

Islamisation Theories of Malay Culture: Issues and Responses

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Abstract

Interaction between Islamic teachings and cultures has resulted in the Islamisation of culture. The Malay culture was not an exception as Islam has transformed it into a Malay-Islamic culture. But it has raised questions on how Islamic teachings interacted with the indigenous culture before Islamising it and the degree of success of this process. These questions, later on, turned into a heated polemic, dividing the scholars into those who support the Islamisation of culture and those who oppose it. This study will look into the Islamisation theories of Malay culture deliberated by the orientalist and compare them to the responses from contemporary Muslim scholars. It will be argued that both of these camps have opposing views regarding the basis of philosophical, sociological, and historical theories in the Islamisation of culture. While the orientalist camp condemned it, Muslim scholars see it as a remarkable process in transforming the human culture.

Keywords: Islamisation, Malay culture, orientalist, sociological theories, history.

A. Introduction

Islam and culture are strongly interconnected. Islam as a set of teachings and rules could not exist in a vacuum, a space entirely devoid of matter. On the contrary, Islam needs to be nurtured and applied in the living people who already have their own cultures, belief, and civilization. For 1400 years, Islam interacts with different civilizations, societies, and cultures. Chronologically, Islam has the

first contact with the Arab civilization and culture as it was the place of the descent of the Holy Quran and its petri dish for the Islamic teachings in the early phase of Islam.¹ Later, the Islamic teachings that integrated into Arab culture and Islamizing it, spread out to other cultural realms such as Persia,² Turk,³ Africa,⁴ the Indian subcontinent,⁵ mainland China⁶ eventually reaching the Malay-Indonesia Archipelago.⁷

As a result of the long process of spread and development, Islam has emerged as a distinctive civilization among the world's major civilizations that unite all Muslims from various geographical, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds based on the same faith. However, in terms of its culture, without a doubt, there are various cultural variations in the Muslim world due to differences in locality, ethnicity, language, and culture.⁸ Therefore, scholars have divided Islamic civilization into parts of the sub-civilization or the cultural zones of Islam which are generally split into Arab, Persian, African, Turkish, Indian, Malay, and Chinese sub-regions, as well as some

¹ Chase F. Robinson, "The Rise of Islam," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.1, ed. by C. F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 173-226.

² Elton L. Daniel, "The Islamic East," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.1, ed. by C. F. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 448-506.

³ Andre Wink, "The Early Expansion of Islam in India," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.3, ed. by D. O. Morgan and A. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 78-100; Dusuki Ahmad, *Ikhtisar Perkembangan Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1993), pp. 431-439.

⁴ Ulrich Rebstock, "West Africa and Its Early Empires," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 2, ed. by M. Fierro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 144-161.

⁵ Andre Wink, "Early Expansion of Islam in India," pp. 78-100.

⁶ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, "Follow The White Camel: Islam in China to 1800," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.3, ed. by D.O. Morgan and A. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 409-427.

⁷ Geoff Wade, "Early Muslim Expansion in South East Asia: Eighth to Fifteenth Centuries," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol.3, ed. by D. O. Morgan and A. Reid (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 366-409.

⁸ See for details Ismail al-Faruqi, *Atlas Budaya Islam*, trans. Ridzuan Othman et.al. (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992); Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 18-24; Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Islam and The Cultural Imperative," *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*, vol. 1, no.1, (2009), pp. 19-22; and R. Michael Feener, "Islam: Historical Introduction and Overview," in *Islam In World Culture: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by R. M. Feener (California: ABC-CLIO, 2004), p. 1.

smaller zones like Muslim minorities in Europe and North America.⁹ Each of these cultural zones has unique characteristics and features as compared to other zones. Throughout the dissemination process, Islamic teachings have interacted with various local cultural traditions so that the existing cultures have molded the ‘face’ of Islam in their respective regions, thus creating several distinctive cultural zones within the Muslim world.¹⁰

