

BOOK REVIEW

Historiographical reflection on the Malay World

Published in Kuala Lumpur by Universiti Malaya, 2011

By Tatiana A. Denisova

Reviewed by

Hadenan Towpek, PhD

(Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies,

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak)

This work began with a very interesting criticism from the author, Tatiana A. Denisova, who argued that: “every time there is a need to understand the Malay view on various subjects or areas of human life, a researcher must refer to primary sources, i.e. the Malay literary treasures, including works on the historiography of Islamic Malay.”

This is obviously a pure thought of a high academic level based on the study of history which is deeply-rooted in the motive of curiosity and awareness. In addition, historians often find lessons that should be learnt, even though the application and practicality of past experiences in a new context in the current time is no easy matter.

Here is a description of what Denisova has done through this work. Denisova is an expert in the Malay historiography, a Russian citizen, holding a position as a Division Chief of the Islamic Historical Resource Research, Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow. Denisova found that the work to understand primary sources requires a lot of time and complicated work, especially for those who are not knowledgeable in the Malay historiography, and do not know the *jawi* alphabet, or have no knowledge of old languages. Ultimately, a researcher might end up writing about his study based on secondary sources or references of the West and repeat all the mistakes and misunderstandings that may exist in the referenced sources.

Denisova acknowledged that this book was written as a reference for various studies on the Malay world. Denisova did her best to develop an interest and passion of readers and researchers through the search and primary reference materials. Therefore, this book presents the treasures of Islamic Malay literature as a very interesting and useful sources of history. It also introduces materials recorded in the old Malay historical texts in order to prove the supremacy of these texts. At the same time, it also indicates that these works carry the ideals of great importance, which serve as the foundation of the civilization of the Malay.

Simultaneously, Denisova also introduced the writing and thought of the Malay that created their works from the 13th to the 19th century. In this light, this book incorporates many passages from the historical texts of the Islamic Malay, then attaches and complements it with some scientific explanation and analysis. This aspect can be viewed through the contents of the book that presents three main parts, i.e. Background of Malay Studies, Intellectual Life, and Economy.

In the first part of this book, Denisova discussed the background of the study as the introduction to the development of the early history on how Western researchers built a tradition of writing in Malay studies that began around the 18th century. This tradition clearly showed that the orientalist chose topics related to non-Islamic tradition as a subject of study. Among them were pre-Islamic tradition, culture, history and customs of Hindu-Buddhism; while there are a lot of works about the new history and modern situation that have been put aside as they contained the elements and the influence of Islam.

According to Denisova, this is where the real character of the orientalist who regarded Islam as a negative factor in the development of the Malay world. They refused to see that Islam has managed to advance the development of communities of the Malay. They were reluctant to admit that Islam had a significant influence in an effort to develop culture and thought, including science, philosophy and the Malay language.

In addition, Denisova concluded that the orientalist character was overshadowed by the prolonged conflict between Muslims and the West. So, it is not surprising when they generated and used a variety of prejudices and myths about the Islamic Malay and the heritage of Islamic Malay History. Typically, they had prejudice that Islam in the Malay world is not as classical, pure or true Islam. The Malay Islam is a mix of some Islamic terms with Hindu-Buddhist tradition and local paganism.

Their prejudices are also concerned with the arrival of Islam into the Malay world at that time that occurred merely by accident. It is understood that Islam does have any importance in the history of the Malay world. Islamic presence did not change anything in the society and culture of the Malay. Moreover, they stressed that the Westerners came into the Malay world as a peacemaker without aggressive goals, and they helped with the development of the Malay community. Denisova is trying to frame, analyze, answer, and correct these prejudices by making the primary sources of the Malay heritage as a true historical recorder.

Therefore, Denisova stressed that the historiography of Islamic Malay which

includes the texts of the Islamic Malay history of the 13th to the 19th century is very important as a source of history. Thus, Denisova selected six historical texts representing a number of periods and different directions in the history of the development of Islamic Malay civilization, i.e. *Hikayat Raja Pasai (the Story of the Pasai King)*, *Sejarah Melayu (Malay history)*, *Hikayat Aceh (Story of Aceh)*, *Peringatan Sejarah Negri Johor (Commemoration of the History of Johor State)*, *Hikayat Siak (Story of Siak)*, and *Tuhfat al-Nafis*. The research methods Denisova used were classification, systematization, comparative analysis, and statistical analysis.

The second part of this book focuses on three things: myth, science, and philosophy. These mythological elements are entrenched in the history in the form of chronicles or annals. Mythology as an important part of the intellectual life is a reflection of the traditional thought that is usually unchanged. This is because the original text cannot be changed according to one's own views or the perspective of modern times. Scientists need to understand the meaning of information and messages they intend to communicate.

ore discussion is related to the pre-Islamic myths through an analysis of family tree of the Kings in Kutai Kingdom, as the earliest manuscript dated 1849, while the oral version was in fact available earlier, i.e. since the 17th century. While the spread of Islam here took place as early as the 16th century, but it also includes many elements of pre-Islamic mythology, an overview of the Kutai Kingdom being isolated from the center of politics, culture and the spread of Islam, which is confirmed as the "main story content of Islamic nature but the motivation of the arrival of Islam and the spread and introduction of the new religion are still traditional in nature, namely excellence through witchcraft and unseen powers.

