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## From Noble Muslims to Saracen Enemies: Thomas Stamford Raffles' Discourse on Islam in the Malay World

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### ABSTRAK

*Rencana ini mengkaji perkembangan wacana Sir Thomas Raffles ke atas Islam yang diamalkan orang Melayu. Adalah diujahkan bahawa wacana ini beralih daripada kekaguman terhadap Islam kepada kepercayaan bahawa ia telah membawa keburukan ke Alam Melayu. Peralihan strategi wacana ini dengan menyangka pentingnya Islam di Alam Melayu adalah perlu kerana beberapa sebab. Menafikan kepentingan dan sumbangan Islam, Raffles dan konco-konconya, telah membuka Alam Melayu luas kepada potensi masuknya mubaligh dan untuk dijadikan tanah penjajahan. Selain itu, dengan membesarkan penindasan dan kezaliman sistem sebelum kedatangan British, Raffles ingin membuat publisiti tentang dasarnya yang bersifat suka membuat kebajikan. Yang paling penting, seperti yang akan ditunjukkan dalam rencana ini, ialah cara-cara Raffles gunakan pengaruh ideologi dominan dan epistemologi di persekitarannya untuk merendah-rendahkan Islam.*

*Kata kunci: Orang Melayu, Islam, strategi wacana, ideologi, epistemologi*

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines the development of Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' discourse on Islam as practised by the Malays. It is argued that this discourse shifted from admiration of Islam to the belief that it had brought detriment to the Malay World. Such a shift in discursive strategy, which denies the importance of Islam in the Malay World, was necessary due to several reasons. By denying the importance and contribution of Islam, Raffles and his compatriots left the Malay World open as potential missionary and colonisable territory. Also, by exaggerating the oppression and cruelty of systems preceding the arrival of the British, Raffles intended to publicise the success of his benevolent policies. Most importantly, in the narratives that follow, it will be demonstrated the ways Raffles make use of the influence of dominant ideologies and epistemologies in his milieu to denigrate Islam.*

*Keywords: Malays, Islam, discursive strategies, ideologies, epistemologies*

## INTRODUCTION

Today, if one is asked “What is the religion of the Malays”, the predictable response would be, “Islam”. Perhaps the question in itself is problematic and is in need of deconstruction for it assumes that there is one religion, which Malays subscribe to. Yet, there are some who will probe further: “Are you saying that you can be Malay and Christian or Hindu?” This is a tradition that has been invented and now codified in the minds of the majority in this part of the Archipelago. Malayness is often associated with Islam to the extent that if a Malay were to convert to another faith, he or she will no longer be accepted and perceived as being Malay, even if he or she retains the Malay language, eats Malay food and observes Malay customs. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, whom we remember as the founder of Singapore, the author of a two volume encyclopaedic work on Java and perhaps the most dedicated colonial administrator in the history of Southeast Asia, observed otherwise. The purpose of this article is to present the development of Raffles’ views towards Islam and Muslims in the Malay World.

Before engaging the contents of this article, it is necessary to clarify the term Malay that will be used throughout. Since this is a study of Raffles’ discourse on the Malay religion, it is essential to define this elusive ethnic category as it was understood by the English public at that time. The Malays were “one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs, in all maritime states lying between the Sulu Seas and the Southern Ocean, and bounded longitudinally by Sumatra and [the] western side of Papua or New Guinea” (Stamford Raffles 1818: 103). Echoing Marsden’s definition, this initial stance is reflected in Raffles’ paper on the Malayan Nation published in 1809 (republished in 1818). Its focus was largely on linguistic affinity and geographical proximity. Three years later, Raffles further elaborated his early assumption into a more sophisticated characterisation of the Malays. This discursive framework was slightly elaborated upon after his encounters with the Javanese and Sumatrans. Shamsul and Reid have observed that Raffles’ understanding of Malay merely shifted from that of a nation to a distinct race (Shamsul 1999: 25; Reid 2001: 302). Its main assertions were, however, largely retained. To Raffles, the indigenous peoples, “though varying radically in customs, manners, religion, and language, and possessing very different degrees of civilization, was long been confounded by the Europeans under the general appellation of Malays, a term which may still be retained for convenience” (Raffles to Minto, Malacca, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1811, Eur. Mss. F.14816).

