

BOOK REVIEW

Islam in Malaysia: An Entwined History by Khairudin Aljunied. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 326 pp.

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Islam in Malaysia is a historical biography befitting the time one finds oneself in. The mainstream discourse of Islam in Malaysia has long been cast in a nationalist paradigm of ethnicity and religion whose selective narrative instructs the ethnic factor as the normative position in approaching Islam. Reminding the contemporary reader that the flourishing of Islam in Malaysia has been forged in a longer duration of time and occupies a wider space than the current nation-state, the author Khairudin Aljunied aims for a broadening of his reader's perspective. Islam, as per his account, has in fact a cosmopolitan root and such a history deserves an audience among the learned and the hopefuls.

The author plots the historical development of Islam in Malaysia along a linear periodisation designed to reflect “the Muslim’s conception of life and the world” (p. 12). There are four periods of Islamisation suggested, gradualist (11th to 13th century), populist (14th to 18th century), reformist (19th century) and triumphalist (20th–21st century). In each of the epochs, multiple agencies and institutions played roles in the shaping of Islam and infusing it into various areas of social and political life. In the populist epoch, the Sufi preachers assimilated Islam into the society’s cultural beliefs in their propagation of Islam. The hybridity of Islam and culture was evident in the literary and ceremonial cultures of the ruling class as well as the popular festivities carried out by the Malay commonfolk. For a long time, such tolerance had allowed for a parallel existence between Islam and *adat* as the preachers were fully cognisant of winning the hearts and minds of ordinary people through the coexistence of what centuries later came to be identified as false innovations and unholy superstitions.

Hence, the 19th and early 20th centuries saw persistent attempts at distancing from such syncretic beliefs and practices initiated by the reform-minded scholars. Aljunied singles out a group of Salafi-centric theologians who were also the founders of *al-Imam* newsmagazine: Sayyid Syeikh al Hadi, Syeikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Sayyid Syeikh Muhammad Aqil. For these reformers, the aspects of *adat* which were not consistent with Islamic rationality should be purged because they were the stumbling blocks to the progress of Malay-Muslims in the modern, changing world.

As the effects from the populist Islamisation centuries earlier solidified and carried through the 19th century, the syncretic Islam was presented in the new era as anachronism – embarrassing legacies that had to be disowned. Aljunied’s appreciative overture to the Salafi-centric reformers seeks to highlight a specific type of propagation different in its content and pedagogy from its traditionalist contemporary. Yet, the reformist thinking was not the dominant thought in the social ideology of Malay society then, and arguably, now. Among the scholarly elites dominated by the traditionalist school of thought, there was little appetite in debating about how much of the *adat* should be reformed. Many felt that *adat* protects Islam within the society amidst the structural and mental effects brought by colonialism, therefore, the hybridity of *adat* and theology had not been viewed as antithetical to one another.

Nevertheless, such a perspective was not given space in the book. Instead, the author’s choice of calling the 19th-century era a “reformist” period looks to have tacitly preferred the modern, rational variant of Islam as a defining juncture in the theory and practice of propagation in the 19th and the early 20th century. However, the *en bloc* characterisation does not sit well with the book’s internal logic, even risks orientalisising traditionalism.

Chapter 1 chronicles the context in which Islam entered into the zone of culture where Hindu-Buddhist-animist influences permeated society. The awareness of historical fact, alas, has not been followed through interpretively. The infusion of Islam into Malay society over a long period of time meant that the religion had sufficiently internalised into the existing mores. As with any religion, Islam includes concerns with social life; it makes or breaks depending on the success in making itself appear unified and coherent in society’s worldview and practice. Therefore, while the 19th-century Middle Eastern-educated reformists were bold trailblazers, their outlook was incoherent with the majority of *ulama* and the Muslim populace who did not see any contradiction between Islam and the way of life they had been accustomed to. Hence, the description of the 19th-century form of Islamisation as “reformist” is, therefore, an exaggeration of an important yet not-so-pervasive phenomenon.

The emphasis on multiple, concurrent forces contributing to the Islamisation in Malaysia is the book's *raison d'être*, and it has been made compelling through the analytical lens delivered by the author's "entwined history" approach. It speaks of the connections between global events and local appropriations; politics of state and everyday lives; scholarly Islam and popular piety; and the interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims. One of the significant ramifications from the entwined approach is the revelation of the unexpected or underappreciated agencies such as women and the non-Muslims.

Historically, women played important roles as rulers, military commanders, merchants and preachers in Aceh, Sulawesi and Pattani. Aljunied also highlights some of the Malay *hikayat* which portrayed women as the main protagonists such as *Hikayat Nabi Sulaiman* and *Hikayat Puteri Balqis*. For the non-Muslims, their contributions to trade in the region have increased the possible avenues for interactions in the cultural, material and social aspects, deepening the ties between varied cultures. Despite the apparent contending forces, it is the book's assertion that the flowing in of the entwined influences into Malaysia more or less proceeded peacefully. While there were conflicts such as wars, occupation and resistance, those did not lead to the dismantling of Islamisation; rather, they contributed to the intensity of proselytisation.

