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**AN OVERVIEW ON THE STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATIONS
OF EARLY ULAMAS IN THE MALAY WORLD TO RELIGIONS
OTHER THAN ISLAM***Tinjauan ke atas Kajian Mengenai Pemaparan Ulama Islam di Alam
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Abstract

This article attempts to give an overview on the study of the representations of early Malay ulamas in the Malay Archipelago to religions other than Islam. The ability of these ulamas to transform the Malay world from the influence of Hindu-Buddhist and traditional beliefs to Islam offers interesting prospects to such study. Two main challenges have been identified, namely the problems in dealing with early Malay evidence as well as problems on issues and theories of the Islamization of the Malay Archipelago. The analysis on these challenges will be made on selected early Malay texts as well as on the existing theories of the arrival of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. This study concluded that the understanding on both challenges will provide a less speculative answer as to how well early Malay Muslims responded to the arrival of this foreign religion in their life and adopted and adapted it.

Keywords: Malay archipelago, Islam, ulamas, Hinduism, Buddhism.

Abstrak

Artikel ini meninjau cara ulama-ulama Melayu Islam terdahulu menerangkan agama-agama selain Islam kepada masyarakat Melayu. Keupayaan ulama-ulama tersebut mengubah alam Melayu daripada pengaruh-pengaruh Hindu-Buddha dan kepercayaan tradisi kepada Islam membuktikan perlunya kepada kajian seperti ini. Dua cabaran di dalam proses kajian ini telah dikenalpasti iaitu permasalahan berkaitan bukti-bukti bertulis daripada teks-teks Melayu berkaitan dengan isu ini serta permasalahan mengenai teori kedatangan Islam ke alam Melayu itu sendiri. Untuk menganalisa cabaran-cabaran tersebut, kajian akan dijalankan ke atas beberapa teks-teks Melayu terpilih serta kajian ke atas

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teori-teori kedatangan Islam ke Alam Melayu. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa keupayaan untuk memahami kedua-dua situasi tersebut akan membolehkan kajian ini menghasilkan jawapan-jawapan yang jitu kepada persoalan bagaimana orang-orang Melayu mengubahsuai kehidupan mereka bersesuaian dengan tuntutan agama baru mereka iaitu Islam.

Kata kunci: Kepulauan Melayu, Islam, ulama', Hindu, Buddha.

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the Malay world from a strong base of South Asian religions and civilizations to Islam is an interesting subject to be explored. It has been recorded that contacts between traders from India and their counterpart in the Malay world began as early as the 2nd century B.C.E (Wolters, 1967: 34-7). South Asian culture and traditions penetrated people's lives by means of trade, and court's adoption of South Asian religions, rituals and ceremonies, among them the doctrines of *devaraja* and *bodhisattva*.

THE COMING OF ISLAM TO THE MALAY WORLD

The period of South Asian ideology and influence did not last forever. From the 13th century C.E. onwards, the influence of Islam in the Malay world could be seen in a visible and recorded manner. Gradually, Islam came to replace the dominant power of Hindu-Buddhist religions, especially at the Malay courts, and at the same time gained rapidly increasing popularity among the Malay peoples. In the end, the Malay rulers and their subjects abandoned their old Hindu-Buddhist beliefs and became Muslims.

Conversion to a new religion can happen to an individual or the whole community. It involves a process of 'wholesale transformation that is now and forever' (Rambo, 1993: 1). Although one cannot deny the possibility of a 'sudden conversion', it rarely happens and, can be seen in the Malay world as well, is usually linked to popular mythology of conversion (Rambo, 1993: 1). Two models of religious conversion which explain the processes involved in religious conversion have been proposed by Rambo, namely holistic and stage models (1993: 7, 16). The reason why we highlight these models is because we believe that the process of conversion of the Malays from Hindu-Buddhist and pagan beliefs to Islam follows certain models identified by experts in this field. Thus, by referring to these models of religious conversion, we will be able to understand whether the process of conversion to Islam in the Malay world follows the entire stages proposed in an existing model or not. At the end of this article, we shall see which model of conversion can best be used to define the entire process of conversion of the Malays from Hindu-Buddhist and pagan beliefs to Islam.

One important aspect in the discussion of the issues of the Islamization of the Malay world that needs to be highlighted here is the acceptability to Islam to the local people. One may consider that Malay Muslims living far from the birthplace of Islam in Arabia were not truly Muslim, since they were living at the periphery compared to those who were living in the Muslim heartlands of Arabia. Thus, the Malays must have been merely the recipients of the teachings of Islam, and remained constantly in need of guidance from those who had lived in Arabia.