Various groups or states were thus to be subsumed under a common term, subjected to British “Malay policy”. These were: first, the states of the Malay Peninsula; second, the states of the Island of Sumatra; third, the states of Borneo; fourth, the states of the Sunda Isles, comprising of the chain of islands extending from the Sunda to Timor and Celebes, excluding Java, which we may expect

for the present; fifth, the states of Celebes; sixth, the states of Sulu and Mindanawi; seventh, the states of the Moluccas, i.e. Ceram and Banda; eighth, the states of Jilolo, or Little Celebes, and ninth, the Black Papua states of New Guinea, and the Papua Islands in its vicinity (Raffles to Minto, Malacca, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1811, Eur. Mss. F. 148/6). Religion of any kind was not seen as a defining characteristic although he was aware that a majority of the Malays were Muslims and saw Islam as one of the vital elements of Malayness (Andaya 2001: 29-68). Instead, Raffles laid more stress upon geographic, cultural and linguistic features.

It is also worth noting that Raffles had come to the Malay Archipelago with the assumption that the Malays were a rude, uncivilised and degraded race, much in decline from a high point of civilisation that they had once attained. No developments in thought and science were thus expected of them except for simple and crude ideas that existed in all aspects of life (Sophia Raffles 1991: 15). He found them to be generally indolent. Although he acknowledged them later as being advanced in civilisation, albeit at differing degrees and of varied characteristics, they were of no match to the Britons at that time and could only be compared "to some of the borderers in North Britain, not many centuries ago" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 235). However, being a follower of the Romantic Movement in Europe, he remained optimistic that he would be able to uncover some remnants of great civilisations that were to him, lost and forgotten.

#### RAFFLES' FIRST ACCOUNT OF ISLAM

Little is known about Raffles' initial encounter with Islam. Being a well-read man, especially of Enlightenment thinkers such as Charles de Secondat Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he must have had literary encounters with Islam even before his arrival in Penang in 1805. Nevertheless, it was whilst serving as a young assistant secretary on that island that Raffles first met personally this "community of believers" (Crawford 1971: 363). Interestingly, at that point in time, Raffles had maintained a neutral and if not, positive view of Islam. Although he was critical of what seemed to him a set of empty rituals which the Malays followed, he went a step further to argue that Islam and its adherents were at the same time direct and clear opposites to Christianity. The latter, he posited, was at its lowest ebb. In his letter to his cousin, William Raffles, he remarked; "But of the Mahomedan Religion on the contrary, as much, if not more is done than said. We are here surrounded with Mussulmen and I find them very good men and [pay] by far more attention to the duties and observances of their religion than the generality of Christians – even Methodists" (Raffles to William Raffles, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1807, Mss. Eur. F202/6).

Raffles went on to assert that while he was aware that Islam might have been spread by the sword, "it has in equally many others found its way without such means". He maintained that in its purest form, Islam was a religion that

deserved respect and admiration. The implementation of a Unity of God found in the Qur'an through Muhammad, God's own Messenger had, to him, brought goodness to the Malay Archipelago. Islam thus deserved the same veneration accorded Christianity (Raffles to William Raffles, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1807, Mss. Eur. F202/6).

Many factors could explain his negative attitude towards Christianity. First was the state of religiousness amongst the Europeans in Penang. Stationed for a fixed period on the island, they were preoccupied mainly with commercial and worldly dealings. There was thus an absence of churches and missions that could assert any form of religious influence. The sole clergyman in Penang, according to Raffles, was "though a very good man, like many others of the Church, too careless of the eternal interests of his flock" (Demetrius Charles Boulger 1999: 57). Last but not least of these factors was the sheer vibrancy of the Muslim society in Penang, especially in the observance of religious practices, which possibly left a deep impression upon the young Raffles (Sarnia Hayes Hoyt 1991: 64-8).

While this positive attitude toward Islam was significant, it was short-lived. A few years later, Raffles was to change his stance and develop a discourse that was to be maintained until the end of his life. None of his biographers have attempted to explain in detail the reasons behind this change. Perhaps, the most pertinent factor amongst all was his acquaintance with an evangelical form of Christianity.

### ISLAM: A FAITH?

From 1810 onwards, Raffles began his campaign against the faith that he had once admired. This shift in discourse away from his previously positive image of Islam partly coincided with his new relationship with the first Earl of Minto and his subsequent entrance into the brotherhood of the Freemasons (Wurtzburg 1984: 352; Jasper Ridley 2000: 219; Nigel Barley 2002: 85-6).

