

# ROLE OF EDUCATION IN UNVEILING THE ISLAMIC HERITAGE OF MALAYSIA: A DE-ORIENTALIZED PROCESS

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## Abstract

Education is a powerful tool to combat intellectual poverty. Back in time, in Europe, education was thought to be a religious agenda to indoctrinate Europeans during the papacy age of Europe, during which the Dark Ages were generally limited to the clergy and the elite. It turns out that education became an important aspect of the process of developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills for Europeans. Ironically, during the Malaysian colonial period, the British colony marked Eurocentric thinking, which somehow have left a significant influence and carries the Western Orientalism narrative. Besides, there are many highly historical artefacts and manuscripts kept in their museums. This paper intends to bring about the prospect of de-westernising and de-orientalizing aspects through education. Education is the way to enlighten locals to appreciate and value their own heritage. The result of the paper finds that there are many local Islamic heritages that are left abandoned. The government has not done so much to preserve them as important values for the country.

**Keywords:** Heritage, Orientalism, Islam

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## Introduction

The origins of Islam can be traced back 1400 years to the desert plains of Mecca (Safi al-Rahman, 2007). In comparison to Christianity and Judaism, Islam was arguably the least known religion at the time. Indeed, in the early days of this period, Europeans referred to Muslims as Saracens. Such title was inspired by Sarah's curse on Ishmael (Coeli Fitzpatrick, Adam Hani Walker, 2014).

According to Nanji (1997) the term gradually became obsolete following the rise of Peter the Venerable, who sought assistance from Robert Ketton to translate the Quran. The work of Robert of Ketton, *Les Mahumet Pseudoprophete* (Law of the False Prophet Muhammad), was recognised as the first Latin translation in the world. Peter of Venerable, who played an important role behind this work, was at first trying to understand Islam from their sacred scripture, the Quran (Rodinson, 1974). It turns out that the misleading information and understanding had long been occurred during the cradle of Islamic history.

Back in time, the only source on which Europeans relied to understand Islam and Muslims was John of Damascus (675-749 CE) (Sardar, 1999). He was a Christian monk and priest. Lived and was educated in the very centre of the Umayyad Caliphate. He left his pastoral post in 706 CE and became a monk at the Jerusalem monastery. He then started to launch a series of attack against the Caliphate ever since, until he died in 749 CE (Oladele, 2014).

Lenzerini (2011) heritage is as features, treasures, and belongings to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages, or buildings that were created in the past and still have historical importance for society. It also reflects the identity of certain people. In other words, heritage is the range of ancient material that gives high value to contemporary educational activities such as school and university visitation programmes. Somehow, we can learn from the past (Lenzerini, 2011).

According to Kurin (2004) heritage includes, but is much more than, preserving, excavating, displaying, or restoring a collection of old things. Intangible heritage means practise, representation, expressions, knowledge, skill, and culture associated therewith by communities, groups, and individuals. This type of heritage is transmitted from generation to generation. Munjeri (2004) added that tangible heritage means historical structures that include buildings, historical places, monuments, and artefacts that are considered worthy of preservation for the future. That also includes archaeology sites, architecture, science, and technology from the past.

In short, heritage, whether tangible or intangible, is as important as historical buildings and archaeological sites.

### **Importance Preserving Heritage**

As mentioned earlier, heritage is a contemporary activity that draws its inspiration from the past. Hence, as far as heritage is concerned, it can be an element for political recognition, a medium for intercultural dialogue, a means of ethical reflection, and the potential basis for local economic development. It is simultaneously local and particular on the global stage. Heritage is an essential part of the present we live in, and it demonstrates a strong willingness to build the future generation.

A heritage site is considered the physical component of an area or a group of people's identity. Some cultural heritages come from architecture built in strategic positions and locations. Their use shows us their unique stories and the history of the area around them. The architectural monuments have stories about how they were built.

Heritage is an important factor in enriching the local community of a country and enabling the young and future generations to participate in their cultural roots. It would also be time tunnel memorabilia observing conflicts, reconciliation, peace, and development. Without it, the incoming generation will not be able to understand the story behind their nation. Heritage is a source of community and allows people to learn from the past. The buildings have been passed down from generation to generation, each doing their best to preserve them. They serve as a reminder to everyone living in that area. This comes from a passage in Surah al-Araf: 47.

