



Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

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Abstract

This study examines the historical portrayal of Malay-Islam in Western Orientalist texts and critically compares it with the perspectives of leading Malay-Islamic intellectuals, namely Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. The study focuses on major Orientalist figures such as Tom Pires, R.O. Winstedt, W.G. Shellabear, John Leyden, William Marsden, and Anthony Reid. The study also aims to identify recurring themes of Eurocentrism, epistemological bias, and the marginalisation of the spiritual and cultural role of Islam in the Malay world, particularly in Malacca. A qualitative approach based on discourse analysis, hermeneutics, and comparative epistemology is used to distinguish these Orientalist narratives from Munshi Abdullah's reformist realism and Al-Attas's Islamic philosophical critique. While Munshi Abdullah selectively accepted Western knowledge for social reform, Al-Attas firmly rejected the secular and reductionist paradigm of Western historiography, instead supporting the re-construction of Malay history from an Islamic perspective based on *Tawhid* and *Adab*. This study highlights the need to decolonise historical narratives and reconstruct the understanding of Malay-Islamic civilisation through the lens of indigenous Islamic perspectives.

Keywords: Orientalism, Malay-Islamic History, Islamic Epistemology, Eurocentrism

Introduction

The history of Islamisation in Malacca is an important aspect of the broader influence of Islam in the Malay Peninsula. This process began in the late 14th and 15th centuries with the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate, which became an important centre for trade and Islamic scholarship (Musyrif & Shamsinar, 2022). This transformation was facilitated by the rulers of Malacca, who strategically promoted Islam through political and economic means and applied Islamic principles to local governance and culture (Samsidar et al., 2024). The

influence of Orientalist writings on historical imagery is profound, as they shape perceptions of Eastern cultures through a Western lens. This perspective often portrays Eastern societies as inferior, reinforcing stereotypes that prioritise the interests of colonisers (Syafiq, n.d.). Re-evaluating the views of local figures on the Western Orientalist bias in their writings about Malay Islam is important. This re-evaluation can help shed light on the inaccuracies and historical biases that have shaped the perceptions of Malay and Islamic societies. By incorporating local perspectives, scholars can foster a more nuanced understanding of the cultural and religious dynamics at play.

This article aims to analyse the views of Western Orientalists such as Tom Pires (1465–1540), R.O Winstedt (1878–1966), William G. Shellabear (1862–1948), John Leyden (1775–1811), William Marsden (1754–1836), and Anthony Reid (1450–1680) on the history of Islam in Malacca and the Malay world in general. This study will identify the characteristics of bias, Orientalism, and Eurocentrism in their writings. The most important emphasis is on examining the critical responses of Malay-Islamic figures such as Munshi and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas to the Orientalist discourse. The culmination of the study is to construct an alternative narrative of Malay Islamic history based on Islamic epistemology.

Literature Review

This study is based on three main theoretical perspectives, namely Orientalism by Edward Said. This theory critiques the Western construction of the “Orient” as a culture and intellectual entity. It is used to examine how colonial scholars represented Islam and the Malay world through a Eurocentric lens (Turner, 2023). The second theory is the theory of the Islamisation of knowledge and Islamic epistemology by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931-present). This perspective challenges the secular foundations of Western knowledge and offers an Islamic worldview rooted in *tawhīd* (the oneness of God), *adab* (proper conduct), and the integration of reason and revelation. It serves as a counter-framework to deconstruct Orientalist narratives and validate authentic Islamic intellectual traditions (Jannah, 2022). The third theory that forms the framework of this study is hermeneutic theory and discourse theory. Hermeneutics focuses on interpreting texts in their historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts (Sasani, 2004), while discourse theory analyses how language constructs power, identity, and ideology. It provides a framework for understanding how language shapes identity and the construction of ideology in society. This analysis reveals how identity is constructed and contested. Therefore, it can support a critical reading of Orientalist texts and the responses of Malay Islamic scholars.