This entwined argument was further elaborated in Chapter 3, where Aljunied wrote about the combination of subtlety and overt strategies in promoting Islam. The Malay rajas entered into alliance with rival Muslim polities through marriages, treaties and pacts. More overt strategies like annexation were also used to expand their kingdoms, at the same time enabling Islam to be promoted in diplomacy and trade networks. Malay rulers had also engaged Muslim scholars for advisory and educational purposes, and for enacting Islamic laws to regulate norms among the population. Hence, the expansion of Islam in a Malay state was closely aligned to the prosperity and security of the ruler in providing the pathways for Islam in his state. While the author shows his preference for this version of peaceful, progressive Islamisation, the reader is left with the impression that Islamisation occurred with minimal conflict. This was explained as a result of a successful incorporation of Islam into the existing status quo and power structure. Although the narrative was accurate, it was also imbalanced.

The presence of conflicts cannot be understated in the long march of Islam in Malaysia and in the region. There were conflicts, either eruptive or imperceptible, built into a system where power and participation were not evenly distributed. Malay *hikayat* like *Sejarah Melayu*, for example, described the arbitrary uses of sanctions, apparently under shariah law, imposed upon the subjects and the

followers by an unjust raja, resulting in revolts and assassinations. For a less dramatic conflict that typically occurred at the level of everyday life, a similar spectre of the imposition of an overwhelming coercive power vis-à-vis the non-compliant subject unfolded. For instance, in the 1920s, as the Islamic Religious Council in Kelantan enforced a rule to address prostitution, malicious rumour-mongering in the community had erupted when the punitive measure was directed against property owners and tenants whose premises were seized for alleged facilitation of the crime. Given the unequal power of either side of the intertwining forces, the presence of conflict should have been emphasised as a norm in every epoch of Islamisation.

The cosmopolitan theme is a significant addition to the perspectives of Islam in Malaysia. The author emphasises the fact of the global connectedness of Malaysia which stretches back to the first period of gradualist Islamisation. Every stage of development was informed and shaped by the global currents, so the gradualist and populist stages of Islamisation were shaped by international trade networks, while subsequent stages of reformism and triumphalism were moulded by the response towards Western colonialism and later, decolonisation and nation-building.

A reader will notice from the outset, that the Islamisation history of Malaysia was viewed from the vantage of the Western sections of the Archipelago. The author justifies his option when stating “The adoption of Islam by Malay states must be seen against the Islamization of the Southeast Asian region as a whole” (p. 38). His fact was correct, yet ironically betrays the theme that he wishes to convey about connections and exchanges. Had the author unpack his regional metaphor, he must have realised that the existing metaphor is inclined to alienate the other side of Malaysia – the states of Sabah and Sarawak. While the book did include Brunei as an exemplar of a creole Sultanate (Chapter 3), also the *bumiputera* politics in Sabah and Sarawak to emphasise the non-Muslim contribution to nation-building, as well as their exclusion from the nationhood discourse (Chapter 7), the silence of Sabah and Sarawak in the rest of the content means that the book misses some of the Islamisation dynamics that can further enhance the cosmopolitan theme.

For instance, Islamisation in Sarawak has also occurred in connection with global and regional forces. The elite Malay class of Perabangan was known to have sent their male children for religious education in Mecca and they had participated in the *halaqas* frequented by Malay-speaking learners and scholars. Upon return, the learned elites occupied their ascriptive role as teachers or traders, and during the

Brooke colonialism, as junior officers in the administration. For these religious-educated elites, serving the colonial states was not insensible but a way to maintain their access to the ruling classes albeit in a changing reality.

As another example, cosmopolitanism in the historical context of Borneo also entails access to the royal states within the island and beyond. In Malay and Melanau villages outside Kuching town, the familial link between the Sayyids in Sarawak and the Pontianak Sultanates had sustained a mobility of religious teachers into Sarawak. Religious teachers were also recruited from Banjarmasin through relations with the Al-Banjari *ulama*, descendants of Sheikh Muhammad Arshad, a former *mufti* in the royal court of Banjarmasin. It is the reviewer's opinion that these examples are grounds to suspect that the kind of Islamic cosmopolitanism rendered by Aljunied is incomplete and may probably have been caused by conventional thinking about geography, whereby the link between Sarawak and Sabah to the regional historiography appear indirect and fragmented.

In this regard, the reviewer finds inspiration in the argument proposed by a veteran in Sarawak history, Sanib Said (2021). Sanib Said proposes a new historical geography of Southeast Asia drawn up on the basis of overlapping histories and affiliative cultures. In Sanib's formulation, Borneo Island occupies the central zone of the region; the Western zone applies to Sumatera and the Malay states of the Peninsula; the northern zone covers Vietnam and Cambodia; the eastern zone comprises Sulu and Visaya; the southern zone consists of Java; the south-eastern zone refers to Sulawesi and Maluku islands. While more analytical works need to be done to justify Sanib's argument, the sheer attempt itself demonstrates a reimagination of how historical reconstruction could benefit from the repositioning of spaces.

While the present reviewer feels that the issues raised here point to the consequence of decision-making undertaken by the author, she believes that Aljunied's book remains one of the very few titles on the shelf that takes issue against the emerging intolerance and illiberalism in the social space. For its courageous innovation and painstaking details of a highly complex and opulent worldliness, *Islam in Malaysia* reignites the reader's imagination of a certain heritage of a past that one has been alienated from in one's post-truth reality.

REFERENCE

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