

**ISLAMIC CIVILIZATION OF MALAY: HISTORICAL POLEMIC  
AND MODERN CHALLENGES  
(THE THOUGHT OF SYED NAQUIB AL-ATTAS)**

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**Abstract**

*This paper has a background of polemics about the role of Islam in Malay history and civilization. The polemic begins with the accusations of some Orientalists who claim that Islam is a religion that does not contribute significantly to the progress of civilization in Malay land. This paper describes the strong denial of Syed Naquib Al-Attas against the accusation. Al-Attas shows evidence that Islam has an important role in advancing the development of Malay society and nation both in aspects of culture, thought, philosophy, science and Malay. This paper also presents the Al-Attas view of the contemporary world of Islam which has experienced backwardness in various aspects. Al-Attas identified various causes of the weakness of the Islamic ummah, especially the Malay people and the solution that must be done. For Al-Attas the progress of Islamic civilization and the Malay world can be done by: building various aspects of Malay Islamic civilization, improving the education system and applying the concept of Islamization of science.*

**Keywords:** *History, Civilization, Malay Islam*

**Introduction**

Civilization is generally defined as the result of human creation, taste, and intention throughout history that is manifested in various works both physical and non-physical. Civilization encompasses a broad dimension of life: politics, economics, social, culture, art, education, and so on. Meanwhile the term "Malay Islam" itself is interpreted as "the condition of Islam as practiced by society in a region known as Malay, or the Malay realm" (Burhanuddin 1998, 154–75). The term Malay Islamic civilization can therefore be interpreted as a result of creativity, taste, and intention of individuals or ethnic Malay communities which gave birth to the pillars of civilization in various fields of life.

The term "Malay Islamic civilization", according to Jajat Burhanudin (1998, 154), is a term that has only appeared in Islamic intellectual works in recent times. This term has never been used in previous historical works, especially works written by orientalist in the colonial period. The term "Malay Islam" which is used without the word "civilization" by Orientalists is even negative, namely the condition of Islam that is not rooted in the traditions of local communities and their customs. According to Villiam Roff, Orientalists deliberately obscured the role of Islam as a religion that inspired the emergence of civilization and even consciously made efforts to minimize the influence of Islam in Southeast Asian societies (Roff 1985, 7–34). This view is in line with the opinions of Azyumardi Azra (1994, 108–15) and John Bowen (1995, 69–85) who see the bias and subjectivity in orientalist perceptions of the role of Islam in Southeast Asia, including in the Malay world.

What was written by the experts above is in line with the concerns of Syed Naquib Al-Attas who saw that Orientalists had denied the role of Islam as a religion that contributed to

Malay civilization. This article will describe Naquib Alatas's rebuttal in the view of the Orientalists. Allegations by Orientalists who claim that Islam does not play a role in advancing society, nation, culture, philosophy, and Malay are tried by the Al-Attas to refute by showing historical and academic evidence. This article also explains Al-Attas's views on the causes of the weakness of Muslims, especially the Malay people, and the solution to these problems through efforts to build Malay Islamic civilization, improve the education system and Islamization of science.

### **Biography of Syed Naquib Al-Attas**

Al-Attas biography was revealed by his closest student, Wan Mohammad Wan Daud, at the Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) (W. M. N. W. Daud 2003). As written by Wan Daud, al-Attas's full name is Syed Muhammad Naquib ibn Ali ibn Abdullah bin Muhsin ibn Muhammad al-Attas. He was born on September 5, 1931 in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. His family's official genealogy found in his personal collection shows that he was the 37th descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (David 1998: 2). His father was named Syed Ali Putra of Abdullah ibn Muhsin ibn Muhammad Al-Attas. Grandfather Syed Muhammad Naquib is one of the most influential guardians in Indonesia and the Arab country. His grandmother Ruqayah Hanum was an aristocratic Turkish woman who married Ungku Abdul Majid, the younger brother of Sultan Abu Bakar Johor (w. 1895) who was married to the younger brother of Ruqayah Hanum, Khadijah, who later became Queen of Johor. After I Abdul Majid died, Ruqayah remarried Syed Abdullah Al Attas and was blessed with a child named Syed Ali Attas (Muhammad Naquib's father) (W. M. N. W. Daud 2003, 61). While his mother was named Syarifah Ragan Al-Aydarus, who was still a descendant of the relatives of Sundanese kings Sukapura, Bogor Java (Thoyib and Darahmu'in 1999, 271). One of Muhammad's ancestors, Muhammad Naquib, was Syed Muhammad Al-Aydarus. Where he was the teacher and spiritual guide of Syed Abu Hafs Umar ba Syaiban of Hadramaut, and who delivered Nur Al-Din Ar-Raniri, one of the leading scholars in the Malay world, to the Rifa'iyah order (W. M. N. W. Daud 2003, 45).