Research Method

This study uses a qualitative research approach, focusing on the analysis of both primary and secondary texts related to Islamic discourse in the Malay world. Primary sources include original writings by Western Orientalists such as Tom Pires, R.O. Winstedt, and W.G. Shellabear, among others, while secondary sources consist of scholarly interpretations and

Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

critiques by prominent Malay-Islamic scholars such as Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. The main analytical techniques used are discourse analysis and critical comparative analysis. Discourse analysis is used to uncover the ideologies and assumptions embedded in Orientalist narratives, particularly in their depictions of Islam and Malay identity. Meanwhile, critical comparative analysis allows for a systematic assessment of the differences between Western Orientalist perspectives and the intellectual responses expressed by local scholars. Through this methodology, this study aims to interpret the historical and epistemological tensions between narratives constructed from outside and from indigenous Islamic perspectives.

Results

The view of Tom Pires (1465-1540)

Tome Pires was a 16th-century Portuguese writer. In his notes, *The Suma Oriental*, he described how Islam already existed and was practised in Malacca during his visit in the early 1500s. He referred to the religion of the sultan and the people of Malacca as the “Mahommedan” religion, i.e. the religion of Muhammad. “Mahommedan” refers to an old term used by Europeans to refer to Muslims. According to Wake (1964), the conversion of the Sultan of Malacca to Islam may have been driven by political factors rather than a genuine understanding of the truth of Islam, with the aim of establishing trade and political relations with the Islamic world, particularly Arabia and India, as well as consolidating power, as Islam was well-received by many regional kingdoms at the time.

According to Tom Pires, not all aristocrats, such as dignitaries and palace elites, truly embraced or practised Islam wholeheartedly. It is possible that they were still influenced by old beliefs such as Hinduism, Buddhism and animism, or that they only outwardly followed Islam for political gain. Islamisation was more strategic than spiritual in its early stages. Although Islam was officially accepted in Malacca, Tome Pires' account may not fully reflect the depth and understanding of Islam among the people of Malacca, especially among the nobility. This description is only a superficial view that does not go into depth, and is inaccurate and incomplete. Such a superficial view is likely to be that of a representative of the Portuguese king who was assigned to find the weaknesses and strengths of Malacca, or a view from an outside perspective that may be influenced by Eurocentric bias. Eurocentrism is the belief that Europe is the centre of world civilisation. Orientalists view the West as the “savior” of Eastern nations. This understanding considers them to be more advanced, rational, and scientific. Thus, the Islamic world, including Malay lands, is seen as backward, irrational, and in need of enlightenment from the West (Fathi, 2022).

This superficial view is reinforced by Winstedt's (1949) writing, which describes Tom Pires as confusing because he distinguishes Paramewara from Sultan Iskandar Shah. Similarly, Chinese records are confusing in considering Parameswara to be the father of Sultan Iskandar Shah. Records from the Ming dynasty, such as Ming Shilu (1368-1644) (*Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*), note that the king of Malacca's visit to China mentioned his Islamic name,

“Mahamusa”, which may refer to Sultan Muhammad Shah or an early Islamic king. These records state that Megat Iskandar Shah came in 1414 to announce the death of his father, Parameswara, but other sources mention 1419.

According to Paul Pelliot (1878-1945), a French scholar and sinologist and orientalist, both names refer to the same person, namely Parameswara before and after converting to Islam, not father and son as some believe. This leads to the interpretation that the conversion of the Malacca king to Islam applied to the founder himself, not to his descendants. This shows that they were aware of the process of Islamisation in Malacca, but did not emphasise the religious aspect, instead focusing more on political relations and respect. Errors in dates, titles, and events illustrate that China, like Tome Pires, assessed history from their own perspectives, namely Sinocentric, with China as the centre of the world. Pelliot argues that this inaccuracy also shows bias or misunderstanding on the part of Chinese writers, who regarded every visit as a sign of submission or respect, even though it may have been merely a normal diplomatic relationship. Both Portuguese and Chinese sources show that critical examination of external records is very important because they often bring their own political, cultural and ideological assumptions into historical records.

The views of R.O Winstedt (1878 – 1966)

R.O Winstedt was a British colonial administrator and orientalist in Malaya. Abd Rahman et al. (2019) critically explain Winstedt's approach to assessing Islam and Malay society in Malaya, which was fraught with doubt and bias. Winstedt considered the introduction of Islam to Malay lands to be superficial, shallow, and merely political in nature. As a result, the history of Islam in this region is often considered unimportant or lacking in cultural value. This biased assessment portrays Malay society as passive and easily influenced. Mamat (2018) believes that some Orientalists use Western social theories such as positivism to interpret Malay history and culture. This causes their assessment of the role of Islam in Malacca to be biased and inaccurate. They tend to consider Islam insignificant in shaping Malay identity, whereas Islam played a major role in the establishment of the state, administrative system, legislation and culture of Malacca.