To Raffles, Islam, like Christianity, had a human founder: Muhammad. But unlike Christianity, whose originator was God's son on Earth, Islam had an impostor as messenger. Hence, although Raffles was aware of the word Islam as the appropriate term to describe that faith, he had maintained the usage of two other terms, "Islamism" and "Mohamedanism". It was in many ways a product of his personal conviction about the ungodly origins and nature of Islam. Also, the use of such terminology was deemed necessary to provide a description that could be generally accepted and understood by his European audiences, whose conceptions of Islam at that time radiated solely from the image of Christianity.

To Raffles, Islam "is the Religion of all others most likely to enslave the minds and bodies of mankind...." (Raffles to Rev. Thomas Raffles, Bencoolen, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1815, Mss. Eur. F202/6). It is essentially a "robber-religion" (Raffles

to Minto, Malacca, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1811, Mss. Eur. F148/7). This latter offensive remark was a derivation of the word 'Saracen' from 'sarraq', which means 'robber'. By adopting this remark, albeit casually, Raffles must have been influenced by earlier derogatory terms used with regard to Islam (Ahmad Gunny 1996: 193-4). In addition, Raffles' portrayal of Muhammad and the Qur'an departed from Enlightenment descriptions and returned to those that drew heavily from medieval predecessors. Raffles argued that the precepts of the Qur'an were more detrimental to the natives than the Dutch commercial monopoly. Examples of such precepts were the encouragement of piracy and plunder (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 232; see also Vol. II: 3). Raffles came to believe that Muhammad, the "founder" of Islam, was an evil man and the deliberate fabricator of false doctrines. He was described as "the false prophet of Mecca"; a man who had left a legacy of intolerance and barbarism whose effects could be seen in the backward peoples of the Orient. All of these evils combined, and came to conclusion that Islam promoted the "contempt of unbelievers, with which the Mahometan system inspires its votaries, leads them usually to undervalue the acts which others excel, or instruction they communicate" (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 245).

Raffles, however, was not a scholar of comparative religion or theology. Hence, he never critically discussed many other essential aspects and principles of Islam. Although he was aware that the reading of the Qur'an, praying at appointed times, fasting in the month of *Ramadan* and giving charity are amongst the principal tenets of Islam, his criticisms often focussed on the Islamic practice of marriage. Polygamy, for example, was to him injurious to population growth and happiness in family life. Although this precept was a prevalent practice only amongst the higher classes of the Malay society, he observed that another evil attached to it was often exploited by Malays of inferior classes in replacement of polygamy; divorce. In his words, "perhaps the ease of obtaining matrimonial separations, by admitting of successive changes of wives, diminishes the desire of possessing more than one at a time" (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 73).

Aside from criticising the tenets of Islam, Raffles placed more emphasis in elucidating the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago and its effects. His agenda was to publicise the negative residues left behind by that mass conversion. That could only be done by glorifying what he thought were the original conditions of Malay society prior to the coming of Islam.

#### MALAYS BEFORE CONVERSION TO ISLAM AND THEORIES OF CONVERSION

To Raffles, the Malays had in general made considerable progress in civilisation before the introduction of the religion of Islam among them. They had once dominated the trade and political influence in the Eastern Seas (Raffles 1819: 5). Celebes, for example, had a well-organised administration and government that

surpassed most found on the nations surrounding it before its eventual decline in the Islamic period. The main island of Java had also suffered the same consequence. The latter's progress and influence in the Archipelago was stopped short upon the arrival of "the religion of Mahomet". From then on, the island "had scarcely recovered from the shock of conversion to this faith, when the Europeans found their way round the Cape of Good Hope" (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 239). Their power was dismembered and all trading influences were lost to either pirates or foreign ships.

Moving on to the methods of conversion, Raffles posited that the centre for the training and dispatch of missionaries to other parts of the Malay Archipelago was Aceh. It "was the first and most important footing obtained by the Mahomedans to the eastward, and whence their religion was subsequently disseminated among the Islands" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 92). Gresik, on Java, was also the most important centre amidst many others. To Raffles, the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago was carried out in a different and unique manner from other parts of the Archipelago. In a discourse delivered on the 24<sup>th</sup> April 1813 at a meeting of the Society of Arts and Sciences in Britain, Raffles highlighted an important question that was posed by the pioneers of the Society:

By what means of fitness do the Preachers and Missionaries of the Moslem faith succeed, even at the present day, in converting Pagans to the faith of the Koran, and in establishing them in this faith? (Sophia Raffles 1991: 136)

