ISLAM AND ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS IN BRITISH MALAYA

POLICIES AND IMPLEMENTATION

by

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**FOREWORD — BY S. N. EISENSTADT**

**PREFACE**

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CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF MALAYA'S ISLAM

The gradual British penetration of Malaya during the last quarter of the 19th century brought about radical changes in all areas of Malaya's way of life: in its social, legal, and economic relationships; in the organization of its government; and even in its religious affairs. This introductory chapter portrays the situation that existed in the Peninsula before the advent of British administration. Emphasis is placed on the pluralistic nature of the society, with its groupings of Muslims (Malay, Arab and Indian) and Chinese, and on the characteristics of its creeds.

The most notable feature of the society of Malaya is its pluralism. The population is divided into three major communities: Malays, Chinese and Indians, each immemorially separate and distinct from the others, and retaining its unique way of life, traditions and religious beliefs, social and judicial organization, language (or languages) and economic system.

A. The Islamization of Malaya

While initial contact with Muslim teachings was undoubtedly a by-product of Arab trade with China, the Islam adopted by the Malays was of Indian variety. Indeed, India had been a major cultural influence in the Malay Archipelago in the pre-Islamic period and was responsible for the spread of Hindu beliefs and customs.

It is difficult to determine the precise timing of the introduction of Islam into Malaya.1 It may have been carried there by Arab

1 S.Q. Fatimi, in his *Islam Comes to Malaysia* (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd., 1963), proposed some new
traders in the early centuries of the Hijra. At the beginning of the seventh century, Arab traffic with China was expanding. By the elsewhere, at a very early date.  

middle of the eighth century, Arab traders were to be found in great numbers in Canton; from the tenth to the fifteenth century, until the arrival of the Portuguese, Arab and Indian Muslims were undisputed masters of commerce with the East; they established trading posts on islands of the Malay Archipelago, as they did. Since the thirteenth century, Arab and Indian merchants and clerics had settled in the centres of commerce and intermarried with the indigenous people, and they, their wives and household slaves formed the nucleus of a Muslim community.  

The ease and speed with which Islam gained converts were due largely to its tolerance and adaptability. Readily assimilating old customs and beliefs, it did not oust existing political and social elites or challenge existing social values and practices. Much of the ancient Hindu lore, legends and dramas was as popular as ever.  


3 The earliest evidence of Islam in the Malay Peninsula comes from Trengganu, where a stone pillar was found with an inscription bearing the oldest Malay text in Arabic script yet known. It records Muslim laws promulgated for the State by its governor. Its date is either 1326 or 1386, according to Richard O. Winstedt, A History of Malaya (Singapore: Marican & Sons, 1962), p. 40. See picture of the stone in M. A. Rauf, A Brief History of Islam with Special Reference to Malaya (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1964) inside cover; or Fatimii, Islam Comes to Malaysia, opposite pp. 60–61; Moorhead, II, p. 47.  

Nevertheless, the introduction of Islam was a break from the complete Indian dominance of previous centuries. The Arabic alphabet replaced the Indian script, and liturgical Arabic entered the Malay language, dislodging Sanskrit in many cases. In these and in many other ways — eating habits, clothing, ceremonial — Islam supplanted Hindu practice. But although it weakened the force of Malay customary law (adat), it could not displace it.

The adoption of Islam was also facilitated by the desire to promote trade with the Muslims who, by 1400, had assumed virtual control of all trade in the Archipelago. Trade to Mecca, from all parts of the Archipelago, had been in constant growth following the appearance of Islam. The Hajis who made the pilgrimage to Mecca were held in high esteem and were extremely influential through their proselytising efforts, as reformers and missionaries alike. Among the Sufi orders, the Qadiriyyah and the Naqshibandiyah were instrumental in inculcating orthodoxy and the dissemination of Arabic and the Jawi script. Most of the Muslims of the Archipelago belong to the Shafi'iyah sect, which was predominant in the Arabian peninsula and on the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of India.