Winstedt considered Islam in Malacca to be an external influence that Islamised the existing Hindu-Buddhist culture. He described the political structure and customs of the Malays as part of Indian heritage (Indianised) that was later adapted to Islam. His assessment focuses on Hindu influence as the basis of civilisation while ignoring the role of Islam as the main formative factor. Although he made many contributions to the documentation of Malay texts, his views are often considered Eurocentric and belittle the role of Islam as a complete civilisation system. Winstedt's approach is clearly sceptical and biased, with a tendency to minimise Islam and place greater emphasis on the Hindu heritage in Malay society. This reflects Orientalism with a Eurocentric bias (Abd Rahman et al., 2023).

The views of W.G. Shellabar (1862–1947)

W.G. Shellabar was a British scholar and preacher in Malay lands. Lim Teck Ghee and Charles Brophy, analysts of the Apostolanaya Scholars in the book *The Straits Philosophical*

Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

Society and Colonial Elites in Malaya (2023), offer a thorough critique of Shellabear's approach. They state that Shellabear emphasised textual aspects such as language studies and Islamic scriptures as the lifeblood of Malay-Islamic understanding, while he saw the influence of Islam as limited and more subordinate to Hinduism in the history of Malay civilisation. The main criticism refers to how he limited Islam to religious aspects and written terms, while the fields of government and trade were more influenced by European and Chinese languages. This view is considered orientalist because it makes Islam a “civilisational power” but limits its influence on text, language and instruments only. This situation reveals an Orientalist bias that praises Islam in textual terms but belittles its social and political influence.

Raden Galuh (2025) argues that the historical narrative presented by Shellabar often subtly disparages the dignity of the Malay people. For example, he describes the Malacca Sultanate as lagging in firearms technology when facing the Portuguese in 1509–1511, a description that is not based on valid historical facts and is filled with nuances of the Western “civilising mission” that depicts the Malays as “weak and savage”. Such narratives are also considered romantic in their Orientalist approach because they emphasise the fragility of the Malay people for the sake of an implicit colonial agenda. This reinforces an unfair and emotional reconstruction of history that perpetuates the colonial perspective. The Orientalist romantic view of Islamic Malays is that they are passive and gentle, not aggressive, as if they need Western guidance. Islam is also seen as a foreign element that weakens or obscures the original Malay civilisation. Malay culture is also seen as static and exotic, emphasising customs and mysticism rather than folklore, palaces, art and the romanticism of historical past, without considering the actual dynamics of politics, religion and economics. This portrayal seems to leave no room for the voices of local people, especially critical and rational Islamic scholars.

The views of John Leyden (1775–1811)

John Leyden (1775–1811) was a Scottish orientalist and translator. He sought to raise awareness of Malay identity through historical texts such as *Sejarah Melayu* (Wikipedia, 2025). The first English translation of *Sejarah Melayu* in 1821 was edited by Thomas Stamford Raffles (Wellcome Collection, 2025; *Legends of the Malay Kings*. n.d.). He also wrote a comparative dictionary of Malay, Burmese and Thai languages around 1810. Leyden saw Malacca as the centre of history and the spread of Islam and Malay literary culture, making Malay historical texts the basis for the formation of Malay identity through the legacy of the kings of Malacca. His translation brought the narrative of *Sulalat al-Salatin* to Western readers, while also forming the initial discourse on Malay civilisation as an important historical entity. Leyden's colonial and orientalist approach, along with Stamford Raffles (1786-1826), William Marsden (1754-1836), and Joh Crawfurd (1783-1868), played a role in shaping colonial knowledge about the Malay world. Their translations were not merely linguistic but also served as tools of colonial politics. They also interpreted Malay as part of a broader Indian imperial mission, which placed Sanskrit and Hindu heritage as the main elements that were later civilised by Islam (Richard, 2021).