Raffles' answer to this was that it was "never by the force of arms", a view he consistently held since his arrival in the East. Instead, it was a soft, gradual and continual process that left a deep impression upon the natives (Raffles 1870: 15-6). A demonstration of the potency of the conversion process was the fact that most of the natives remembered accurately the date of the introduction of Islam and some leading circumstances relating to their conversion. Raffles argued that the evidences of this peaceful conversion were what he perceived as an extremely modified and milder form of Islam practised by the Malays in general. The "usual bigotry of the true Muselman" was absent with exception of certain classes amongst the Malays (Raffles 1821a: 50). To him, the Javanese for example, had never displayed any form of hatred towards Europeans although the latter were considered infidels. "This perhaps may be given as the best proof that they are very imperfect Mahometans" (Raffles Vol. II, 1988a: 5). To him, such superficial conversion had resulted in the change, decline and subsequent destruction of the prior achievements and glories of the Malays. It is the details of these 'changes', 'destruction' and 'degeneration' to which we now turn.

## EFFECTS OF CONVERSION

## ARTIFICIAL ADOPTION OF ISLAM

Raffles' standards for judging the Malays' adherence to Islam appear to have been based on a two-fold approach. The first was the 'rule observance' approach (Bowen 1995: 69-86). Using this, Raffles imposed his 'ideal' that all Islamic legal decisions amongst the Malays were supposed to be guided by several Arabic works. To qualify as 'true Muslims', he expected the laws as found in the Qur'an to be observed literally.

His observations, however, did not 'meet' such expectations. The literal laws of the Qur'an were seldom observed in the various Malay states, especially in areas where the influence of Arabian and Mahomedan teachers was weak. In many places, these laws had been mixed with ancient customs and beliefs. He gave the example of the laws regarding capital crimes, debts and marriages. In other parts of the Malay Archipelago, the "civil code of the Koran is almost unknown" (Raffles 1870: 16). Except in matters of religion, marriage and inheritance, other codes of law known as the *Undang Undang* or *yudha nagara*, were adhered to instead of the 'Arabic' texts. He perceived that in contradiction to the laws laid down by Islam, these laws were compiled by respective sovereigns who devised their own unique *Undang Undang* for their respective states (Raffles Sophia 1991: 15). Besides that, he saw other 'deviations' in Java in preservation of a Hindu influenced calendar, *Aji Saka*, instead of the Muslim *Hijrah* calendar. Given these 'facts', he concluded that Javanese Islam was not fully Islamic because "although the Mahometan law be in some instances followed, and it can be considered a point of honour to profess an adherence to it, it has not entirely superseded the ancient superstitions and local customs of the country" (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 277). Raffles contended that Islam had had a 'very slight hold' on the Javanese (Raffles Vol. II, 1988a: 5).

Next was the comparative approach. This was a method then commonly adopted by many Orientalists, who were primarily influenced by Montesquieu and his approach to the study of societies (Montesquieu 1989; Becker 1959). By comparing the Islam manifested in other societies that he encountered or read about to that practised by the Malays, Raffles claimed that the "Malays are at present in a very different situation from any of the old Moslem states, such as Persia, Arabia, or Turkey. The Moslem religion has hitherto taken only a very partial and superficial root in many of the Eastern Islands" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 80-1). Here, he seems to suggest that the religious situation in the other parts of the Muslim Archipelago was different from the shallow appreciation of Islam amongst the Malays. His readers thus get the impression that the "pure" form and observances of Islam could only be found in places such as Persia, Arabia and Turkey. In sum, Raffles thus concluded that the Malays' profession of "Mahometanism has not relieved them from the superstitious prejudices and

observance of anterior worship, they are thus open to the accumulated delusion of two religious systems” (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 245).

Nevertheless, it must be noted that whilst much of Raffles’ discourse were devoted towards demonstrating the Malays’ artificial adoption of Islam, he did mention several features that were in line with the practises of the majority within the Muslim world. Departing from William Marsden, who hypothesised the Malays as generally belonging to the *Shiah* sect from the mere examination of their texts (Marsden 1986: 346), Raffles contested that the Malays were mostly from the majority *Sunni*. He went a step further to elaborate that there were “however, some who still adhere to the doctrines of *Hanifa*; but their numbers are few, and the chiefs are all followers of *Shafih*” (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 397). He also observed that several renowned works in the Arabic language that were used in those days by Muslims in most parts of the world chiefly guided the decisions in Islamic law. Yet, amongst the Malays, “reference is more frequently made to a collection of opinions extracted from them, and translated into the language of the country” (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 279-80).