There are generally two modes of interactions between religion and culture as Islam spreads to various civilizations and cultural realms. First, the interaction between the Islamic teachings and the culture of the society that was in the process of accepting Islam. This was the case between Islam and the Arab’s cultural system at the advent of Islam in the Arab Peninsular.¹¹ The second type of interaction took place between the culture of the earlier Islamic civilization, which played the role of propagating Islamic teachings, and the other civilizations that were subjected to this propagation. For instance, the interaction of Arabic culture through their Arabian ‘*mubaligh*’ (propagator) with the Malay-Indonesian society upon the arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia.¹²

The Malay cultural realm is among the last realms that accepted Islam in the Muslim World, as compared to other cultural realms such as Arab, Persian, Turkish, African, Indian, and Chinese.¹³ So it has raised the question of the authenticity of Islamic teachings

⁹ Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*, 18-24; Azyumardi Azra, *Renaissance Islam Asia Tenggara: Sejarah Wacana dan Kekuasaan* (Bandung: PT Remaja Rosda Karya, 1999), p. 8; Mohamed Tahir el-Mesawi, *A Muslim Theory of Human Society: An Investigation Into The Sociological Thought of Malik Bennabi* (Selangor: Thinker’s Library, 1998); Timothy Insoll, “The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa; A Review,” *Journal of World Prehistory*, vol. 10, no. 4 (1996) pp. 439-504; Alexander Djumae, “Islam and Culture in The Context of The Central Asian Civilization,” *Oriente Moderno*, vol. 87, no. 1 (2007), pp. 53-84.

¹⁰ Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History and Civilization*, p. 18.

¹¹ Robinson, “The Rise of Islam,” pp. 173-226.

¹² Mahmood Zuhdi Hj. Ab. Majid, “Pengaruh Timbal Balik Antara Hukum Dan Budaya Dalam Syariat Islam,” in *Hukum Islam Dan Budaya Tempatan*, ed. by. Md. Saleh Hj. Md et. al., (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Fiqh Dan Usul Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya, 2006), pp. 1-18; Martin van Bruinessen, “Ghazwul Fikri or Arabization? Indonesian Muslim Responses to Globalization,” in *Southeast Asian Muslim in the Era of Globalization*, ed. by. Ken Miichi and Omar Farouk (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 65-66.

¹³ Wade, “Early Muslim Expansion in South East Asia,” pp. 366-409.

practiced by Malay society since the arrival of Islam. This is due to the claim put forward by some scholars especially the orientalist that the version of the Islamic teachings that arrived here were the mere by-products of another culture that had already lost its authenticity and orthodoxy.¹⁴ So it is not surprising that the Malay's 'version' of Islam was oftentimes mocked as "peripheral Islam" in contrast to the "central Islam" of the Middle East.¹⁵

This paper thus looks into the Islamisation theories of Malay culture deliberated by the orientalists. Subsequently, responses to these theories are provided with a referral to contemporary Muslim scholars.

B. The Orientalist Theories of Islamisation of Culture

In discussing the Islamisation of culture, scholars both from the orientalist's stream and their Muslim counterpart are mainly engaging with two approaches. The first approach is the sociological and anthropological study of Islamic culture. While the second approach is a historical study of the Islamisation process of culture that took place in the Malay World.

The Formation of Islamic Culture

First, to have a clearer view of the Islamisation process of culture, we need to have a good grasp of the concept of culture. Unfortunately, from the very beginning, there is a disagreement on the very fundamental question as to what is the origin of the culture. A quick review of the mainstream theory of culture in anthropology and sociology shows that the study of culture nowadays has been conquered by the evolutionists who see the development of human culture as a continuous process of evolution from the primitive stage to savage human beings to the modern man. This evolution is achieved through the process of natural selection and 'the survival of the fittest' in Darwinian philosophy.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 124-130.

¹⁵ Dietrich Reetz, "Conflict in Islam on the Asian and African Periphery: Doctrines, Cultures, and Politics," *Religions and the Modern World* (2009), pp. 478-513.