Al-Attas education began in Sukabumi, West Java (Indonesia) and Johor Baru (Malaysia). Syed Muhammad's formal educational background Naquib Al-Attas began when he was 5 years old, while in Johor Baru, he lived together and under the tutelage of his father's brother Encik Ahmad, then with Ibu Azizah until the second world war broke out. In 1936-1941, he studied at Ngee Neng English Premary Schoool in Johor Baru. In the Japanese colonial era, he returned to West Java and settled there for 4 years. He studied religion and Arabic at Al-Urwatul Wutsqa Madrasah in Sukabumi, West Java in 1942-1945. In 1946 he returned to Johor Baru and lived with his father's brother Engku Abdul Aziz (then Johor's Minister of State), then with Datuk Onn who later also became Johor's Chief Minister (Dato Onn was the first UMNO President). In 1946, Al-Attas continued his studies at Bukit Zahrah School and so on at English College Johor Baru in 1946-1949. Later, he accompanied the army (1952-1955) to the rank of Lieutenant. However, due to his lack of interest he finally left the army and continued his studies at the University of Malaya in 1957-1959, then continued his studies at Mc Gill University, Montreal, Canada, and received an M.A. Not long after, he continued his studies in the postgraduate program at the University of London in 1963-1964 until he received his Ph.D. D (W. M. N. W. Daud 2003, 46).

While still taking a bachelor program at the University of Malaya, Al-Attas had written two books. The first book is titled "*Rangkaian Rubaiyat.*" This book is one of the first literary works printed by the Language and Library Council, Kuala Lumpur, in 1959. The second book

which is now a classic work is *"Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced among the Malays"*, which was published by the Malaysian sociology research institute in 1963. This book is so valuable that the Canadian government through the "Canada Counsel Fellowship" gave him a scholarship to study at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal founded by Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Finally Al-Attas continued his studies to obtain an M.A. degree from the campus. He graduated in 1962, with a thesis entitled *"Raniri and the Wujudiyyah of 17th Century Aceh."* Then he went on to Ph.D University of London in England, focusing on studies on natural theology and metaphysics. It was at this university that al-Attas became acquainted with several well-known scholars such as Sir Hamilton Gibb (England), Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan), Toshihiko Izutsu (Japan), and Sayyed Hossein Nashr (Iran) (W. M. N. W. Daud 1998, 49).

Al-Attas has many academic works as a legacy for the Islamic world, namely:

1. (1969) *Raniri and the Wujudiyyah of the 17th Century Aceh* (Kuala Lumpur: Monographs of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society).
2. (1970) *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press).
3. (1970) *The Correct Date of the Terengganu Inscription*, Kuala Lumpur Museum Department.
4. (1972) *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu*
5. (1975) *Comments on the Re-Examination of Al-Raniri's Hujjat au'l Siddiq: A Refutation*, Kuala Lumpur Museum Department.
6. (1978) *Islam and Secularism*
7. (1988) *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqa'id of al-Nasafi*
8. (1995) *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*
9. (2001) *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)).
10. (2011) *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press) (W. M. N. W. Daud 2003).

### **The Antithesis of Al-Attas against Western Orientalist Allegations**

Syed Naquib Al-Attas was among the few figures who consistently rejected the allegations of Western thinkers especially Dutch Orientalists when discussing the links between Islam and Malays. In one of his writings entitled 'Islam in Malay History and Culture', a work he wrote coincided with his appointment as Professor of Malay Literature at the Kebangsaan Malaysia University UKM on January 24, 1973, Al-Attas denied the biggest accusation he considered painful. The accusation was made by Dutch historians, namely Van Leur and Snouck Hugronje, who considered that Islam was a negative factor in the development process of the Malay world (Denisova 2011, 2). In the full sentence he said, "There is no need to be surprised that Islam in the Malay realm has not been fully studied. During the European occupation that lasted for 350 years, the colonial government always tried to disguise Islam and Muslims, by characterizing Muslims as the most backward class of people (Al-Attas 2011).