#### THE RISE OF FANATICS/ REBELS: ARABS, PADRIS AND HAJIS

Although much of Raffles’ discourse aimed at showing that the conversion of the Malays was ‘incomplete’ and that the Javanese in particular were the ‘least bigoted’ of the followers of Islam, he was not ignorant of the existence of purist elements amongst the Malays. Two groups topped his list. First were the *hajis*, returned pilgrims from the Holy City of Mecca. Second were the ‘men-in-white’ whom he described as the *Padris*. Most importantly, Raffles observed that these two groups were products of the influence of those claiming to be “descendants of the Prophet”, the Arabs. It is worthwhile then to examine his views of the Arabs in relation to the Malays.

To Raffles, Arabs were primarily responsible for the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Due to this significant contribution, the Malays became accustomed to looking up to them (Raffles to Rev. Thomas Raffles, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1815, Mss. Eur. F202/6). In many cases, Arabs were revered as ‘saints’ endowed with supernatural powers. Such veneration, according to Barbara Andaya (1993: 219-21), was often enhanced by the Arabs’ demonstration of superior trading skills as well as extensive networks. Raffles’ contempt for the Arabs in general stemmed from his belief that Muhammad was a “false Arabian prophet”. This resentment was further accentuated by his observations of the favours Arabs received from Malay chiefs that allowed them to secure high offices in Malay Kingdoms. Furthermore, in the realm of commerce, exemptions from all port duties were granted to all those with the title of ‘Sheikh’ and ‘Syed’. Unable to explain such phenomenon, Raffles essentialised them as ‘mere drones’, “useless and idle consumers of the produce of the ground”, ‘robbers’, ‘sycophants’, ‘promoters of piracies and slavery’, ‘manumitted slaves’ and ‘hypocrites’ with



the exception of their contribution to trade. Without them, Raffles argued, "trade would be reduced to less than one-third of even what it is at present, for it is only through the stimulus which they give to the industry of the country that its resources are to be developed: but let their trade be regulated; and above all, let them not be left in the enjoyment of immunities" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 73).

Most worrying to Raffles was the continuing and growing religious influence of the Arabs, and reports that more were coming to the Malay Archipelago. His concerns were particularly directed to the Malays' continual dependence on Arab teachers who, although "comparatively few and of an inferior order", were able to affect many changes in the Malays' attitudes and lifestyles. To him, this was due to the Malays' inherent stupidity and childishness in thought, which exposed them to believing in "omens, to prognostics, to prophets, and to quacks. They easily became the dupes of any religious fanatic, and credit, without scruple or examination, his claim to supernatural powers" (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 245). Most troublesome for Raffles was the change in attitude towards the Europeans. The Malays, if left open to the 'views' and 'schemes' of the Arabs would soon be transformed into something undesirable to Raffles: bigots "incapable of receiving any species of useful knowledge" (Raffles to Minto, Malacca, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1811, Mss. Eur. F148/7). These 'bigots', 'influenced by Arabs', were soon to be organised in a group that called themselves Padris.

### THE PADRI MENACE

There has been debate amongst historians on the origins of the term Padri. Nevertheless, most agree that Padri meant men of Pedir (Pidie), a port in Aceh. In 1803, upon returning home from Mecca, three learned men from this area sought to reform their Minangkabau villages, which they saw not abiding by the basic teachings of Islam. They opposed aspects of the mainstream Minangkabau lifestyle such as gambling, cockfighting, local matriarchal customary law (especially concerning inheritance), the use of opium, strong drinks, tobacco and betel nut. The movement soon gained a large following, and in time, resorted to a violence that alarmed the Dutch and subsequently the British (Hamka 1967: 26-9; Dobbin 1987: 128-40).

The Padris gained Raffles' attention in 1818 when he was serving his term as the new Lieutenant-Governor of Bencoolen. Although he was already aware of puritanical elements within Malay society, the Padris seemed to have caused bewilderment in him. Strangeness in forms of dressing was the first amidst the many perceptions and judgements he had of them. Described by the locals as *Orang Putis* (literally 'White Men'), the Padris wore white and blue robes with turbans of different shapes which, to Raffles, gave them a 'sorry appearance'. They grew their deficient beards, in conformity with the ordinances of their founder, Tuanku Pasarnan. Most of the women would cover "their heads under

a kind of hood” (Sophia Raffles 1991: 430). The Padris were determined to enforce their version of Islam throughout North Sumatra. Those who opposed and did not follow their ways were soon to be attacked and suffer devastation. All in all, to Raffles, the Padris were no different from the “unrelenting and tyrannical” Wahabees in the Arabian Desert (Sophia Raffles 1991: 429).