For example, the eminent anthropologist E.B Taylor (d.1917) described the process of cultural evolution as the development of all societies that must pass through three basic stages of development: 1) Savagery, 2) Barbarism, and 3) Civilisation. The culture of every society starts with the primitive state and savagery when humankind only interacts with their environment to survive. So at this stage, the savage man creates a set of beliefs, in the form of mythology and paganism to comprehend the phenomena that are beyond their faculty of reason. Then this society evolves into a new stage of life, that is barbarism, and later on into civilization to become the modern man.¹⁶ If this mainstream theory of culture is accepted, we will then have to agree that civilization started from scratch on its own, without any guides and directions from God.

Accepting this theory for Islamic civilization and culture, we will have to assume that the process of Islamisation of the Arabian Peninsula is a completely new phenomenon, not connected to the histories and messages of the early Prophets and Apostles. This will imply that the spread of Islamic teachings into new territories contributing to a new civilization, all started afresh, completely foreign to its original and ancestral culture, namely Abrahamic culture.

While regarding the relationship between Islam and the local culture, early orientalist such as Robertson Smith (d.1894), Ignaz Goldziher (d.1921), and Snouck Hurgronje (d.1936) pioneered a view that the precedent original culture of society has succeeded in dominating Islamic teachings. This has led to the formation of the "foreign element" theory which attempts to demonstrate that Islamic teachings in the early stages of its emergence are merely the result of the evolutionary process of foreign elements such as the pre-Islamic beliefs of the Arabs and Roman legal legacies.¹⁷ While according to Robert Bellah (d.2013), the teachings of Islam only began to be

¹⁶ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), pp. 328-400.

¹⁷ Ayman Shabana, *Custom in Islamic Law and Legal Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 18-28; Wael Hallaq, *The Origin and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 8-29.

influenced by the elements of Arab culture when entering the era of the Umayyad Empire.¹⁸ Either way, according to these scholars, the Islamic teachings that spread out of the Arab culture zone were no longer the teachings of Islam in their original form, free from external influences.

This has led to the blurred distinction between Islamic teachings and Arab culture so that Islam is often thought to be identical to the Arab. It was due to the prominent role played by Arab culture that is considered as the "host" to the process of revelation of the Quran and the application of prophetic tradition (*al-sunnah*). Thus, when the early expansion of the Islamic empire beyond the Arabian Peninsula happened, this Arab culture has also spread widely along through the process of Arabization. This process occurred among others through a resettlement policy of the Arab tribes to major cities in the newly opened territory of the Islamic caliphate.¹⁹

Consequently, this has led to the claim of Arabisation and the cultural colonization of other cultures by the Arabs. For instance, studies showed that the Arabisation process has taken place extensively on the Berber ethnic group in North Africa. This occurred as a result of the spread of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula to this region that almost eliminating the original culture and language of the Berber community.²⁰ Another issue brought upon by this orientalist's "foreign element" theory is the confusion between the concept of Islamisation with other concepts such as syncretism and acculturation. We will elaborate more on this in the next part discussing the Islamisation of Malay culture.

¹⁸ Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 149-156.

¹⁹ Abdul Aziz Duri, "Arab (Islamic) Culture: An Approach Through Iraq," *Bulletin d'études Orientales*, vol. 31 (1979), pp. 51-62.

²⁰ Mohand Tilmatine "Arabization and Linguistic Dominations: Berber and Arabic in The North of Africa," in *Language Empires in Comparative Perspective*, ed. by. Christel Stolz (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 1-16; Jago Ritonga "Arabisasi Dan Perspektif Bangsa Arab Terhadap Bahas Asing: Tinjauan Historis," *Innovatio*, vol. 6, no. 12 (2007), pp. 354-356.

