Finding Malay Islamic Identity through Manuscripts: A Textual Criticism of *Bahr Al-Lahut*

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Abstract

Identity often divides people, but at the same time it is a decisive factor of collective solidarity. Being Malay assumes a long history pertaining to social, cultural and political construction. By means of textual criticism of *Bahr al-Lahut*, it can be observed that the identity offered in *Bahr al-Lahut* can be understood as an alternative to the established concept of identity. While Malay is identical with Muslim, cosmopolitan Islam is a response to the diversity of identity.

Keywords: Identity, textual criticism, Malay, cosmopolitan

1. Introduction

Ibn Khaldun in his *magnum opus*, *Muqaddimah*, argues that the strong will be followed by the weak. It turns out to be true that a great number of individuals as well as groups are attracted and thus follow the cultural expressions of the West in many ways such as dress, knowledge and civility. The reliability of foreign civilisation presented in printed as well as electronic media has placed the Other in a marginalised position. Thus progression is always identical with West modern life style.

No exception is the Malay Islamic world. Foreign influences have absorbed into every aspect of life since electronic media such as television and the Internet have changed hours of human activities. Islam, which has its key hours such as five times of obligatory daily prayers, is forced to follow television programmes. Malay Muslims often prioritise watching "the show" over following "guidance". Awareness of bringing Malay life style to a simple fashion often goes in vain since the style offered to them has no any reliable reference.

Modern media have become a catalyst for the growing interest in gaining fast and immediate information. Reading book culture has gradually faded and become marginalised even by students. This is ironic since the Malay world has a long history of writing and authorship long before Europe has been a developed nation. Therefore, contemporary Malay identity refers more to life styles as presented in mass media. Ironically, custom as a signifier is exposed only in cultural performances, being merely tourism consumption.

Many Malay people have lost their historical consciousness. In its victory years, Malay identity was expressed in the respect for customs and intellectualism through publications, either in Arabic or in Malay-Arabic called *pegon* or *Jawi*. This victory was and is becoming faded, since their self-confidence of making customs part of their identity has decreased.

This article is devoted to tracing Malay identity through a manuscript which up to the present has not been considered as a guide for Malay Islamic intellectual tradition, and to examining its content in order to see closely how early Malay scholars formulated their conception of becoming human. Approximately in the twelfth century, Abdullah 'Arif wrote an important manuscript entitled *Bahr al-Lahut* (The Sea of Divinity). This article is, therefore, meant to investigate this manuscript.

2. An Early Malay Manuscript

I found this *Bahr al-Lahut* manuscript from my professor investigating its philosophical content. The manuscript copy found in Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia looks blurred, meaning that it is old. Besides, I got seven copies of the manuscripts in various versions from Leiden University Library.i

It turns out to be clear as to who is the author of *Bahr al-Lahut*. This can be found in the account of Hawash Abdullah in his *Ilmu Tasawuf dan Tokoh-Tokohnya di Nusantara*. Abdullah suggests that it was the reference of the book *Risalah Seminar Sejarah Masuknya Islam Ke-Indonesia* in which in page 191 it was stated, "In the book *De Hollander* the name Johan Syah was mentioned as the first founder of Islam in Aceh, and came from outside. Several accounts say that according to a story from us, an Arab preacher named Abdullah Arif had begun the preaching in 1177 M."ii This quotation is from T. W. Arnold, professor of Arabic at the University of London, in his *The Preaching of Islam*, on "The Spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago." He says as follows:

> *Tradition represents as having been introduced into Sumatra from Arabia.*
> *But there is no sound historical basis for such a belief, and all the*
> *evidence seems to point to India as the source from which the people of*
> *Sumatra derived their knowledge of the new faith. Active commercial*

relations had existed for centuries between India and the Malay Archipelago, and the first missionaries to Sumatra were probably Indian traders.iii

There is, however, no historical record of their labours, and the Malay chronicles ascribe the honour of being the first missionary to Atjeh, in the north-west of Sumatera, to an Arab named 'Abd Allah Arif, who said to have visited the island about the middle of the twelfth century; one of his disciples, Burhan al-Din, is said to have carried the knowledge of the faith down the west coast as far as Priaman.iv

In tracing the authorship of this manuscript such Malay scholars who studied it as Mahyuddin Hj Yahayav dan Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullahvi referred to Wan Saghir Wan Abdullah.vii No new more sound findings can be found in order to convince readers on the biography of Abdullah Arif. Due to the limited account of the manuscript, a comprehensive study of it is difficult to do. It is difficult, for instance, to use a hermeneutic approach to understand historical records of an author's life. In this article I will study this manuscript by means of textual criticism by taking its immediate context, the text itself, and far context, into consideration, in order to understand history, thought, and other themes contained in the manuscript.

