

The Recovery of the Muslims' Past and the Others

Islamic Perspective of History

Ataullah Bogdan Kopanski



*International Islamic University
Malaysia*

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Research Management Centre
INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA



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Edited by
Ataullah Bogdan Kopanski



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TABLE OF CONTENT

Foreword from the Editor. i-ix

Acknowledgement. lx

Chapter 1. 1-14

Arshad Islam, Shah Walil Allah Delhavi: Life and Thoughts of Islamic Counter-Esotericist in the waning Timurid India.

Chapter 2. 15-74

Ataullah Bogdan Kopanski, The colonial crimes against humanity and massacres of Muslims in the French-Italian occupied Maghreb.1832-1962 CE

Chapter 3. 75-95

Fauziah Fathil, Islam in the Land of the Rising Sun: Spread, history and issues.

Chapter 4. 97-146

Ghassan Taha Yaseen, and Djamel Dilmi, Sino-Arabic script in Islamic Art and Architecture of China with special reference to Xi'an Mosque.

Chapter 5. 147-168

Noordalela bint Baharudin, Vestiges of the western European heraldry and vexillology in Malaysia .

Chapter 6. 169-190

Solehah Yaacob, Orientalism revisited: Ignaz Goldziher's speculation on history of the Arabic grammar.

Chapter 7. 191-218

Ataullah Bogdan Kopanski, The political myth and origin of the Anglo-American Israelitism.

Chapter 8. 219-232

A. Rahman Tang Abdullah, Development of Waqf institutions in the colonial and post-colonial Malaysi

Chapter 9. 233-248

Wan Suhana Wan Sulong, The Muhammadan Law for the Federated Malay States: Views and Debates in the 1930s.

Chapter 10. 249-280

Zulkifli bin Ishak, The "Others" of the European Medieval Mind: Making of the Christian images of the Malay peoples.

Discourse:

Chapter 11.281-306

Caksu Ali, Ibn Khaldun versus Hegel : Theodicy and Casuality in History

Muhammad Ismail Christopher Marcinkowski, Remarks on Herbert Illig's Thesis of "Phantom centuries" .

Chapter 12. 307-326

Mesut Idriz, Manastir: A Historical Sketch of Casbahization of the Illyrian city in the Osmanli Rum-eli.

Ahmed Abu Shouk

Hassan A. Ibrahim,

Hafez Zakaria,

Afterword 327

Contributors' brief curricula vitae 329

CHAPTER 9

MUHAMMADAN LAW FOR THE FEDERATED MALAY STATES: VIEWS AND DEBATES IN THE 1930s

Wan Suhana Wan Sulong

Muhammadan Law for the Federated Malay States was introduced by the British to govern the moral behaviour of the Muslims and at the same time supervise the running of religious affairs in the states concerned. It ignited rigorous discussions and debates among the Muslims in Malaya especially the Malays. Among the main medium utilized by the public to voice out their views was the newspapers. Opinions, whether supporting or resisting the implementation of the law were expressed unsparingly in both the Malay and English newspapers. A close look at the discussions and debates on the law revealed many interesting facts about the reality of the Muslims life and the running of religious affairs in Malaya during the period under study. Various writings on the issue, mostly in the forms of editorials and letters to editor, highlighted the tense relation between the Islamic reformists or popularly known as Kaum Muda and the religious authorities or Kaum Tua. For those who opposed the law, many criticisms were directed to religious authorities in particular and the British in general. Apart from that, the issue of ethnic competition was also brought up in the arguments against the implementation of the law. This, to a certain extent, signifies how real was the threat of foreign races, especially the Chinese, to the Malays in Malaya. Finally, the discussion on Muhammadan Law for the Federated Malay States also lead us to ponder the Malays' views on crucial issues like the implementation of Islamic law in the society and revealed the extent of their concern on religious matters in Malaya during that time.

Keywords: Muhammadan Law, Federated Malay States, Malays, newspapers, religious authorities, Islamic reformists.

In the first half of 1938 there were incessant discussions in Malaya about the Muhammadan Law Enactments for the Federated Malay States.¹ This law was proposed for the Federated Malay States, namely, Selangor, Perak, Pahang and Negeri Sembilan and was actually an amendment to "The Muhammadan Laws Enactment, 1904" with some new

¹ A law introduced by the British with the consent of the sultan and State Council and binding upon the Muslims. Among the main purposes were to govern the moral behaviour of the Muslims in line with the Islamic teachings and at the same time supervise the running of certain aspects of religious affairs.