Islamisation of Malay Culture

According to this "foreign element" theory, for cultural zones situated far apart from the center of Islamic civilization in the Middle East, the interaction of Islamic teachings with other cultures has resulted in syncretism. Syncretism is a theory in which the religious teachings are deemed to only able to change the external appearance of the original culture of society while failing to do the same to the core and kernel of their culture and beliefs. This resulted in the domination of their original beliefs and mythologies in their daily life. The syncretism theory in Islam has been supported by Clifford Geertz (d.2006) who argues that the Islamic teachings spread across the world are influenced by the local culture and the original beliefs of the community. At the same time, these cultures and beliefs are resistant to the Islamic influence thus giving birth to the nominal Muslim society.²¹

Another aspect to be taken into consideration on the process of Islamisation in the Malay World is the dilemma in choosing the version of the history that served as the starting point of the Islamisation process in this region. As there are quite a several historical versions and theories on the origins of the Islamisation process in the Malay World, each one of them might conflict with the other. In general, all of these theories try to answer the questions of who, when, how, why, and where concerning the spreading of Islam in Southeast Asia.²²

The mainstream orientalist led by Snouck Hurgronje, Van Leur (d.1942), Clifford Geertz, B.J.O Schrieke (d.1945), and R.O Winstedt (d.1966) generally side with the theory showing that the process of Islamisation in the Malay World only met with little success as the Malay region already had a strong influence of Hindu-Buddhist culture of the Indian Subcontinent. For them, the process of

²¹ Geertz, *Religion of Java*, pp. 124-130; Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (London: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 4-22.

²² William R. Roff, *Studies On Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), pp. 13-21.

Islamisation only scratched the surface, maintaining the old religion and belief system at the core.²³

This theory tries to show that the process of spreading and preaching Islam to Southeast Asia originated from India, through the network of sea traders, as late as the 13th century. This is to impress on us that the propagation of Islam in the Malay World was merely a coincidence as there was already an established relationship and influence of the Indian Subcontinent in Southeast Asia through the trading and Hindu-Buddhist activities.²⁴ They elaborated more on this through several cultural theories such as the dichotomy of the Malay society into *Santri-Abangan-Priyayi*,²⁵ and the theory of *Receptie* and *Autochthony*.²⁶ In general, all these theories try to prove that Islam enjoys little effect and success in this region, as the Malay society already holds fast to their ancestral belief and Hindu-Buddhist religion. They only accept Islam at an external and surface level, converting themselves into the nominal or namesake Muslims.

C. Responses to The Orientalist Theories of Islamisation

Based on the two problems at hand, namely the origin of the Islamic culture and the history of the Islamisation of Malay culture, Muslim scholars have responded from an Islamic perspective. As far as the theoretical and fundamental aspect in studying culture is concerned, they argue that the evolutionistic view of culture is not compatible with the Islamic worldview. Since Islam believes that all humankind originated from Prophet Adam and God the Almighty had taught Adam “the name of all things,” as clearly stated in the Holy

²³ Geertz, *Religion of Java*, pp. 124-130; Roff, *Islam, and Society in Southeast Asia*, pp. 13-21; Mary Margaret Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory in the Anthropology of Southeast Asia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 28 (1999), pp. 433-437.

²⁴ Roff, *Islam, and Society in Southeast Asia*, pp. 13-21.

²⁵ Geertz, *Religion of Java*, pp. 124-130, 227-260.

²⁶ *Receptie* is a theory created by Snouck Hurgronje to show that the elements of Islamic jurisprudence can be accepted for legalization in Nusantara only if it coincidentally already existed in the pre-Islamic culture of the society. But if Islamic teachings and pre-Islamic cultures clash together, the pre-Islamic culture will prevail. While autochthony is a theory to imply that Nusantara society only received the Islamic teachings that were compatible with their own pre-Islamic culture, the teachings that are not compatible will only be met with rejection. See for more details: Akh. Minhaji, *Islamic Law and Local Tradition* (Jogjakarta: Kurnia Kalam Semesta Press, 2008)

Quran, this implies that from the very beginning humankind was given a set of cultures capable enough to build a civilization. Thus it runs contrary to evolutionism's belief that our beginning is from the ground zero as a primitive creature that just evolves from another type of primates.²⁷

A more serious work to develop the sociological theory of human society from the Islamic perspective was carried out by Malik Bennabi (d. 1973), an Algerian Muslim scholar. He tried to develop some theories of the origin of the human association and the birth of society by undertaking an inter-disciplinary approach by combining a variety of disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology to analyze human society and to grasp its dynamics, its birth, development, and disintegration, and discover the laws governing its march in history.²⁸