Al-Attas' defense of these accusations is not only limited to giving strong reasons for the wrongful accusations, but also providing historical facts and refuting some historical data

about the arrival of Islam in the Malay land that they have revealed. In his monograph entitled 'Islam in the History of Malay Culture', he wrote, "Van Leur's final decision like the sentence he has imposed on Islam is that Islam does not bring anything, fundamental change and does not carry a higher noble than what is available is there. The innate thoughts of Dutch scholars have indeed hinted at the tendency towards minimizing Islam and its role in the history of the archipelago and even in reality" (Al-Attas 1972). This sentence clearly shows that Al-Attas indicated the intentions of Dutch scholars to play down the role of Islam in Malay history and culture, something that should not be done by a scientist.

Al-Attas stated the accusations, "We must see the arrival of Islam in the Indonesian Malay Archipelago as characterizing the new age in its history, as a firm slogan that brings rational knowledge to the knowledge and affirms a system of people based on individuals, justice and the glory of human personality" (Al-Attas 1972). So it is not true the Orientalists' accusations about the absence of Islam's contribution to Malay civilization. It is precisely Islam that characterizes the high development of civilization, thought and height of language in the Indonesian Malay archipelago. Al-Attas in his book also shows evidence that from the hands of Islamic scholars it was the birth of literature, culture, writing, philosophy. The works were inspired by Islamic teachings, something that had not been brought before by civilization.

Regarding the language which is the identity of a nation and also determines the development of a nation's civilization, Al-Attas affirms:

One of the most important new events concerning culture, which is directly driven by the historical process of Islamic culture, is the spread of Malay as the language of instruction, not only in epic literature and romance, but more important is a discussion of philosophy. The use of Malay as a literary language of Islamic philosophy in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago adds and elevates its vocabulary and special terms and is one of the main factors that upholds it to rank a literary language that is rational, which is finally empowered and able to overthrow the sovereignty of Javanese as a language Malay-Indonesian literary (Al-Attas 1972).

The Al-Attas statement above confirms that Islam is the one who contributed and raised the Malay language so that it was recognized and used as the language of instruction in the archipelago. The scholars have made great contributions for writing manuscripts, monographs and Islamic studies in Malay. Their Malay language is placed in a higher level position so that it is appropriate to be used as a language that connects people, tribes and races. Malay became more egalitarian than Javanese, which was only used only in the Javanese court and the Java Islands.

Furthermore Al-Attas denied the history of the entry of Islam in the archipelago by refuting the Theory of Gujarat Snouck Hurgronje. Al Attas stated that before the seventeenth century all relevant Islamic literature did not record any writers from India. Authors who are considered by the West as Indians are of Arab or Persian origin, even what is called Persian origin turns out to be of Arabic origin, both from ethnic and cultural aspects. The names and titles of the first Islamic bearers to the archipelago showed that they were Arabs or Arab-Persians. It was admitted that half of them came through India, but half came directly from Arabia, Persia, China, Asia Minor, and Maghrib (Morocco). However, it is important that their religious understanding is a notion that developed in the Middle East at the time, not one that developed in India. For example, the style of the letters, the name of the title, the days of the week, the way of reciting the Koran, all of which express the Arabic definitions (Al-Attas 1972).

Al-Attas' statement about the historical facts of carrying Islam to the archipelago above is in line with Buya Hamka's opinion which states that Western writers made a very systematic effort to eliminate the beliefs of Malay countries about intimate spiritual relations between them and Arab land as the main source Islam in Indonesia in studying religion. In Hamka's view, Muslims in Indonesia get Islam from the first people (Arabs), not just trade. The argument material used as Hamka's reference material is local Indonesian sources and Arabic sources. According to him, the initial motivation for the arrival of Arabs was not based on economic values, but was motivated by the motivation of the spirit of the spread of Islam. In Hamka's view, the trade route between Indonesia and Arabia had been going on long before the year of the dead (Hamka 1997).

### **Al-Attas Thought About Modern Malay Islamic Civilization**

Naquib Al-Attas is not only concerned with aspects of the history of the Malay world, but he is one of the few Islamic leaders who has great attention to the condition of the Islamic ummah in the modern era. His thoughts were poured out on how to improve the deterioration of the Islamic Ummah so that it became a people who were taken into account in world civilization. He identified the problems of the ummah by revealing the weaknesses and diseases suffered by Muslims as the cause. Wan Daud stated, "The establishment of al-Attas regarding the problems of the ummah was quite clear since the 70s. In his letter of response to the Islamic Secretariat in Jeddah, he stated that the problems stemming from economic, scientific, and technological setbacks were only something external, a reflection of the fundamental problem of science (M. N. W. Daud 2005, 268). This means that the cause of weakness and the withdrawal of Muslims according to Al-Attas is due to the weak mastery of science which all have a domino effect on the mastery of other fields.