*"Remember when He made you successors after 'Ad and established you in the land—and you built palaces on its plains and carved homes into mountains. So remember Allah's favours, and do not go about spreading corruption in the land."*

This passage makes no mistake about how buildings and sites could be the object of lessons and learning.

### Importance of Preserving Heritage In The Light Of Al-Quran

Islam emphasises the importance of lessons. There are many verses in the Quran that Allah says about lessons that could be learned from annihilated people of the past as follows:

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|----|---|--|
| 1. | Many generations we have annihilated before you when they transgressed. Their messengers went to them with clear proofs, but they refused to believe. We thus requite the guilty people. (Yunus: 13)  | Transgressed people of the past              |
| 2. | Iram, who had lofty pillars unmatched in any other land. (Al-Fajr: 7-8)   | Allah mentions building in the past          |
| 3. | Have they not travelled throughout the land to see what was the end of those before them? Allah annihilated them, and a similar fate awaits the disbelievers. (Muhamad: 10)   | Quran that mention travelling and reflecting |
| 4. | We only sent before you 'O Prophet' men inspired by Us from among the people of each society. Have the deniers not travelled through the land to see what was the end of those 'destroyed' before them? And surely the 'eternal' Home of the Hereafter is far better for those mindful 'of Allah'. Will you not then understand? (Yusuf: 109)               |  |
| 5. | He is the One Who smoothed out the earth for you, so move about in its regions and eat from His provisions. And to Him is the resurrection 'of all'. (Al-Mulk: 15)  |  |
| 6. | Say, O Prophet, "Travel throughout the land and see the fate of the wicked." (Al-Naml: 69)  |  |
| 7. | Similar situations came to pass before you, so travel throughout the land and see the fate of the deniers. (Ali Imran: 137)   |  |
| 8. | Have they not travelled throughout the land to see what was the end of those destroyed before them? They were far superior in might; they cultivated the land and developed it more than these Meccans ever have. Their messengers came to them with clear proofs. Allah would have never wronged them, but it was they who wronged themselves. (Al-Rum: 9) |  |
| 9. | Say, O Prophet, "Travel throughout the land and see what was the end of those destroyed before you—most of them were polytheists. (Al-Rum: 42)  |  |

From this point of view, the Quran clearly offers the best reference for lessons through the eye of heritage. While the Quran carries lessons for humankind from the past stories of prophets, annihilated people, ancient buildings, and others, modern technology and intellectuals should then materialise in academic publications and preserve them as heritage sites for future generations. This coexistence (Baudouin Dupret, Clémentine Gutron, 2016) creates the messages of the Quran and lessons from it more visible to society. Surely, the lessons of al-Quran are powerful for human beings, but with combined technology, al-Quran events are more than 1400 years old in Islamic age.

Al-Quran, as it is, gives a path for humans to choose the right path over the wrong ones. It also emphasises doing good and teaching people to live in peace and harmony. In contrast, in the view of Rodinson (1974) most orientalist seem to be propagating the Quran as a source of intolerance.

Among the several widespread misconceptions about Islam could be seen as (Dawood 2014) defines them in the following verse:

*"Kill them wherever you find them."*

Al-Baqarah: 191

It turns out, most misunderstandings are justified by this passage, which describes the characterization of religious intolerance in the Quran. Unfortunately, this perception is not true when we look at the context of the passage *Asbab Nuzul* (al-Bawdawi, 1998). This passage was revealed after the incident that took place at Hudaibiyah when the Holy Prophet decided on a journey to Makkah to perform the pilgrimage along with his companions. On the eve of this journey, some companions started to worry about the disbelievers who could not be trusted in a peace treaty (Kathir, 2000). If they choose to be aggressive, as they did a year ago, what option are they going to take? Thereupon, the words used in the present event gave them permission to meet the challenge of their aggression and kill them where they found them. And if they could, it was permissible for them to drive the disbelievers out from where they had driven the believers out.

One could suppose that allowing the Quran to speak for itself via our past would undoubtedly dispel Western preconceptions about Muslims. Because historical preservation is about tracing the events of the past, only live items on the ground can be used to grasp the story line.

### **Reclaiming Islamic Heritage From The Hand Of Orientalist?**

The term orientalism refers to a group of Western scholarly works and methods to understand the Eastern world through the lens of Western perception. In summary, Kapp (1980) points out that orientalism might be understood as:

- 1) Western scholars who teach, write, or perform a series of research works concerning Eastern, they are anthropologists, sociologists, and/or philologists.