To answer the problem of the origin of human society and cultures, Malik Bennabi has divided human societies into two categories: first is the *natural stationary societies*, and second is the *historical dynamic societies*. The first category is natural stationary societies, in which people in this type of society lead a mechanically, organized life ruled by instinctive drives. This is the category that belongs to the primitive societies that we can still see today. Whereas the second category is the historical dynamic societies. It consists of two types: the geographical type in which the society developed in response to the challenges of the physical environment, and the ideological type where a society advanced as an outcome of an espousal of a certain ideal. Islamic society and civilization thus belong to this type.²⁹

Therefore, according to Bennabi, the evolutionists were wrong in the sense that they were too focused on the natural stationary or primitive society, that is a stationary, non-dynamic human group.

²⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim's Guide to The Modern World* (Chicago: Library of Islam, 2003), p. 186; Shoaib Ahmed Malik, *Islam, and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021), pp. 94-99.

²⁸ See for details El-Mesawi, *Muslim History of Human Society*.

²⁹ Malik Bennabi, *On the Origins of Human Society*, trans. Tahir el-Mesawi (Petaling Jaya: Islamic Book Trust, 2002).

Instead, the real concern of a social scientist should be focalized on the dynamic societies where the Islamic society belongs to.

While on the question of the Islamisation of culture, Muslim scholars such as al-Attas (b.1931), al-Faruqi (d.1986), Hossein Nasr (b.1933), Umar Faruq (b.1948), and Osman Bakar (b.1946) argue that in the interaction between Islam and the cultures, it is the elements of Islamic teachings that have dominated the culture of society through the process of cultural Islamisation. This means that the existing culture of society during the arrival of Islam had undergone the process of screening, filtering, and eliminating before transforming into Islamic culture.³⁰

In this process, the existing culture of the community has been divided into three categories. Firstly, there is the culture of the society that is fully accepted by Islam. The majority of cultures are included in this category because Islam takes a positive attitude and approach to culture, as long as it does not contradict the values of Islamic teachings.³¹ As Islam comes with universal values, it thus recognizes the legitimacy of the existing local culture.³² Islam, therefore, is not a racial ideology that is only specific to certain races and cultures as found in some other religions such as the Jews.³³

Subsequently, the second category is a culture that has undergone a modified process to ensure that it coincides with the teachings of Islam. Most of the issues included in this category are the original culture of a society that has some aspects that contradict the teachings of Islam hence need to be modified. Examples may be given with this regards to polygamy, trading, criminal penalties, and

³⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Petaling Jaya: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, 1990), pp. 17-24; Al-Faruqi, *Atlas Budaya Islam*; Hossein Nasr, *Islam: Religion, History and Civilisation*; Umar Faruq, "Islam and The Cultural Imperative," pp. 10-26; and Osman Bakar, "Cultural Symbiosis and The Role of Religion in The Contemporary World: An Islamic Perspective," *KATHA: The Official Journal of the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2008), pp. 31-58.

³¹ Shabana, *Custom in Islamic Law*, p. 56.

³² Umar Faruq, "Islam and The Cultural Imperative," pp. 10-26; Osman Bakar, "Cultural Symbiosis and The Role of Religion," pp. 31-58.

³³ Rahimin Affandi Abdul Rahim, "Kebudayaan Melayu Dan Islam Di Nusantara: Suatu Analisis Pengkaedahan," in *Hukum Islam Dan Budaya Tempatan*, ed. by. Md. Saleh Hj. Md et. al. (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Fiqh Dan Usul Akademi Pengajian Islam Universiti Malaya, 2006).

slavery. While the last category is the culture of the society that is completely prohibited for violating the core principles and values of Islam. Among the examples are banned foods, consuming alcoholic drinks, *riba* (usury) transactions, killing daughters, and adultery.³⁴ This Islamisation process has resulted in a comprehensive transformation process on the ethical values of the pre-Islamic Arab culture after the advent of Islam, primarily the success of changing the worldview of society.³⁵