However, such an understanding is not compatible with the notion that Islam is a universal religion. As a universal religion, geographical differences cannot be taken as a tool to measure the level of acceptance and understanding of Islam by local people. As a universal religion, Islam should be able to accommodate all people, regardless of where they live be it at the periphery or in the Muslim heartlands in Arabia. Thus, the level of acceptance or understanding of Islam among local communities depends very much on how Islam is presented to them, and how they understand the religion, rather than on geographical boundaries. The task of ensuring that those at the geographical periphery, as seen from Mecca, understand and accept Islam fully lies in the hands of ulama not so different from those in Arabia.

THE ROLES OF ULAMAS IN THE MALAY WORLD

The term *ulama* (*ulamas* – pl.) is the general term given to Muslim scholars and teachers. Other terms, such as *kiyai* and *syekh*, are also used in the Malay world. The former is widely used in Indonesia, and particularly ‘for both the head of *pesantren* and other eminent *ulama*’ in *Java*’ (Azra, 2006: 70) while the latter is used commonly throughout the Muslim world. In the Malay world, the term *syekh* is normally used for scholars and teachers who are originally from Arabia, or for local scholars and teachers who have been educated there. In this article, we will be using the general term *ulama* for these scholars and teachers, instead of other similar terms that have been mentioned before.

To be successful, however these ulama must understand the reality of the people and the local context. By having a good understanding of the local people, they can present Islam to the Malays, according to their needs, but always in accordance with the tenets of Islam. As a universal religion suitable for people everywhere, at any period of time, Islam is able to deal with any incompatibilities between its teachings and local traditions and practices. Thus, the task for ulama is to show an understanding and respond to the challenges they meet wisely.

While local and foreign ulama have played an important role in bringing Islam to the people in the Malay world, there is no doubt that during the early period of Islam, the Malays had already being exposed to this religion elsewhere. Apart from their contact with foreign Muslim merchants, ship owners and envoys, as reported from Srivijaya (Azra, 2006: 153-5), there were also Malays who travelled as seafarers to areas

where there were Muslim communities such as Gujarat in the Indian subcontinent (Iskandar 1966: 2). Such contacts would probably have brought Islam to the knowledge of the local people, even before the coming of these ulamas to the Malay world proper. Such evidence reaffirms the notion that there was earlier contact and exposure of the Malays to Islam before the beginning of the extensive period of Islamization activities in the Malay world, starting from the 13th century onwards. Thus, their exposure to Islam, coupled with a feeling of dissatisfaction among the local communities with the total control of their personal freedom by the courts at that time, might have resulted in Islam being able to gain easy acceptance in the Malay world. There was no force involved in converting the Malays to Islam. It was a peaceful, gradual process. All these facts suggest that Islam was voluntarily received by the local people. Indeed, their exposure to Islam before the conversion had helped them considerably in making the whole process of conversion peaceful and voluntary.

PROSPECTS ON THE STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF RELIGIONS OTHER THAN ISLAM

As has already been stated, both early Malay and foreign ulamas were instrumental in the whole process of Islamization during the early period of Islam in the Malay world. They were keen to make Islam acceptable to the local people at that time. Without the ability of these ulamas to understand the reality of the Malays and their religious beliefs and practices, while at the same time giving appropriate responses to any matters that arose, Islam would never have been able to replace the Hindu-Buddhist culture and traditions which had penetrated the Malay society for many centuries before Islam arrived.

In analyzing the representations of early Malay ulamas to the existence of practices in contradiction with the teachings of Islam which were inherited by the Malays either from the past Hindu-Buddhist culture and traditions, or rooted in their earlier paganistic traditions, Malay texts have been identified to be the best source of reference. This is because these texts which survive until today directly and indirectly describe and portray the spiritual life of the Malays before and after their conversion to Islam. Thus, the responses of the ulamas to the presence of other religions after the conversion of the Malays to Islam could be traced in these texts equally directly and indirectly. However, it is important to note here that there are problems which need to be answered in this study related to the Malay texts themselves. Several features of the nature of these texts should be taken into consideration before any conclusion can be drawn from them. Apart from this, there are specific problems with the existing theories of Islamization of the Malay world, they will have to be applied with caution and there is a need to review them in light of what we might have gathered and found throughout our analysis of the texts at a later stage.

