship in the eyes of the early Malays since they do not breach any Malay traditions nor those of Islam.

In contrast to the past, Muslim religious authorities acted independently as religious advisors to the Malay Muslim rulers from inside as well as outside the palace. This is a less direct role than that of the Brahmins of the *devaraja* cult who had a more functional role, which was to ensure that the concept of *devaraja* worked as it was expected to be. Any inappropriate rituals during the installation of the king as a *devaraja* and during his daily duties as the king would invoke the wrath of the deities and might end up with severe consequence for the whole population.

The Muslim religious authorities on the other hand presented their own religious opinions based on the contents of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an as well as their interpretation of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, the *Ḥadīth*. They saw their role as to guide people with the teachings of Islam. People might accept or reject their opinions. And, if these opinions were seen as incompatible with the position of the palace, most of the time, the ruler would ignore them and might even try to get rid of the messengers. On the other hand, the consequences of this action might not be felt in this world, as there was no obvious and immediate causality and reward or punishment might have to wait for the Hereafter and the Day of Judgment.

In conclusion, the evidence from *Sejarah Melayu* and *Bustān al-Salātīn* shows that the roles of Muslim religious authorities during the early period of Islam in the Malay Archipelago had changed into a more dynamic and less hierarchical one compared to the past Hindu-Buddhist period. Most importantly, it had made ruler and ruled equal in the eyes of God and had given the individual the opportunity to make his own decisions.

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