However, these researchers differed when it comes to defining the concept of "Islamisation". According to Hossein Nasr, the process of Islamisation occurs with the process of comparing the doctrine of Islamic cosmology with the cosmological doctrines of other cultures.³⁶ Meanwhile, for al-Attas Islamisation is the process of identifying foreign elements such as the ideology of secularism found in the knowledge to be Islamised and then abolishing it.³⁷ This concept resembles the approach taken by al-Faruqi who views that the strain of science must be traced to identify the sources of irregularities and subsequently corrected according to the paradigm of *tawhid* to make it Islamic.³⁸ Sardar took a slightly different approach when he argues that the process of Islamisation was adequate when the morals and values in that field had concurred with the universal ethical values of Islam.³⁹ Whereas according to Shaharir, it is the indigenous values found in the original culture of the community that needs to be taken into account, so that instead of Islamisation, the process is more accurately referred to as the 'indigenization' process.⁴⁰

³⁴ Shabana, *Custom in Islamic Law*, p. 57.

³⁵ See Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico Religious Concept in The Qur'an* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan*.

³⁶ See Syed Hossein Nasr, *Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).

³⁷ See Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978)

³⁸ See Ismail al-Faruqi, *Islamisation of Knowledge: The Problem, Principles and the Workplan* (New York: IIT, 1982).

³⁹ See Ziauddin Sardar, *Argument for Islamic Science* (Aligarh: Centre for Studies on Science, 1984).

⁴⁰ See Shaharir Mohd Zain, *Berakhir Sudahkah Ilmu Dalam Acuan Sendiri?* (Kuala Lumpur: Pusat Dialog Peradaban Universiti Malaya, 2012).

Nevertheless, the definitions made by these scholars are more focused on Islamisation from the aspect of science. Whereas the specific understanding of Islamisation from the cultural aspect has been proposed by Tariq Ramadan. According to him, Islamisation of culture occurs when universal values of Islam are used as a moral foundation in a culture of society. The precedent and original culture of a community are free to be practiced as long as it is based on these moral foundations and Islamic universal values.⁴¹ Thus, in his attempt to adopt this approach in the Muslim community in the West, he opines that the community is free to practice Western cultures which had become their homeland and not to be bound to any outside cultures from the other Muslim's cultural zones. This is since all of these cultures are of equal values in Islam so that no culture is considered better, superior, or more Islamic than the others. He thus categorically rejected the common perception generally adapted to the Arab culture as a superior Islamic culture compared to the other cultures of the rest of the Muslim world.⁴²

While regarding the Islamisation process in the Malay World, these Muslim scholars have responded to the theory developed by the orientalist and refuted it using their theory of Islamisation of the Malay World. They criticized the weaknesses and mistakes found in the Western theory of Islamisation that was loaded with hidden agendas, no matter how value-free they claimed it to be. Al-Attas for instance refutes the orientalist's theories on the coming of Islam to the Malay World. According to him, the influence of the Hindu-Buddhist culture in the Malay World was in reality not as strong as it may seem. Instead, the influence only occurs at the top level of the Malay ruling classes in the palace and not among their ordinary citizens. Besides, it only affords to penetrate to the level of arts and aesthetics but not to the very core of Malay religious beliefs. He proceeds to argue that there is no such thing as the existence of a distinctive Hindu-Buddhist civilization in Southeast Asia before

⁴¹ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 58-61.

⁴² See Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999).