PROBLEMS IN DEALING WITH EARLY MALAY EVIDENCE

Generally, early Malay evidence consists of inscriptions, texts and, treated with caution, contemporary oral traditions. In dealing with early Malay evidence, there are several problems which need to be addressed carefully. To begin with, the distribution of documentary evidence is uneven. For example, textual and spiritual evidence on the coming of Islam to the Malay world is not well represented. Evidence in the form of inscriptions on tombstones was only found in several places on Java, Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Borneo. Presumably, these do not represent the whole area of the Malay world, which is much larger. Texts, manuscripts and other evidence related to the arrival and dissemination of Islam are also found scattered in terms of their time and place of origin. Furthermore, the exact place and date of origin of a text, or its authorship, are often difficult to establish since this information was rarely included in many types of non-religious texts and philology has not yet addressed this issue fully.

In addition, the contents of many of these texts are also fragmented. Many early Malay texts are known to be incomplete, and contain various differing themes such as commentaries on certain verses of the Quran, narrative stories or Malay Islamic *hikayats*, discussions of Islamic Jurisprudence, and also translations of celebrated devotional poems in praise of the Prophet (van Bruinessen, 1994: 128). Moreover, texts of a considerable age are only preserved in recent manuscript copies, which adds to the problems of analysis.

Early ulamas in the Malay world devoted their time in writing to various topics ranging from the discussion of the theological aspects of Islam to the laws and ethics of the everyday life of a Muslim. One may assume that the existence of so many early Malay religious manuscripts is due to the fact that religious discussions were popular among the Malays at that time, or they could also be copied by the students of ulamas for their own personal notes, used throughout the period of their studies. These personal copies were then passed down from one generation to another, and were then considered as texts in their own right. As a result, we have inherited hundreds of such writings which until today are not fully described and classified. Some of these writings are helpful in providing information about the author. Nevertheless, a large part of the early Malay texts are anonymous and frequently undated, such as *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah* and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah*. It has been said that most writers, especially those who wrote the religious texts, wanted to remain anonymous, due to the fact that their contributions in the writing those texts were for the sake of God, not for their own popularity (Mohd. Nor, 1982: 1).

However, while this view may be seen as if correct when applied to popular religious texts, it is definitely not so for *kitab* texts. This is because all *kitab* texts, in their capacity as specialized religious texts which were written by ulamas for other ulamas in the Muslim world, acknowledged the names of their authors. Information about the author

for *kitab* texts is important, because these texts deal with matters relating to the fundamental teachings of Islam. By making this known, we can then, know the background of its author and his teachers and after that, be able to conclude as to whether such writings were based on authoritative and authentic sources or not. Thus, any study related to early Malay texts must employ great caution, especially when dealing with the above problems.

Scholars in Malay studies differ in their opinions on the classification of the Malay texts. Siti Hawa, in her study, has highlighted this problem (2002: 211-12). According to her, these different views among scholars such as Winstedt (1939: 2-243), Teeuw (1966: 429-46, 1984: 43), Brakel (1979: 1-2), Johns (1979: 43), Kratz (1981: 232) and Amin Sweeney (1983: 33-46) are centred on the issue whether the existing Malay texts should be classified according to the classification of the western classical texts or they should be seen in their own perspective without having to impose a certain model on them (2002: 211-14). Siti Hawa offers what she terms as ‘*the guidelines in determining categories of texts in the Malay traditional literature*’ (2002: 215-18). According to her, the general guidelines for the classification of Malay texts that they are (i) based on the mode of transmission i.e. oral or written (ii) can be further divided into prose and poetry (genre) (iii) based on the materials or contents of the texts which could be either narrative or non-narrative texts (2002: 218-20). Based on these guidelines, Siti Hawa proposes eight different categories of Malay texts (religious texts, epic texts, historical texts, legal texts, *adab* texts, *hikayat* texts, *panji* texts and traditional knowledge texts) (2002: 223-32).

However, the eight categories proposed by Siti Hawa do not agree with the guidelines she set up herself earlier, because they use an unsystematic mixture of criteria. For example, *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah* and *Hikayat Amir Hamzah* are placed under two different categories, namely religious texts, under the sub-category of Muslim heroes, and epic texts, under the sub-category of Islamic epic. Siti Hawa also admits that there could be texts which can be considered to fall into more than one of the categories she proposed above. *Hikayat Luqman al-Hakim* is an example of this. First, she listed this text under the religious sub-category of Muslim heroes’ texts. At the same time, she stated that this text could also be placed under the *adab* text heading since it contained Luqman’s guidance and advice to others from his life experience as a prophet (2002: 225).