Although John Leyden played an important role in introducing Malay history to the Western world, he also shaped the initial perception of Malacca as a centre of historical and

Islamic heritage. However, his approach was influenced by Orientalism and colonial epistemology, viewing Malacca not only as a centre of Islamic heritage and literature but also as a society that needed to be nurtured or led by the West through texts and education (Ismail et al., 2017). Shiung Ng (2022) wrote in the *Scottish Historical Review* that Leyden's initiative to build 'Malay nationhood' through the Malay Annals text was based on 'Scottish enlightenment idealism', which suggested that Malay society had the potential to be reborn under Western leadership. Abd Rahim (2015) argues that Leyden relied on an empirical positivist and philological approach when writing Malay history, often minimising narratives based on revelation or religious values. This approach resulted in a sceptical view of Islam and Malay customs as a true civilisation. This aligns with the writings of Abd Rahman et al. (2022), who emphasise that Orientalists often offer sceptical, biased views and tend to reject religious values as a source of history.

The Views of William Marsden (1754–1836)

William Marsden (1754–1836) was an orientalist, numismatist and linguist who served with the East India Company and produced several important works on the Malay world. Among his most famous works are *The History of Sumatra* (1783) and *Grammar and Dictionary of the Malay Language* (1812). Marsden studied the development of the Malay language, particularly how it developed as a lingua franca during the Malacca Sultanate, influenced by Arabic vocabulary (through Islam) and Sanskrit and Tamil heritage (Malay Language, Wikipedia, 2025). *The History of Sumatra* also documents the relationship between Malacca, Islam, and the growth of Arabic vocabulary within the Malay community. Marsden viewed Malacca as a strategic hub where Asian trade and power intersected with the West. However, his approach focused on economic and linguistic changes as a result of external influences, rather than a holistic understanding of Islam as a civilisational system (Amirell, 2020; Ozay, 2013). Amirell (2020) further describes Marsden's view of Malay society as degenerate compared to the original humans, accusing them of making trade and piracy their main activities. He uses terms such as 'plunder' and 'duplicity' to describe the Malays.

Studies such as *The Travelling Text* explain how Marsden's work is not merely a linguistic study, but part of a colonial knowledge network that shaped historical narratives to support British rule in the Malay Peninsula and Islands. Marsden is seen as one of the intellectuals who built the colonisers' epistemology through texts and the cataloguing of Malay-Islamic culture. According to Abd Rahman (2019), Orientalists often use empirical positivism and reject Islamic sources (revelation) as valid historical references. This results in the Islamic narrative being devalued and reduced to a purely sociolinguistic form. It cannot be denied that Marsden made a significant contribution to the documentation and formation of the Malay language, as well as the initial Western perception of Malacca. However, his views were also influenced by Orientalism and colonial bias. Islam and Malay culture were seen more as products of change rather than as a civilisational system shaping their social and political structures.

The views of Anthony Reid (1450–1680)

Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

Anthony Reid (1450–1680) was a contemporary scholar from Australia who was not a colonial orientalist, but is often cited in the context of historical and Islamic studies of Malacca and Southeast Asia, complete with scientific references. The focus of his main work, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce (1450–1680)*, is on the history of Southeast Asian trade, maritime political developments, and maritime Islam in a global context that explores the interconnections between trade, port formation, Islam, and changes in governance in this region (Maritime Silk Road, 2025; Wade & Tana, 2012; *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, Wikipedia, n.d.).

Reid's main view of Malacca and the Muslim maritime network emphasises that Islam spread through Muslim traders and maritime trade networks that crossed the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, China, Arabia, India and beyond. These connections helped shape the maritime Islamic identity in ports such as Malacca from the 14th to the 16th centuries (Wade & Tana, 2012). In his work, Malacca emerges as a key connecting entity in the global trade network linking Western and Eastern trade, and as a centre for the spread of Islam throughout the archipelago. Through port systems, trade laws, and networks of wealthy Muslims, Islam became an important medium for shaping local political and economic identity (Reid, 1995; Orillaneda, 2020). Reid's approach differs from that of classical Orientalists like Winstedt or Marsden. Reid does not emphasise the narrative of 'Europe saving the Malays'. Instead, he uses many Orientalist sources but reads them in a broader context, examining the integration of trade, maritime politics, and religion that were shaped by local communities themselves before Western intervention (Reid, 1995; Reid, 2010). Reid also views Islam as a social and economic system that functions through networks of Muslim diaspora traders, rather than merely as a religious ideology imposed politically (Reid, 1984; Reid, 2015).