Islam. It was only the Hindu-Buddhist culture that managed to spread at the surface level of the life of Malay societies.⁴³

The Muslim scholars also seek to demonstrate that the spread of Islam into this region is not an accidental process but was the effort and a carefully executed plan of the Muslim preacher and Sufi movements. Hence, Islam has arrived in this region as early as the 9th and 10th centuries, much earlier than the orientalist's estimation. It was also coming directly from the Arabian Peninsula, carried by the great scholars and preachers of Islam and not accidentally by the sailors and traders.⁴⁴ While on the question of the type of interaction that occurred between the Islamic teaching and the ancestral religion and cultures, according to them the Islamic teachings have managed to penetrate to the core and kernel of the tenets of Malay society belief system. Therefore, there is no such thing as the process of syncretism, acculturation, or indigenization as advocated by the orientalist theories.⁴⁵

So, it was clear that the Muslim scholars have responded accordingly to the issue of the Islamisation of culture both in the general context and especially in the context of Malay Culture. Malik Bennabi for instance has focused on the problem of culture and human societies at the theoretical level to solve the problem of the domination of evolutionism in the sociological and anthropological studies of Muslim societies. He has also emphasized the main role of religion, especially Islam in developing human societies and cultures. Religion in this regards served as an independent force underlying the existence of human society and determining their culture and civilization.⁴⁶ However, this theory is a work in progress that calls for further elaboration and support especially from the archaeological data and historical proofs to challenge the long-established evolutionist theory of cultural evolution.

⁴³ Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamisation of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1969); al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan*, pp. 28-31.

⁴⁴ Syamsuddin Arif, "Islam Di Nusantara: Historiografi Dan Metodologi," *Jurnal ISLAMIA*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2012), pp. 14-23.

⁴⁵ al-Attas, *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan*, pp. 16-20.

⁴⁶ El-Mesawi, *A Muslim History*.

While on the Islamisation of the Malay World, the Muslim scholars have managed to come up with an alternative theory on the process of Islamisation in this region, highlighting some aspects of the interaction between Islam and the culture of origin that has been concealed for so long. Islam is nothing but a continuation of the religion of *fitrah* since Prophet Adam. Hence, the process of Islamising culture is no more than to rediscover the Islamic elements found in a particular culture and civilization and to amend and refresh some of its elements that have been decayed over time. Islam in this sense, is never a foreign element to that culture, as Islamisation is never a process of cultural colonialism or Arabization.

Moreover, in each of these Islamic cultural zones, there should never be a question of superiority or inferiority between these cultures, nor a polemic in determining which culture is more Islamic than the others. Islam as practiced by the Malay Muslims, therefore, is the same as being practiced by Indian, Chinese, Turkish, Persian, African, and even Arabs. All of their cultures are equivalent as long as it is parallel with the Islamic teachings based on the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah. This ultimately dissects the dichotomy between central Islam and peripheral Islam in the Islamic civilization.

D. Conclusion

In sum, based on the sociological, anthropological, and historical approaches taken up by the orientalist, the Islamisation of Islamic culture generally, and the Malay-Islamic culture specifically are being undermined as something of little importance. The interaction between Islamic teachings and the culture is seen as a completely new phenomenon, foreign to its original and ancestral culture, hence making it obsolete as it is only a phase in the evolution of the human society toward modern civilization. Whilst in the Malay culture, the role played by Islamic teachings is made minimal, as Islam in the Malay culture is perceived as a superficial part of the culture, while at the core of it is the heritage of the ancestral belief and Hindu-Buddhist religion.

These theories set forth by the orientalist have been met with responses and critics by Muslim scholars. Unlike the orientalists, for

these scholars, Islam is a formidable force underlying the existence of human society and determining human culture and civilization. Islam is but a continuation of the religion of *'fitrah'* in its complete and final form that will stay relevant forever. While on the Islamisation of the Malay culture, the Islamic teachings have managed to penetrate to the very core of its culture, reforming completely the tenets of belief and faith of its society.

But this polemic is far from over. The discourse on the Islamisation processes and theories needs active participation. It requires the courage and strong will of the Muslims as Islamisation is not an apologetic action to include all types of foreign elements into it in the name of inclusivity nor it is a radical movement that brings the Muslims into seclusion and exclusivity. It needs objectivity, to accept what must be accepted and to reject what is not, based on a clear discipline and methodology. Therefore, we have to move forward in this project of Islamisation from merely constructing theories and frameworks to the actual practice of Islamisation in the reality and various disciplines of knowledge such as anthropology, sociology, history, and cultural studies.

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