A further example is that of *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. According to her, this text could be placed under the *adab* category, which highlights guidelines for people in their relationship with the rulers (2002: 226-7). In her original classification, *Hikayat Hang Tuah* was considered to belong to the epic category (2002: 226). These are only some of the problems with following the classification proposed by Siti Hawa. However, for the purpose of this study it will be sufficient to group texts into three categories, namely religious texts; historical, legal and traditional

knowledge texts; and *adab* texts. These proposed classifications can avoid confusion with so many different and overlapping classifications, such as the one proposed by Siti Hawa which may eventually distract us from the real objective of this study. Two of these classifications, namely religious and *adab* texts, are similar to that proposed by Siti Hawa. The term given to the third category represents a combination of relevant categories which does not fall under either the religious or *adab* texts.

Religious texts are generally written by ulama discussing issues related to Islam. The main issues discussed here are Theology (*Akidah*), Sufism (*Tasawuf*), Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fikah*), the Traditions of the Prophets (*Hadis*), Quranic Exegesis (*Tafsir*) and Islamic history. There are also writings in the forms of Islamic tales (*hikayat*) which fall into the category of theological texts. These writings are normally related to the story of the Prophet Muhammad, the ancient prophets and, companions of the prophet, pious Muslims, as well as recounting romances of Muslim heroes. The analysis of these religious texts will assist us in identifying of the interests, priorities and needs of Malay Muslim communities during the early period of Islam in the Malay world. Such interests, priorities and needs may be deduced from the contents of the writings of these early ulama.

It seems that certain subjects were written about by almost all early Malay ulama, for example, the subject of Sufism. However, can we identify the reasons why early Malay ulama were so keen to write on Sufism? Does this mean that Sufism was popular at that time, or is the presence of so many manuscripts and texts merely coincidental? Furthermore, can there be any absolute evidence as to the popularity of a particular theme, judging by the presence of many copies of such writing in a particular place in the Malay world?

If we look back at the history of Sufism in Islam, the Malay world is not the birthplace of this mystical movement. The propagation of Sufism started from its place of origin in Baghdad, and spread to Persia, India, North Africa and Muslim Spain during 1200 C.E. – 1500 C.E (Trimingham, 1971: 1-30). However, the presence of a vast number of texts on this subject written by early ulama raises very important questions which need to be answered. For example, why was there an interest in Sufism at that time in the Malay world? Was there any relationship between the traditions of the previous Hindu-Buddhist times and the mystical experience of Sufism? Or, is there anything to do with the pre Hindu-Buddhist history of the Malays?

The same questions need to be asked with regard to other themes. Sufism is not the only theme which was the focus of the writings of early Malay ulama at that time. Other themes, such as *fikah* (Islamic Jurisprudence) and *akidah* (Islamic Theology) were popular among the early ulama in the Malay world. Thus, by identifying and analyzing themes in the writings of these ulama, is it possible to draw conclusions as to the nature of the culture of the Malays? If the answer is yes, then how far can

we draw the conclusion that this evidence will lead us to understand the needs, priorities and interests of the Malay communities at that time? Moreover, can we identify factors that shaped the thinking and understanding of these early Malay communities through this method?

Considering that the number of early Malay religious texts which directly discuss the responses of the ulamas to practices of other religions is limited to a few texts written by one, non-Malay ulama, such as *Tibyan fi Ma'rifat al-Adyan* (An Exposition of the Understanding of Religions), *Hujjat al-Siddiq li daf' al-Zindiq* (the Proof of the Truthful for the Refutation of the Heretics), and *Hall al-Zill* (Concerning the Shadow), the source study of theological texts becomes even more important if it can be established that they reflect the priorities of Malay speaking communities, and hence of the ulamas, at a given time. To do so, one has to study more closely other texts that are, not explicitly theological or religious.

As for historical, legal and traditional knowledge texts, they include a wide range of different types of Malay text which are not immediately of a religious nature, be they scholarly or popular, and which were not written purposely to elaborate on the teachings of Islam. However, this does not necessarily means that they are not of religious relevance and can be excluded from an investigation to indicate the responses of early ulamas to other religions. There might be elements and aspects of Islamic teaching and practice in these writings that reflect the religious education and thinking of the authors at that time, since one assumes that they were produced by local Muslims within their own environment. Based loosely on the previous classification proposed by Siti Hawa, this historical, legal and traditional knowledge texts category will include all other texts which do not fell within the category of religious and *adab* texts. Nevertheless, the problem with this type of evidence is that we will not be able to find any direct evidence concerning the responses of ulamas to other religions. These texts were basically written for other purposes, and not to highlight anything related to current religious issues and controversies.