The views of Munshi Abdullah (1796-1854)

In his autobiographical account in *Hikayat Abdullah*, Munshi Abdullah presents Malay Islamic thought from a local and realistic perspective. (Hamdan, n.d.). In his autobiography, he shares his social observations on Malay society, which was still bound by feudal customs and old beliefs, as well as the growing awareness of the importance of knowledge and Islam. Abdullah condemns the feudal king's oppressive system of government, which only serves to maintain power and the symbols of religious and political grandeur. He cites the siege of Kelantan as an example, where feudal warfare destroyed society not merely due to political conflict, but because of the king's irresponsible mentality (Hamdan et al., 2019). However, Abdullah praised the presence of Qur'an teachers and Islamic education in Malacca. He described the local community as being willing to pay tuition fees for knowledge. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the Malay population remained unaware of the value of their own language and the need for systematic language education to understand religion and society (Abdullah, 2023). For this reason, Munshi Abdullah can be considered a Malay occidentaliser (Westerniser) for accepting the Orientalist narrative that portrays the West as the sole path to modernity. Malays actively respond to Western influence by rejecting aspects that undermine their religion or culture but accepting knowledge.

Abdullah played the role of an agent of change who embraced Western values and rejected cultural colonialism, rather than being a passive recipient as depicted by Orientalists. Thus, Malays are also historians and identity journalists, not merely objects of Western study (Zakaria & Lubis, 2024; Merican, 2011; Hamdan et al., 2016; Chong, 2018; Rahim et al., 2020). However, Abdullah was often accused of being a British agent due to his harsh criticism of Malay society through a Western framework of thought. Nevertheless, his works such as Abdullah's Voyage to Kelantan (1838) (Saufy, 2022). Hikayat Abdullah (1849) and Ceritera Ilmu Kepandaian Orang Putih (1855) (Wrang, n.d.) prove that he was an honest reformist with a scientific outlook and critical of feudalism. His criticism was not merely pro-Western, but arose from a deep understanding of religion and a desire to advance Malay society (Mohd Faizal Musa, and Tujeri Shah Abdul Razak, 2024).

The views of Syed Naquib al Attas (1931-present)

Syed Naquib al Attas (1931-present) is an Islamic philosopher born in Bogor, Java, Indonesia, and the only contemporary scholar of traditional Islamic science of his time. Al-Attas is a pioneer of the idea of Islamising science in the process of re-evaluating modern science based on Islamic epistemology. In his book Historical Fact and Fiction (2011), Al-Attas acknowledges the contributions of Western scholars such as Tome Pires in compiling the history of the Malay world, but asserts that their analyses are superficial, focusing on visual heritage such as architecture and fine arts, but failing to delve deeper into the fruits of thought ('aql-fikri) and textual interpretations as recorded in the Hikayat Raja-Raja. Al-Attas asserts that most Orientalists tend to equate Malay civilisation with Hindu-Buddhist heritage. Orientalists have overlooked the Islamic intellectualism that underpins Malay culture (Ngadiran, 2011; AJAMI, 2023).

With that, al-Attas emphasises the need for a more comprehensive and in-depth historical approach, such as the sincere efforts of preachers to spread Islam and the development of Malacca as a centre of maritime Islamic culture (AJAMI, 2023). Al-Attas appreciates Pires' information but criticises it for not sufficiently examining the intellectual and spiritual aspects of Islam in the history of Malacca. The historical narrative crafted by Pires is considered superficial from the perspective of Malay Islamic thought. Al-Attas states that Western historiography, including the works of Winstedt (1878-1966), C.O. Blagden (1864-1949), H.S. Paterson (1924), A. Teeuw (1921-2012), and Crawford (1783-1868) have value if their accuracy is objectively acknowledged and their shortcomings are identified for improvement (Ngadiran, 2011). He acknowledges that they have made a significant contribution to documenting Malay history through transcription, textual criticism, and linguistic analysis. However, this acknowledgement does not mean fully accepting the value of their interpretations. According to him, we must acknowledge what is true and correct what is problematic in their interpretations. Orientalist views are based only on external facts, such as customs and institutions, without delving into Sufism and Islamic philosophy. They reject revelation or spiritual values as sources of history, viewing Malay society as "relatively primitive" and "inferior" compared to Europe.

Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

He criticised Orientalists such as Blagden (1864-1949) and Paterson (1922) who focused on external aspects of history such as dates, inscriptions and social structures but ignored the inner and spiritual side of Islam in Malay culture. Al-Attas referred to this situation as an interpretation that rejected implied values and meanings, which he believed were important in understanding Malay-Islamic history. In his polemic with A. Teeuw, for example, al-Attas opposed Teeuw's interpretation of Hamzah Fansuri's poetry as flawed because it actually contained spiritual depth and Sufi values that Teeuw had ignored. Al-Attas criticises the positivist methodology of Orientalism, which prioritises empirical facts and disregards sources based on revelation or spiritual values as valid historical evidence. This results in the Malay historical narrative being written from a perspective that elevates the West as the centre of civilisation and obscures Malay Islamic civilisation (Al-Attas, 1972).

Al-Attas asserts that Orientalism has distorted the history and heritage of Islam in the Malay world. He believes that Orientalists often use Western frameworks to assess and interpret Islamic civilisation, which ultimately leads to a major misunderstanding of Islam's true role in the formation of Malay society. Western Orientalists tend to view Islam as a foreign influence that replaced the original culture, rather than as the main foundation in the formation of Malay culture itself (Al-Attas, 1972). In his book *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, he states that the major mistake of Western scholars is that they read and interpret the Islamic world without first understanding the essence of knowledge in Islam (Al-Attas, 1965). According to Al Junied (2013), Al-Attas criticises Orientalists such as Leyden for relying excessively on empirical and positivistic approaches that focus on external facts (social structure, chronology, language) but ignore the spiritual, intellectual, and inner interpretations of Islam in the Malay-Islamic tradition. External interpretation refers to the neglect of aspects of thought such as Sufism, philosophy, and symbolic meaning in narratives, which, according to Al-Attas, are central to Malay-Islamic civilisation. Empirical positivism, on the other hand, emphasises empirical data, rejecting revelation and classical textual narratives as valid historical sources.

Therefore, al-Attas considers the writing of history by Orientalists to be reductive, separating Islamic elements from the Malay cultural structure (Ngadiran, 2023). For him, it is very necessary to free Islamic historiography from the dominance of Western methodology (Aljunied, 2013). Without an Islamic philosophical approach, history will lose the moral and spiritual meaning that shapes Malay-Islamic civilisation. Al-Attas calls on Malay historians to re-read history using a more comprehensive Islamic philosophical framework, rather than relying solely on negative Orientalist interpretations (Al-Attas, 2011). He believes that knowledge is not neutral but must be bound to a worldview that has a specific framework. Fahrudin et al. (2020) and Lisyani & Ghazal (2023) state that Al-Attas sees the Western framework as leading to misunderstandings in understanding Islamic heritage, including the history of Malacca as a centre for the spread of Islam. Therefore, knowledge originating from the West must be filtered to prevent it from corrupting Muslims' understanding of their own history. In his book *The Concept of Education in Islam, A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (1980), he notes that Islamisation does not mean rejecting Western knowledge entirely but subjecting it to Islamic principles. Islam has advanced Malay civilisation in various fields, including culture, philosophy, and science. He calls for a renewed focus on Islamic

education and the process of Islamising knowledge. He called for a return to Islamic education and the Islamisation of knowledge as a way to address the contemporary challenges faced by Malay society (Razzaq, 2018).

Malay history written after the Islamic era should use terms and concepts derived from Islamic epistemology, such as *adab*, *hikmah*, and *ta'dib*, rather than Western concepts like 'civilisation', 'progress', or 'myth'. Within the framework of Islamisation, history is not merely a narrative of events, but a tool for educating morality, identity, and way of life by highlighting Islamic figures as role models rather than colonial figures (Al-Attas, 1980). The ultimate goal of the Islamisation of history for Al-Attas is to restore the authenticity of Islam in Malay historical narratives, correct colonial or Orientalist historical misunderstandings and biases, build the identity of the Malay people based on Islam, and make history a tool for spiritual and intellectual education. For this reason, Al-Attas rejects the Orientalist view that Islam is merely an additional element, asserting that Islam is the foundation of Malay civilisation after the Islamic era (1972).

