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# PROMOTING DIVERSITY via LOCAL WISDOM: An Analysis of Selected Classical Malay Texts

By:

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# Introduction

- Malay world as the melting pot of world community
- Malay language was once known as lingua franca
- City-port such as Malacca flourished as port of call at that time due to its strategic sea route location connecting the east and west
- Diversity of race and religion found in the Malay world

# The Diversity

- The arrival and spread of Islam in the Malay world was not in vacuum
- Hindu-Buddhist, animism and other local traditions were there prior to Islam
- Hindu-Buddhist practices were not rooted among the lay people
- In fact it was upheld by the aristocrat to maintain their supremacy – devaraja

# Local Wisdom 1: Maintaining Past Practices

- The Malays maintained practices which they inherited from the South Asian cultures, even after they became Muslims, especially practices that related to the honour and respect of their ruler. For example, Demang Lebar Daun introduced the language of the court such as *patik*, *duli* and *beta*, which indicated the superior status of the ruler and at the same time, indicated the obedience of his people to the ruler.
- Furthermore, the greatness of early Malay ruler was portrayed through the use of royal colour. Yellow has been regarded as a royal colour, and no ordinary people are allowed to wear any types of costume which are made up of this colour.

- *'Syahadan bagindalah yang pertama-tama meletakkan 'kekuningan larangan'; tiada dapat dipakai orang keluaran, dan diambil akan sapu tangan; dan tiada dapat dibuat tepi tabir dan ulasan bantal besar dan tilam, dan bungkus barang apa-apa, dan akan karang-karangan benda; dan tiada dapat diambil akan perhiasan rumah; dan lain daripada itu pun tiada juga dapat, melainkan kain, baju dan destar, tiga perkara itu jua yang dapat dipakai' (Sejarah Melayu, 74)*
- *'Berapa lamanya belayar itu maka sampailah ke Bentan. Maka segala orang kaya-kaya dan segala rakyat dalam negeri itu pun sekalian datang menyambut raja dengan segala bunyi-bunyian terlalu gempita bunyinya. Maka sekalian pun sujud mengatakan, 'Daulat Syah Alam.' Maka Sang Maniaka pun disambut oranglah, dinaikkan ke atas tandu. Maka payung iram kuning pun terkembanglah dan gendang arak-arakan pun dipalu oranglah' (Hikayat Hang Tuah, 19)*

# Local Wisdom 2: Selection of Quranic Exegesis

- The second issue concerns the the selection of certain Quranic exegeses by early ulama in the Malay world. Quranic exegeses, written by ulama in the Middle East such as Ma'alim al-Tanzil (The Signs of the Revelation) of al-Baghawi (d.1122), Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'wil (The Lights of Revelation and the Secret of the Interpretation) of al-Baydawi (d. 1286) and Lubab al-Ta'wil fi ma'ani al-Tanzil (The Essence of Interpretation in the Meaning of Revelation) of al-Khazin (d.1340), were very popular among local people during the early period of Islam in the Malay world.
- Although there were other Quranic exegeses available at that time, such as Jami' al-Bayan fi tafsir al-Qur'an (Collection of Explanations for the Interpretation of the Qur'an) of al-Tabari (d. 923) and Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim (The Great Commentary of the Quran) of Ibn. Kathir (d. 1371) (Rippin 2000: 86) surprisingly only those texts by al-Baghawi, al-Baydawi and al-Khazin were widely used in the Malay world.

- Thus, the decision made by early ulama to introduce these three exegeses was required to be in the best interests of the people. Local Muslims were already familiar with similar narrative stories found in early Malay texts, such as Hikayat Seri Rama, Hikayat Pendawa Lima and Hikayat Si Miskin. These texts highlighted various epic stories about rulers and societies, whereby miracles and magic became the central theme in most cases which would be analyzed later. The portrayal of such an influence from South Asian traditions not only restricted in the form of writings only.
- During the Hindu-Buddhist period in the Malay world, South Asian epics were popularized in Java, while in the Majapahit colonies of Malaya the shadow-play was more popular than written translations (1950: 140). Due to its popularity, scenes from the Ramayana, for example, were carved on a Prambanan temple in 10th century C.E. and at Chandi Panataran four centuries later (Winstedt 1950: 140). This suggestion was also supported by Hall, who described how a Javanese ruler by the name of Dharmavamsa (c.985 - c.1006) ordered Sanskrit texts such as parts of the Mahabharata to be translated into Javanese prose with the Sanskrit verse interpolated (1968: 67).

- In short, early ulama in the Malay world had shown their wisdom when introducing Islam to newly converted Malays. By understanding and accommodating the needs and interests of the local people to such kinds of Quranic exegeses which had similarities with South Asia epic stories, these ulama adopted specific approaches to teach them about Islam. They well understood the religious and cultural background of the Malays, which was influenced strongly by the epic stories of the South Asian gods and goddesses.
- Indeed, by adopting suitable approaches, they avoided unnecessary conflict with people and at the same time, they made it easier for them to understand more about Islam through familiar methods. In this case, the selection of certain Quranic commentaries show, that both were used to achieve the mission of changing the views of the Malay people from beliefs in paganism and animism, as well as Hinduism and Buddhism, to Islam.



# Local Wisdom 3: Adaptation of Pre-Islamic Texts

- The third issue is the adaptation of pre-Islamic texts and the process of Islamizing them. Previously, in regards to the first and second issues, much has been said about the influence of South Asian religions and traditions on the life of the people in the early period of Islam in the Malay world.
- Ulama have to respond to such influences wisely, in order to ensure that Islam can offer alternatives to existing practices and traditions. There is further indirect evidence which again demonstrates the ability of these ulama to respond to such similar situation. This time, it involves the South Asian origin-texts which exist in the Malay world at that time.

- Popular South Asian epic stories such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata were brought to the Malay world as part of the process of Indianization in the region long before the arrival and spread of Islam. As a result of centuries of exposure to these texts in the Malay world, they became part of early Malay life and tradition. South Asian beliefs are clearly portrayed and manifested through the texts, which contain a description of South Asian gods and goddesses and the practice of magic which characterized Hinduism (Liaw Yock Fang 1991: 52-57, 79-84).
- This is where the problem lies. Differences in theological doctrines between Islam and Hinduism put the wisdom of early ulama in the Malay world to test. Islam, with its monotheistic belief in the One and Only God, and Hinduism, with the belief in many gods represent totally different fundamental theological foundations.

- The obvious changes made were to the titles to these texts. For example, Ramayana was renamed Hikayat Seri Rama, Mahabharata as Hikayat Pandawa Lima and Hikayat Marakarma as Hikayat Si Miskin.
- In other words, the scribes decided to opt for local, as well as Arabic and Persian names and titles to substitute its original South Asian titles.

- By changing titles, these texts would not be seen as Hindu religious texts, as in the case of Ramayana and Mahabharata, but simply as ordinary stories like any other hikayats.
- The perception of common people to these texts would also be different, as they no longer had anything to do with religion, anymore and would have thought that these texts were indeed in conformity with Islam.

# Conclusion:

- It may be concluded that the Malay communities showed many characteristics of a spiritually advanced society. The evidence gathered from the Malay texts tells us that the Malays were able to select practices and concepts from outside that were only considered as beneficial to them and incorporate them into their own cultures and traditions.
- They were not blindly submissive to foreign influence. They adopted and adapted those foreign influences to suit their own local needs. These steps can only be taken by a community, which already possessed certain levels of intellect understanding and certainly, this was the case for the Malays.

Thank you