In spite of the above fact, these historical, legal and traditional knowledge texts may be very important to this research, and are probably as important as the religious texts themselves. The so-called historical Malay texts such as the *Sejarah Melayu* (The Malay Annals), *Hikayat Raja Raja Pasai* (The Pasai Chronicles), *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Tales of Hang Tuah), *Salasila Kutei* (The Kutei Chronicles), to name but a few, may be able to explain the nature of Malay society at a given time, and provide some indication of the place of religion within.

The *adab* texts such as *Bustan al-Salatin* and *Taj al-Salatin* are grouped under different category because of nature of these texts, which are meant for specific purposes. These texts were written by scholars as manuals for rulers in administering their kingdoms (Jelani 2003: 12). *Adab* is the general term used in modern Arabic for literature or *belles-*

lettres (Bonebakker, 1990: 16). In fact, this term represents a literary genre that is 'too wide to provide a workable analytic framework' (Bonebakker, 1990: 30). In Arabic literature, this term is not restricted to texts written as guidelines to moral and virtues to the rulers only, as described above. Rather, it can also include, among others (i) 'the cream of past speech and wisdom which has been stored up and selected from by succeeding generations' (ii) 'examples of eloquence occurring in poems and stories or in shorter prose extracts' (iii) 'transcribed course-notes taken down by students of philology and literature – were intended for specialists, not for general readers' (iv) 'specialized notion of literary and linguistic scholarship' (v) 'the literary scholarship of a cultivated man' (Bonebakker, 1990: 28-30). In *adab* texts such as the *Bustan* and *Taj al-Salatin*, the real life of the Malays is directly or indirectly expressed, and this is essential for this study in order to find at least indirect evidence for the responses of ulama in the Malay world. Despite the importance of these texts, we must be careful, at the same time, to deal with them as they should not be read literally. The reliability of any evidence mentioned in the texts must be properly authenticated.

The problem, then, is how far these texts can tell us of the realities of the early Malay communities such as their religious expression and structure, as well as the extent and nature of foreign influence on the mind and life of the Malays. Furthermore, can these texts provide us with an understanding of the culture and traditions of the Malay communities which might have existed long before Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam came to their region?

As far as Islam is concerned, these texts might also provide evidence of the responses of ulama in the Malay world to the religious practices of their communities, which were not Islamic. However, in most cases, evidence is in an indirect form. Therefore, the problem here is how to identify from these texts elements of indirect evidence for the response of ulama to the non-Islamic practices of the early Malay Muslim communities. Finally, there remain the questions on how to come to an appropriate weighting of any evidence possibly found.

PROBLEMS ON ISSUES AND THEORIES OF ISLAMIZATION OF THE MALAY WORLD

Various theories of the Islamization of the Malay world have been put forward by scholars, who have discussed questions of the origin and dissemination of Islam in the Malay world. The discussion is conducted at a great length, with arguments and counter-arguments presented to accommodate different kinds of evidence used. However, due to a limited amount of hard evidence to support each and every theory presented so far, the present theories are subjected to reconsideration whenever there are new findings and interpretations.

Generally, these theories conclude that Islam was brought in by either people from Indian subcontinent, or Arab or Chinese people. Those who

agreed that it was the responsibility of the people from South Asia to have brought Islam to the Malay world continue to argue who among the peoples of India was responsible for this noble act, whether South Asian Muslims from Gujarat, situated in the western part of India, or Muslims from Malabar, on the Coromandel Coast of South of India (Coatalen, 1981: 100-23).

The present theories are mainly of a very general nature and they do not fit in with most places, times and features, as broad generalizations were often drawn on the basis of a few, or even a single and specific event. These theories generally cannot explain the intricate details of the process of Islamization in specific places all over the Malay world. Everybody appears to agree that the process of Islamization in the Malay world occurred gradually. Very few areas in the Malay world were Islamized during the early period of Islamization, for which we have evidence since the 13th century C.E. Generally, the entire process of Islamization of the Malay world has been going on for more than six centuries, that is between the 13th century C.E. and the recorded Islamization of the Kingdom of Samudra-Pasai (1280 C.E.-1400 C.E.) up to the 19th century C.E., when more distant and less accessible parts of the Malay world began to turn to Islam for a number of different reasons (Ismail 1983: 18-22).