2) Orientalism is a Western discipline to dominate, restructure, and control Eastern societies. Their interest is to create, teach, govern, and revise the arguments of the East on the subject of religion accordingly.

Long before the rise of American dominion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Euro-centric Orientalists were a tool or mediator for colonial powers to expand their empire (Blaut, 1992). For instance, Christian Snouck Hurgronje was among the examples whereby the Dutch Colonial Government had to seek his supervision to smooth the Dutch East Indies Army's gain of control over the Sultanate of Aceh Army (McFate, 2019).

Orientalism started to highlight their interests in manuscript study, for this subject was regarded as highly valuable material for those intending to conduct studies and research in the East (McFate, 2019). According to (Mills, 2023) it was Edward Pococke (1604–1691 CE) who transformed the tide of orientalism from merely religious interest to Eastern or Arabic literature and philological study. Edward Pococke spent his entire Orientalism magnum opus learning the Oriental languages, both written and spoken Arabic. Edward Pococke is known to have an abundance of Arabic manuscripts and to have paid so much attention to studying them. And this included historiography, translations, philology, poetry, literary letters, philosophy, astronomy, and medicine (Holt, 1952).

Manuscript study appeared to have such significant value in the 18th and 19th centuries that a book dedicated to locating Arabic manuscripts in the world was published. According to (Macdonald 1901) this encyclopaedia, a work of German orientalist Carl Brockelmann (1868–1956), was once considered the most complete mapping book for locating Arabic manuscripts.

This did not exclude the Malays Archipelago. Since the Malay world became the subject of the attraction of Western power 15 centuries ago, the element of Orientalism was among them (Moy, 1975) One of the early European accounts regarding the Malay kingship can be seen in the account of the English Captain Alexander Hamilton, who came to visit Sultan Mahmud II of Johor (1675–1699), where he witnessed the atrocities of the Sultan towards his subjects. Mr. Hamilton concluded that the Sultan was a *Sodomite* and had taken many of his noblemen to fulfil his desire. Furthermore, the Sultan was depicted as having executed his servants out of anything (Barnard, 2016).

Another example came from an article of (Milner, 1981), states that a colonial officer J.M. Gullick who dismissed a widespread view that Islam in Malays had not established itself to any significant extent in the Malay kingdom as a state religion. Instead, religious men and chaplains were more bound to the Sultan's desire and the Malay chieftain. He then reiterated that there was neither *Kadi* nor Islamic jurisprudence until the British came to protectorate power in the Malay Peninsula. (Milner 1981) Apart from that, Malay Annals such as *Merong Mahawangsa*, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, *Sijarah Malayu*, and others have ever since been a magnet for orientalists to study them (Othman, 2011).

Western studies of Malay world achieved to the extent of grabbing the opportunity to "colonise" religious sites and manuscript documents. Undoubtedly, orientalism was a product of imperialism. There were many unpublished manuscripts, statutes, and folk weapons brought from colonised lands to Europe (Nadzirin, 2021). In fact, most of the artefacts are being exhibited in their library and museum. Some manuscripts, such as *Kitab Perintah*

*Pawang, Undang-Undang Raja Melaka, Hikayat Raja Babi, Hikayat Hang Tuah, and Hikayat Indera Putera*, that were lost to colonialism are kept in the Museum of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

Great British scholar-collectors who served colony governments in Malaya expressed their intention to gain local manuscripts. According to (Al-Attas 1984), the earliest recorded manuscript to be acquired by orientalist was the "Trengganu Inscription," dated February 22, 1303 CE.

This was followed by the misinterpretation of those western scholars towards Muslims in the Malay world. The prejudices towards the East and stereotyping are two of the essential features of Orientalism. Thus, the stereotype frequently portrays Malay as lazy, stubborn, dumb, and non-progressive (Rahman, M. F. A., Razak, M. I. A., Lokman, M. A. A., Mustafar, M. Z., Shukor, K. A., & Nason, 2022). Frank Swettenham, a colonial officer in Malaya, once stated that when Raja Muda Abdullah of Perak asked the British to intervene in Perak State affairs to crush rebellion in the state, (Swettenham, 1880) was reported to say that the British taught the Raja Muda how to govern the country. This underlines the idea of the supremacy of Western civilization through Euro-centric orientalist. Swettenham attributed the Islamic Jurisprudence to merely being suitable for the Middle East. Implementing Syariah Jurisprudence will reflect backwardness and reject modernity, while the Western system that offers secularism is far better for the development of the Malay.