Meanwhile the myth of the early Islamic historiography can be found in the story of Pasai King and the Malay History. According to Denisova, what is interesting is that the story of Pasai King did not the arrival of Islam from India or Persia, but instead it came from the Arabia, i.e. Sultan Muhammad who was a descendant of Abu Bakr al-Sidiq. In the same way, in the story of the Malay told of the Malay rulers who descended from King Iskandar Zulkarnaen, a hero who fought for the religion of Allah, the most fair and famous all over the world.

Then, in the 16th century to the 17th, *Hikayat Aceh* can be referred to as representing mythological tradition in the period. Once more, King Iskandar Zulkarnaen was made the concept of the origin of the Malay rulers, who still maintained a quasi-historical nature, by introducing the era of Sultan Iskandar Muda.

For the 18th century to the 19th Denisova presented the historiography of Johor in the language of Jawi that continued the transformation of myth of the origins of the Malay rulers influenced by Islam. The historiography of Johor covered three directions of writing history, the tradition of Johor Malay, tradition of Siak-Minangkabau Johor, and tradition of Johor Bugis.

Moreover, after the mythical aspect, the aspect of science is also the core of the discussion in Denisova's book. This is because the rate of development and spread of knowledge on the general view shows the degree of advancement of social awareness and the community development. An analysis of works of Islamic Malay historiography during the 13th to the 19th century help to understand and explain some of the problems mentioned especially the definition and conceptualization of science, science category, related scientific works, scientists and scientific figures involved, and scientific elements contained.

Meanwhile, with regard to the philosophical aspect, Denisova describes the terminology and related information in the text of philosophy of Islamic Malay in the 13th to 19th century. Among the categories and definitions of the most debated include the source of wisdom, the concepts of nature, afterlife, monotheism, justice, government, punishment or retaliation, *hudud*, origin of the king, obligation, mysticism, desire, martyrdom, Islamic brotherhood, and many others. Denisova found that the analysis of the texts shows and proves that the Malay world already had a historiographical tradition that has special characteristics. Among other things, it reflects that the Malay world has extensive international relations covering not only economics and trade, but also in the field of intellectual activities. The Malay world during the Melaka Kingdom had become a well-known Islamic center throughout the Islamic world and was part of Muslims and could not be separated anymore. The information recorded in the texts also reflects that the development process and intellectual life of the community were influenced by Islam, from myth to science, and from polytheism to monotheism.

The third part, which is the last section, Denisova analyzed the economic aspects which include the debate on the details of the economic history of the Malay world. She also discussed the sources of economic history, followed by a discussion on Islamic Malay historiography as economic history. Furthermore, the toponym aspect, which is the names of places of economic activities, was also studied by Denisova. Furthermore, Denisova described the Malay definition of the terms related to the sea and the weather, as well as the terms for estuaries, bays, straits and rivers. The aspects of ships and shipping were also analyzed, and continued her discussion on aspects of foreign relations.

Denisova also included a discussion on the aspects of prosperity and decline in the history of the Malay recorded in the primary sources. Information about state prosperity was normally used by employees to prove the justice of the sultan/king who ruled the country during the period. In contrast, a description on economic decline reflects tyranny and injustice of the state including imposition of unfair punishment, an unjust government, war, oppression, rebellion, disobedience toward Islam and other factors. Denisova concluded that information about the number of weapons and military development indicated the security and prosperity of the country, rather than a passion for war and violence.

Denisova critically analyzed business and financial aspects with a careful study on the primary materials of the historical works of the Islamic Malay from the 13th until the 19th century. She also covered trading, merchants, purchase agreement, trade methods, prices, weapon business, opium, tin, gold, etc. In addition, Denisova also analyzed the records of ships and shipping, sea and trade routes, international relations. The same goes for information about urban development and urban construction, drainage system, mosques, houses, and palaces were also discussed. Denisova found that large cities, such as Malacca and Aceh, served as an entry port in which trade revenues were collected from all of the surrounding areas such as the manufacture of goods, handicrafts such as decorative items, jewelry, weapons, musical instrument and other luxury goods.

Denisova finally concluded that Islamic Malay literary heritage is a very important, useful and relevant source of history. These old texts can be regarded as an encyclopedia of the Malay life. The research on the Islamic Malay historiography helps to understand the history of economic development in the Malay world. The economic elements recorded in the texts provide us with a description on the role of the Malay world in the international economic system and on the skills of the Malays in the economic field.