Even though Islam was adopted at the courts of the Malay kingdoms, it does not guarantee that the whole ‘territories’ of these empires received the message of Islam, and subsequently embraced Islam. There are still many communities in the interior parts of the Malay Peninsula and the islands of the archipelago which did not even embrace Islam until today.

However, there is an obvious problem with these theories. By and large, they are incomplete. Most prominently, and with the exception of Peter Riddell’s work (2001), there is hardly any mention of the contribution of the early Malay Muslims themselves to the process of Islamization. Credit is given almost entirely to foreigners, despite the fact that it would be very difficult for them to explain a new religion with complicated doctrines without help from knowledgeable locals. Generally, Malay Muslims are portrayed in those theories as mere recipients of the conventions of Islam, which they have then tried to internalize over the following centuries. Their possible involvement in, and contribution to the process of Islamization was ignored, and they were sometimes typecast as uncivilized and illiterate prior to the coming of Islam, and as ignorant followers thereafter.

The problem here is that such a claim does not correspond with historical facts. History tells us that the Malays were selective in receiving and adopting the South Asian religions, particularly Hinduism. During the era of Indianization, the Malays adopted almost all aspects of life introduced to them by the people from South Asia except the caste system. Thus, if the Malays were able to be very selective in adopting South Asian religion and not merely become blind followers, the argument that the

Malays were uncivilized and illiterate prior to the coming of Islam is, indeed, contestable.

A further case is the introduction of the Jawi script, which has continued to be used in the Malay world until today. The Malays adapted 'brilliantly' (Kratz, 2002: 23) the Arabic script, as modified by the Persians, by adding three more letters, namely *Nga*, *Nya* and *Cha*. They made the Jawi script as their own script. At the time of the introduction, however, they could not decide which spelling conventions to follow: Sanskrit or Arabic. As a result, there is now mixture in the spellings of words either by fully or partially representing all the vowels as in Sanskrit, or by omitting vowels, as in Arabic, thus creating their own unique form of spelling. The extent of the use of Jawi has become obvious in the huge number of Malay manuscripts and its widespread use across the Malay world over centuries.

A further problem with regard to the theories of Islamization of the Malay world is the generalization of a specific theory of Islamization of a particular area in the Malay world, as if it somehow represented a picture of the process of Islamization in the Archipelago as a whole. Limited evidence used to support the long process of Islamization contributed to the problem of the existing theories of Islamization. How could a theory applicable to a particular place be used to explain the process of Islamization in other places in the Malay world? The process of Islamization of each particular area is unique in terms of how and who brought Islam there. It is thus very difficult for us to accept one general theory of Islamization of a particular area in the archipelago to represent the general characteristics of the whole process of Islamization of the Malay world.

Moreover, the use of a limited amount of local evidence documenting the process of Islamization in the Malay world also contributed to the problem of the present theories. Initially, scholars built up their theories on the Islamization of the Malay world, based on eyewitness evidence in the form of travelogues mentioning the presence of Muslims in a particular area, at a particular time (Gibb, 1929) and also on the inscriptions written on tombstones of a Muslim (Ricklefs, 2001: 4), and on descriptions concerning Islam and its teachings (al-Attas, 1970: 23-24).

Some sources have discussed the process of Islamization of their locality, but most of them are in the form of myths (Jones, 1979: 129-158). In his well-known article, Jones concludes that generally, these myths discussed events surrounding the conversion of a ruler to a faith, which would be under the influence of some supernatural elements, and that the Islamization of the Indonesian states was accomplished by the conversion of the existing rulers to Islam, which was then followed by the masses (1979: 153-4). The problem here is whether these sources can be used as evidence in explaining the entire process of the Islamization of the whole of the Malay world. This is because the reliability of these myths most of

which suggest that Islamization in their locality started at the top is indeed questionable. It could be true for some places, but certainly not to the entire archipelago. It is also interesting to know the reasons why these local myths on Islamization of the Malay world were so keen to conclude that Islam began with the *raja* in a community, and only then followed by the peoples.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a comprehensive understanding of the challenges which must be taking into consideration is analyzing the representations of religions other than Islam during the early period of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Such challenges must be taken into consideration before any conclusion be made on the finding of such study. It will later on provide a less speculative answer as to how well early Malay Muslims responded to the arrival of this foreign religion in their life and adopted and adapted it. The great transformation of the religious life of the people of this archipelago from Hindu-Buddhist and pagan beliefs to Islam indicates the success and the wisdom of these early ulamas in understanding the interests of Malay society, and their ability to respond to their needs, whilst providing them with the teachings of Islam in the most suitable manner.

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