Another aspect of Orientalism that sparks reaction is the quest for Malay ancestral origin. The question of where Malay originated? Did the Malay have a real indigenous of Nusantara? In the pre-independent nation of the Malay Archipelago and in the absence of academic institutions, it was orientalist who took charge of studying the question of the mentioned quest.

In the eyes of western orientalist, the Malay is just an 'invented nation' that has been created since the 18th century (Rameez, 2015). The idea of a theory of migration somehow became a narrative for Western scholars. Western discourse about the origin of Malay can be traced to the work of Professor Johan Hendrik Kern (1833–1917 CE). He laid the foundation of the Malay-Polynesian study, based on which he concluded Oceanic race and language constituted a group of people ranging from Cambodia to Fijian Island. He also suggested that the Malay-Polynesian ancestor was a seafarer who came from Tonkin (Uli Kozok, Eric van Reijn, 2010).

The most striking finding that seems controversial probably came from Professor R.V.H. Geldern (1885–1968), when he asserts that there were two waves of Malay migrations from Yunnan, Southeast China, to Southeast Asia (Tweedie, 1949). The first wave, known as the early or proto-Malays, arrived during the late Stone Age, from 8,000 BC to 10,000 BC. The later Malays, or Deutero-Malays, were more civilised. They settled in the valleys and river mouths and drove the early inhabitants into the jungle (Braddell, 1951). According to Mohamed Anwar Omar Din, the term "deutero" was named after the biblical chapter of Deuteronomy, which reflects the mass migration of Israelites. And surprisingly, R.V.H. Geldern was a Jewish scholar who said to be conducting research from Europe and never present in Southeast Asia (Din, 2011). And that he only relied on baseless evidence and arguments. Yet, this theory is still accepted to this day.

From this point of view, whether we are aware of it or not, some Orientalism-misleading propaganda is somehow accepted by post-colonial leaders in Malaysia. The stigma is continuously used as a political tool to represent equality within local issues. For example, a delegate from the Malaysian political party once said that the Malay is also migrant (which refers as *pendatang*), referring to their ancestral Indonesia, and that the Malay does not deserve indigenous status and all its privileges.

### **Way Forward**

Looking at the above discussion, one could give a new perspective and fresh narrative of heritage. Researchers in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, history, and all academia must take part in changing the landscape of Islamic heritage. The only answer to counter-researching how orientalism works should then be started now.

The process of reclaiming our heritage may seem like nothing is happening, or, at least, our efforts to do so are progressing slowly. In Perak, for example, many abandoned historical sites have yet to be thoroughly documented. When did Islam come to Perak? Who was responsible for bringing Islam to Perak? What was the first Islamic building (mosque, etc.) in Perak? Had that Shariah law been implemented in the pre-colonial era of Perak? What was Islamic institutional law in pre-colonial Perak? Who were the muftis of Perak who served on the religious council of Perak?

It is disheartening to see that some historical sites have been abandoned. For example, a house that belongs to Datuk Maharajalela of Perak has been left without further conservation. Madrasah Bumbung Lima, better known as Surau Latifah, located in Pasir Salak, which is regarded as the oldest surau in Perak, was left rotten to the ground before the community decided to voice out their complaints in the media, which finally attracted state government attention to rebuild the surau. Masjid Raja, located in Lenggong, is said to be one of the oldest mosques in Malaysia. It is believed that the mosque was built in 1539 CE in conjunction with the coronation of Sultan Muzaffar I during his reign in Perak.

These questions should have been studied and documented in a book. Perhaps we should look into a "Malaysian Carl Brockelmann" that not only document all artefacts but maps the exact location where the event took place. Hence, an encyclopaedia of Malaysian Islamic heritage is a must.

### **Conclusion**

The approach pointed out that Western portrayals of Islam and its generation certainly showed a prejudice point where most diffusions deviated from local or Malay civilization. Therefore, we must take part in re-looking into it. We must then localise our own heritage instead of relying so much on the Orientalism point of view. We must transform the Eurocentric narrative into an even more local perspective.

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