Negative as Raffles may have been about his early encounters with the Padris, he nevertheless juxtaposed such negative observations with some about their virtues which were in line with his own plans to ‘civilise’ the Malays. The Padris thus could be tolerated in their enforcement of the basic prescriptions of Islam since this was in line with British policies of abolishing evils such as “gambling, cock fighting, tobacco and intoxicating beverages” which Raffles personally detested (Sophia Raffles 1991: 430). Hence, neutrality in attitude and policy was Raffles’ stance toward the Padris in the early stages of his term in Sumatra.

By the early 1820s, the Padris were gaining ground in their war against the Dutch. In reality, these campaigns were motivated by more than mere religion. They were instead in many ways a desperate response to the change in the economy and the difficulties that followed it. Curbed by the Dutch monopoly system, the Minangkabaus were suffering difficulties that augmented an environment of hatred towards all Europeans (Dobbin 1987: 161- 87). Raffles’ discourse was to be transformed by such developments, although the policy of neutrality was maintained for some time due to pragmatic and strategic reasons, and the ‘fact’ that the doctrines of Islam were essentially ‘peculiar’ and so could be resolved at the discursive level only by the natives themselves (Sophia Raffles 1991: 561). However, from being ‘noble reformers’, the Padris were now portrayed negatively as being ruthless towards both their enemies and families. Raffles stated; “it is the practise of these people, when they are attacked to place women and children in front; and in the last onset by the Dutch, it is reported that not less than one hundred and twenty women, each with a child in her arms, were sacrificed, the women standing firm” (Sophia Raffles 1991: 511-512).

The Padris justified their cause of destruction “with the Koran in one hand, and the sword in the other” (Sophia Raffles 1991: 562). Raffles asserted that like the Arabs, the Padris were hypocrites who seldom implemented what they preached. Thus, they should not be credited for any kind of social reformation. To Raffles, their interests were merely in plunder and revenge. Speaking on behalf of the Malays, he argued that they were disinclined to such radical change in habits and the abolishment of their customs as propagated by the Padris. It was thus the duty of European governments to insulate them “from their adoption of the tenets of the Padris” (Sophia Raffles 1991: 562).

## HAJIS

Last on Raffles' list of 'fanatics' were the *Hajis*. Reiterating Marsden's earlier discourse (Marsden 1986: 343), he observed that the Malays regarded two places as holy sites to be visited. First was Minangkabau in Sumatra. This was considered the centre for religious learning and scholarly exchanges in the Malay Archipelago. Even more important was the pilgrimage to Mecca. Just as with the Arabs, returned pilgrims from Mecca were often perceived as saints having supernatural powers (Raffles Vol. II, 1988a: 3). Many among these would later assume the role, according to Raffles, of 'priests' in Malay society. Although Islam has never recognised any form of priesthood, Raffles went on to state that the "Mahometan priests have almost invariably been found most active in every case of insurrection." They were active in stirring up native chiefs to attack and massacre Europeans (Raffles Vol. II, 1988a: 4). Like the Padris, they must be blocked.

In sum, Raffles saw the Arabs as the root cause of the rise of fanaticism among the peaceful and docile Malays. The Malays, to him, could only maintain their ancient worship, native institutions and peaceful nature by avoiding any exposure to the inroads of Arabs. However, his list of evils propounded by Islam in Malay societies did not end here. The myth of natural unity destroyed by the advent of Islam was next.

## 'NATURAL UNITY' AND THE DISUNITY OF THE MALAY PEOPLES

Raffles theorised, or rather subscribed to, the existing myth that the Malays had once been a united and common race. The Arabs were again blamed as the root cause of the disunity that he thought was rampant during his time. Similar to the differences between the Chuliahs and the Tamil as well as Telinga nations on the Coromandel Coast, or the Mapillas of Malabar and the Nairs, the Malays were separated into nations due to a variety of factors. First, it was intermarriage with persons of Arabian blood. Second, it was the introduction of the Arabic language, followed by the adoption of the 'Moslem religion' (Sophia Raffles 1991: 80).