Based on his analysis of the main causes of the backwardness of Muslims, Al-Attas then expressed his ideas as an effort to build Malay Islamic civilization. Al-Attas's great contribution is: first, that the most important problem faced by Muslims today is the problem of science; second, modern science is not neutral because it is influenced by religious, cultural, and philosophical views, which reflect Western human consciousness and experience; and third, Muslims, therefore, need to Islamize contemporary science by Islamizing linguistic symbols about nature and truth (M. N. W. Daud 2005, 259).

In his book *Historical Fact and Fiction* (2011) Al-Attas revealed his thoughts which also contributed to the concept of Islamization of science. In his view Islamization is not a simple matter, Islamization is how to change the "worldview of Muslims from Western influences" and provide a correct understanding of the Islamic worldview which includes the concepts of divinity, religion, science, revelation, humanity, the Prophet, language, and others. This Islamization needs a process (Islamization is process). The process here is 'time process', that Islamization takes a long time not for a moment (M. N. W. Daud 2005, 259).

The concept of Al-Attas thinking about the importance of Islamizing knowledge is a necessity in the effort to build civilization. Ijtihad's thinking emphasizes the development of civilization must be done by reforming the concept of science. According to him this is the most important work whose reform must be carried out through the education process. For Al-Attas the most relevant concept of education is the concept of ta'dib, which is education which aims to form civilized human beings through the integration of the concepts of science *fardhu a'in* and *fardlu kifayah* (M. N. W. Daud 2005, 260).

In another section Al-Attas said that the process of Islamization of the Malay realm had gone through two phases: the period before Hamzah Fansuri was the first phase, in which the

role of jurisprudence was very dominant in practicing Islam. And the second period after Hamzah Fansuri was marked by the influence of Sufism and Kalam (Daud, 2005: 260-261). The division of this phase actually does not mean to separate the two fields of science but merely shows the process of maturity in religion. Al-Attas's pure understanding of Sufism led him to conclude that Sufism's philosophy was an expression of the process of Islamization. This thesis contradicts the Izutsu thesis which considers metaphysics and Sufi ontology to be too free and arbitrary (M. N. W. Daud 2005, 283).

What we can understand from al-Attas's thought above is the message that we see that the success of Islamization may not be enjoyed perfectly now or in a short time, but it requires a considerable amount of time, it can even be one hundred, two hundred, or six hundred years will come. However, Islamization must continue to be rolled out and understood to the people from generation to generation and not to be interrupted, so that it will become an ongoing process. Therefore the task of scientists, educators and educational institutions is to transmit the sciences which have undergone this process of Islamization from generation to generation. This is the process we can do and enjoy. As for the results we are left to God.

### **Conclusion**

The important role of Islam in Malay history and civilization has become a polemic because it is triggered by the subjective and tendentious attitudes of Western orientalist. This kind of polemic will probably continue. But as an honest scientist, the discontinuation of data and facts must always be maintained. Likewise, scientific honesty in writing historical data and facts is also a must. Scientists such as Naquib Al-Attas flatly reject the subjective view and efforts of Western scholars to downplay the role of Islam in Malay history and civilization in the archipelago. He certainly will not easily risk his big name if he reveals his theories and thoughts based solely on assumptions without real force and analysis. Al-Attas shows historical and academic evidence that Islam plays an important role in building the pillars of the Malay paradigm. The denial of Western orientalist theories was conveyed by Al-Attas certainly not because of a tribal fanaticism, but was driven by scientific honesty and an attitude of his love for religion. This is what makes Al-Attas always at the forefront of defending these allegations.

Al-Attas is not only concerned with historical facts in Malay Islamic civilization, but also concerned with the backwardness of Muslims in general and Muslim societies in the Malay world in particular. Therefore he offered the concept of how the strategy of building Islamic civilization was able to catch up with other civilizations. Al-Attas believes that the Islamization of science and sustainable education reform are the answer. According to him, only with knowledge that is integrated with Islamic values alone will give birth to a highly civilized and advanced Islamic ummah.

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