Misunderstandings and biases in colonial or Orientalist history need to be corrected and purified of secular and colonial elements (Al-Attas, 1993; Al-Junied, 2013). The education system, including history, needs to shape civilised individuals, with Islamic identity as the core of their identity and culture. History should be used as a tool for spiritual and intellectual education. He emphasised that historical knowledge is not merely chronology but a tool for shaping character, self-awareness and a correct orientation in life (Al-Attas, 1994). According to Husni (2023), Al-Attas emphasised the process of Islamising knowledge through semantic analysis of Malay Islamic history, calling for mastery of both Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. It is very important for them to promote wisdom in understanding the contributions of scholars to Malay civilisation. Islamising knowledge is one way to counter secular Western science. There is a need for a framework of thought rooted in Islamic values derived from the Qur'an and Hadith that can form a distinct Malay Islamic intellectual tradition (Muhibuddin, 2022).

Al-Attas emphasises the need to rebuild Malay Islamic thought, addressing issues such as Orientalism and secularisation by integrating Islamic principles with contemporary science in the education curriculum in line with Malaysia's unique cultural context (Abaza, 1999). He calls for a return to the original sources of knowledge from Allah, with the Quran and Hadith as the foundational guides in the history of Malay Islam (Nasution, 2022). The importance of genuine knowledge is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the Islamic worldview as the foundation for interpreting the history of Malay Islam. His epistemology combines empirical methods with Islamic principles, ultimately forming a framework that accurately reflects the role of Islamic history in the Malay world (Kamaruzzaman & Omar, 2016).

A Comparison of the views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

Munshi Abdullah's writing approach takes the form of autobiographical writing and is narrative realism, while Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas uses an epistemological philosophical approach to Malay Islam in its history. From the perspective of worldview, Munshi is selective in accepting Western knowledge and technological advancements but

Discourse of Malay-Islamic History in Orientalist Texts: A Comparative Analysis between the Views of Munshi Abdullah and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

rejects colonial domination and their religious values. In contrast, al-Attas takes a more critical approach to Orientalism. He completely rejects Western epistemological domination over Islamic history and thought, emphasising the importance of developing an Islamic discourse framework based on Islamic scholarly traditions.

Looking at Munshi Abdullah's writing, it is more descriptive (apparent) and somewhat subjective, reflecting the reality and personal experiences of the Malays of his time, for example, his criticism of feudal culture. In contrast, al-Attas uses a more analytical and systematic approach based on Islamic scientific epistemology. His historical perspective not only considers external facts but also assesses the overall internal dimensions in line with Islamic philosophy itself. Munshi Abdullah was interested in bringing social reform to the Malays. He believed that religious education was the way out of the social and cultural imbalances of Malay society but did not reject the use of Western knowledge for progress. He saw learning as a tool for liberation from ignorance. Al-Attas, meanwhile, championed the concept of Islamising knowledge and language, making it the foundation for building Malay-Islamic identity and scientific identity. In this framework, knowledge not only plays a role in advancing society, but also serves as a medium for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment based on revelation.

Conclusion

Orientalist narratives tend to minimise or distort the spiritual, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of Islam in Malacca, portraying Islam as a superficial or foreign influence and reducing the richness of the Malay-Islamic heritage to political, linguistic, or economic dimensions. In contrast, the responses of Munshi Abdullah and al-Attas represent two distinct local epistemologies that challenge the Orientalist worldview. Munshi Abdullah, through his autobiographical and reformist writings, adopts a critical yet selective approach, acknowledging the benefits of Western knowledge and education while criticising feudalism and cultural stagnation in Malay society. His worldview reflects a pragmatic form of Occidentalism, positioning himself as an agent of social transformation who values Islamic ethics and rational education.

Meanwhile, al-Attas expressed a more profound philosophical and epistemological critique of Orientalist historiography. His approach, rooted in the Islamic worldview, emphasises the integration of reason and revelation, and the need to reconstruct Malay-Islamic history through an Islamised framework of knowledge. Al-Attas rejects the empirical positivism of Western scholars and calls for a return to a tawhid-based epistemology that acknowledges the spiritual, metaphysical, and intellectual heritage of Islam in shaping Malay civilisation. Through discourse and comparative analysis, this study affirms the importance of rewriting history by redeeming the Islamic perspective. He argues that the history of Islam in Malacca cannot be fully understood through external interpretations alone, but rather through material interpretations. Instead, it must be reinterpreted through the intellectual and spiritual framework of Islamic scholars who view history as a medium for instilling morals and

civilisational identity. Finally, this study contributes to an ongoing project to reaffirm Islamic epistemology in the narration of Malay history and offers a basis for developing a more just and valid understanding of the Islamic heritage in this region.

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