By adhering fanatically to Islam as interpreted by the Arabs, disunity became more rampant. Raffles exaggerated his findings of constant struggles in every Malay state between the traditionalists and *kaum adat* (culturalists) against those who fervently introduced and imposed the laws of the Arabs (Sophia Raffles 1991: 80). He acknowledged, however, that the effects of such struggles were different in the respective Malay states. The Javanese, for example, being more exclusively an agricultural people, had in fact received an additional stimulus from what he saw as the decline of their neighbours. Division was further counteracted by the Dutch, whose efforts to colonise Java had only resulted in the reverse effect of uniting the Javanese to a common cause. The situation in

Sumatra, on the other hand, was different. Division and dismemberment of once prosperous societies and networks caused by the introduction of Islam proved fatal to their natural unity. The eventual consequence was the waning of Sumatran civilisation (Raffles 1821b: vi).

#### TRANSFORMATION OF SCIENCE, LITERATURE AND THE ARTS

Raffles also believed that there were other adverse effects of the Malays' conversion to Islam. Science, the key to progress, was missing, or if existent, dim and superficial. The knowledge he believed to have been in existence in the Malay World had by then been uprooted progressively in the four centuries of Islamic rule under the obtuse 'Sword of Mahomet' (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 372). Such assertions were certainly in contrast to the views of his contemporaries that Islam had introduced a multitude of new 'sciences' in the Malay Archipelago (Marsden 1986: 289; Crawford 1967: 27). It is interesting to note that Raffles never elaborated on the kinds of science that were "removed" by Islam. Instead, he went on to emphasise that Islam had also destroyed the past literary achievements of the Malays (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 372).

In saying this, Raffles acknowledged that prior to the introduction of Sanskrit and subsequently Arabic characters, termed *b'hasa jahui*, the Malays did not possess any writing system of their own (Raffles Sophia 1991: 20). Arabic, which removed some of the Sanskrit nuances, had made little or no inroad into the language. Yet, the use of an Arabic-based writing system and the acceptance of Islam were potent enough to bring about a gradual eradication of Malay classical literature manifested in Sanskrit texts. Hence, what was once a civilisation of flourishing literary compositions spawned by the forces of creativity and imagination, had by then been reduced to "historical and dry compositions of the head" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 235). Worse than that, these historical and literary compositions seldom went farther back than to the introduction of Islam. They were filled with narratives of Muslim rulers or of matters pertaining to religious laws and observances. Thus Europeans, whose interests and biases were the recovery of the monumental and ancient civilisations of the East, were left with nothing but "an account of Noah's ark, or some romantic tale" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 358).

The decline in literary production attributed to Islam was supposedly mirrored by a general decline in the realm of the arts. Raffles posited that the establishment of 'Mahometan institutions' had discontinued the efforts of preserving and building of monuments, which were distinctive pursuits of the pre-Islamic Malays. The pre-Islamic 'treasures' that survived in the Islamic period were left to decay by the natives, who regarded them as relics of the *wong kuna*, *kapir*, or *buda* (Raffles Vol. II, 1988a: 35). Some of these monuments were deliberately demolished and replaced by graves and new 'Mahometan temples' which were, to Raffles, insignificant when compared to ancient monuments

(Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 57). Raffles thought that this loss in knowledge, literature and the arts needed to be recovered.

#### DESPOTISM AND POLITICAL DISORDER

One of the most prominent tropes in the European study of Islamic societies in the early nineteenth century was 'Oriental despotism' (Turner 1984: 34). This trope assumed that, in contrast to the civil society of Europe, the East was doomed to dictatorship, enslavement and oppression by native despots. Although some of these 'despots' were portrayed as 'enlightened', the tyranny which even the best amongst them were so often seen as guilty of, naturally disqualified them from the honour of benevolence that was an inimitable characteristic of most European rulers.

Raffles was an active propagator of this discourse. Although he was well aware of the intermixing of Islamic laws with customary Malay laws, the predominance of the former was, to him, the root cause of despotic rule amongst the Malays (Raffles 1823: 7). The effects of this were to him extremely adverse. The peasants whom he regarded as more noble, empathetic, kind and superior for their maintenance of older Hindu beliefs and practices, became the main victims of a ruling elite which subscribed to the cruelty and autocracy advocated by Islam. In addition to that, they were also denied of their rights to private ownership of land. Raffles noted;

Whatever truth there may be in this opinion, the fact is undoubted, that in the mountainous and less fertile districts of Java, and in the island of *Bali*, where Mahometan sway has not yet extended, individual propriety right in the soil is fully established, while in that portion of Java where the Mahometan rule has been most felt, and where propriety right amounts to the greatest value, it vests almost exclusively in the sovereign (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 139).