Malay rulers, enthusiastic converts, contributed to a wider diffusion of Islam, persuading or coercing neighbouring courts also to accept the Faith. The force of example and royal sanction compelled the Malays, and the upper classes in particular, to follow


6 The Arabic alphabet — the Jawi script — was adopted by the Malays for their language at the time of their conversion to Islam, under the stimulus of Muslim missionaries.

in the footsteps of their lords and masters. By the fifteenth century, Islam held sway along the littoral as far north as the Sulu Archipelago and western Mindanao of the Philippines.8

When Malacca was converted to Islam in 1414, it became the militant centre of its diffusion throughout the Archipelago. The Hindu title of maharajah was discarded by the princes in favour of sultan, and when the third Muslim ‘sultan’ sought to revert to the Hindu style and faith, a palace revolution led by Tamil Muslims overthrew him and reinstated Muslim power. Islam under the Malacca sultanate, however, was largely a religion of the élite, as Hinduism and Buddhism had been. It was not until after the fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511 that conversion among the lower classes began in earnest.9

The harshness of the Portuguese towards the Malay population and their attacks on the Muslim trading enterprise made the Muslims more militant in proselytising. Islam became the institution around which Malays rallied in opposition, and it spread in the Archipelago more widely after the conquest than before, in reaction to the commercial and religious aggression of the conquerors.10


Islam continued to proliferate after 1641, when the Portuguese empire in the Straits was seized by the Dutch.\(^{11}\)

The conversion of the peasants of the interior, in Pahang and Trengganu, was hastened by the immigration of the Muslim Minangkabaus from Sumatra from the second half of the sixteenth century onward.\(^{12}\)

B. The Malay Muslims: The Impact of Immigration

Indeed, a very important factor in the growth of the component of Malayan Muslim society was the steady influx of newcomers from all over the Archipelago; it also accounts for the diversity of the Malay stock. The composition of this immigrant element varied from one part to another. The immigrant Malaysians settled and intermarried with the peninsular Malays with relative ease.\(^{13}\)

Language, too, was a powerful, unifying factor.\(^{14}\)

Yet, there was some difference in the process of absorption of the several groups of those arrivals. Those from Sumatra, for instance, became merged almost at once in the Malay population, while the absorption of the Javanese was much slower and commonly took several generations. The influx of immigrants swelled considerably after the institution of British rule, which led to the distinction between those who had been living in the Malay States when that rule began and ‘foreign’ Malays, who came afterwards;


11 Bird, p. 3; Fay-Cooper Cole, p. 25. Also, Rauf, pp. 79-97, gives a short but concise description of the advent of Islam to Malaya and its expansion.


thus an original Malay resident of the State of Perak was known as orang Perak; all foreign Malays were termed anak dagang. The distinction was not, however, recognized by the British Administration and no preferential treatment was accorded the original Malays.

Gradually, the differentiation was blurred as all the immigrants were drawn into the main body of the Malay Muslim community, mainly through intermarriage. Compulsory education, introduced early in the twentieth century, speeded the process of integration.

With the establishment of the British system of Residents in the 1890s, the population of Malaya began to rise rapidly, partly because the internal wars and disturbances which had plagued the country throughout the nineteenth century came to an end, and partly because of the influx of Malaysians attracted by new gainful opportunities. In 1921, including Singapore, it made up almost half (48.8%) of the total of 3.3 million. The Chinese accounted for 35.2%. In 1931, the census differentiated Malays (37.8%) from other Malaysians (6.6%). The total had grown to 4.3 million and the Chinese component had gone up to 39.2%. By 1947, the Malays were 38.2%, other Malaysians 5.3% and Chinese 44.7% of a 5.8 million total. All along, the residual components of the population were Indians, Europeans and other groups.

Malays of all origins always felt a strong affinity with the rest of the Malaysian world — Malaya, Indonesia, and as far as the Philippines. Speech, general culture, and political identity, too, especially since World War I, represented values of great importance. The desire for pan-Malay unity, a central theme in the Malaysian world, reflected the ethnic bonds between the Malay peoples, and the preponderance of Islam not least.