Despotism was just the beginning of other forms of discord. To Raffles, Islam had spun off other political problems in Malay society. There existed an ill-defined system of succession "in every other Mussulman government" (Sophia Raffles 1991: 51). Wars between petty chieftains were also rampant. The Dutch were partly blamed for this, but the inadequacies of Islamic law embraced by the Malays were perceived as the root cause. The bulk of the population was also left in ignorance and coerced to submit to local rulers without resistance. Those who decided to rebel against the local authorities contributed to the existing chaos. They became malicious tribes that in turn plundered other natives for their own survival. The Malays were thus left with no order and control (Sophia Raffles 1991: 144).

Raffles was, however, not disheartened by what was to him political decadence and disorder confronting Malay society. Whilst Islam had resulted in the problems discussed above, the very fact that it had not been adopted fully amongst the majority of the Malays meant that the rulers and natives would be

more flexible to political reforms initiated by the British. That was for Raffles an assurance that the Malays were a few steps from reaching the European model of a civilised society (Raffles 1821a: 50). British intervention was thus needed to accelerate this process.

#### OTHER VICES

Raffles also believed that there were other vices that could be solely attributed to Islam. Piracy, for example, although an evil which had plagued the Malays since ancient times, was amplified by the “the intolerant spirit of the religion of Islam” (Raffles to Minto, Malacca, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1811, Mss. Eur. F148/7). Then there was slavery. Raffles, who was an ardent opposition of such practices, blamed Islam for the encouragement of such vice amongst the Malays. Infidels such as the Hindus of Bali and the pagans of Nias were often victims of enslavement. Although Raffles acknowledged that slaves amongst the Malays were treated in a rather kind and civil way when compared to other parts of the Archipelago due to “the milder prejudices and more humane temper of the country” (Raffles Vol. I, 1988a: 76), he maintained that it was still an unacceptable tradition. To him, such practices must, along with other vices which Islam generated, be abolished.

#### CONCLUSION

Raffles’ discourse on Islam shifted from admiration to the belief that it had brought detriment to the Malay Archipelago. From his point of view, Islam was to be identified with fanaticism, violence and bigotry. The religion had sown corruption and despotism, which limited the intellectual and social progress of the Malays. It had suppressed all questioning and scientific endeavours. In short, it was a source of decline. Thus, none of the plates of his two-volume work on Java show any significant sign of Islam’s presence (Raffles 1988b). Demonstrating further his lack of respect for Islam, only four pages of *The History of Java* were dedicated to the discussion of Java’s dominant religion. Close examination of Raffles’ portrayal of Islam in the later part of his life reveals the influence of the anti-Islamic polemics that were on the rise at that time.

Mark Woodward (1996: 30) and Bernard Vlekke (1959: 262) have argued that Raffles, like other colonial scholars after him, was compelled to deny the importance of Islam in Java and the Malay Archipelago due to several reasons. First, by denying the importance and contribution of Islam, Raffles and his compatriots left Java and all the Malay states open as a potential field for missionary work and colonisation. Second, by exaggerating the oppression and cruelty of systems which preceded the arrival of the British, Raffles intended to publicise the success of his benevolent policies. Islamic and Dutch rule were thus con-

strued as twin evils that needed to be extricated through the British rule of which he was the embodiment. Next, in the context of Java, Raffles was particularly influenced by, and subscribed to the advice of, his trusted adviser, H.W. Muntinghe, who believed that European rule could only be asserted amongst the peasants through “setting aside all dangerous and harmful influences of the Mohammedan government” (Schrieke 1955: 217).

Nevertheless, looked at from another perspective, Raffles should also be credited for his ability to appreciate Muslims as a diverse group of people rather than a monolithic bloc. Unlike many of our contemporaries, who still perceive Muslims as adherents of a single interpretation of Islam, Raffles was able to comprehend the different interpretations of what was to be understood as ‘Islam’. His sympathies and optimism were placed with the ‘nominal’ Muslims against the ‘bigoted’ Padris and *Hajjis*.

By way of concluding this article, one should not lose sight of the Britons’ growing fascination with Indian religions in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Like many English Orientalists whose experiences in India produced in them romantic longing for lost civilisations, Raffles perceived Islam as a faith that was already well known and therefore undeserving of detailed attention. Thus, many of the achievements of Islam in the Malay Archipelago were lost in the “silences” of his discourse. Hinduism and Buddhism, however, were novelties to him (P.J. Marshall & Glyndwr Williams 1982: 107).

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