In the Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia version of the manuscript we can find its Malay *Jawi* translation (in Arabic script). Some words were taken from local dialects in the archipelago, such as وسورتكن (rendered from the Arabic word يكتب)viii.

It can be concluded that Malay is open to any foreign words in he archipelago. In addition, Sanskrit words such as *neraka*, *surga*, *bahasa*, were also absorbed into Malay and suited to Malay *weltanschauung*ix.

In order for us to find the intellectual genealogy of this eight-centuries-old manuscript comprehensively, a meticulous effort should be made. Such an effort is difficult indeed. However, Sufism gives an opportunity to better understand history and its content. More importantly, it provides us with the opportunity to examine what the significance of the manuscript for present times is.

3. Major Themes

As part of a compilation of *tasawwuf* (Sufism), *Bahr al-Lahut* of the Leiden University Library copy consists of six pages in Malay. It can be said that this copy is not systematically arranged, since it does not contain chapters for themes. A reconstruction of this manuscript needs a lot of references and a serious analysis.

In general, *Bahr al-Lahut* is a *tasawuf* work dealing with God's greatness. Seen carefully, the author pays much attention to *shari'ah*. It is said, for instance, that the prophet Muhammad said, "Die before you die!" which means "know yourself before you die". Then, God said that His servants will never be eternal so that they must approach Him by performing recommended voluntary prayers until I (God) love them." x

For most part, Abdullah Arif concentrates much on *tawhid* (monotheism), which is to confess the only God, the oneness, and not to associate him with creations. To refer to this reality the author uses the term "*al-haqq*". The preference of this theme seems to have closely related to the atmosphere in which Abdullah Arif conducted his Islamic proselytising in the twelfth century.

Theology thus took an important part in the manuscript, since at the time Malay people adhered theologically to the concept of Islamic monotheism. In addition, Islamic principles taught by Muslim preachers were five Islamic pillars.xi Even though all God's

creations such as chairs, heavens, animals, Satan, jinn, and humans originated from "light" (*nur*) of Muhammad, the light is part of the greatness of God the Most High.xii

This is in contradiction to the Ash'arite theological concept which is limited to twenty God's attributes such as *qidam*, *baqa*, *mukhalafa al-hawadith*, *qiyamuhu binafsihi*, *wahdaniyyah*, and others. Other attributes called essential attributes (*ma'ani*) are seven, including *al-hayah* (life), *al-ilm* (knowledge), *al-qudrah* (power), *al-iradah* (will), *al-sam'* (hear)*, al-basar* (seeing) and *al-kalam* (speaking). Abdullah Arif viewed God's attributes as countless and endless such as *diya'* (lighting), *wasi'* (wide), *tahir* (pure) *sifa'* (clear) dan *safiyyah* (calm). In addition, God is endless; therefore He is not on the top, bottom, with time day and night.

Nuruddin al-Raniri, an Islamic Scholar originated from India, as opponent to the concept of *wujuddiyyah* (union of God) influenced by Ibn 'Arabi, states that the world is novel. Likewise, he opposes al-Farabi who says that the world is pre-eternal (*qadim*). In fact, Abdullah Arif adhered to this latter, but he believed that it was created by God from *nur Muhammad*.xiii Whereas, al-Raniri suggests that the world was created by God through "*tajalli*". In this concept of *tajalli*, the world is divided into twofold: one is the upper world which contains nine planets and ten minds, and the other is the bottom which consists of different elements such as fire, water, soil, and air. The upper influences the bottom, by creating all hard substances in the world such as plants, animals, and humans. The creation of humans is the most perfect creation in the world through which the creation process has become perfect.xiv

4. Contested Identity

The term "identity" is often elusive, since, in addition to being as a signifier for the difference, its exact meaning is debatable. Moreover, it has become a subject of various disciplines in contemporary social sciences such as psychoanalysis, psychology, politics, sociology, and history. According to Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, there are three different usages of the term. First of all, it refers to a culture of a group of people; sometimes it cannot be differentiated from ethnicity. Secondly, it refers to identification similar to a collective and social category, as it is used in the theory of social identity or in the theory of social movement. Finally, it is used to refer to part of the self which contains meanings because of its relation to various roles played in complex societies.xv

Following Manuel Castell, identity is a process of meaning construction based on cultural attributes or a set of cultural characteristics prioritised over other sources of meaning.xvi An individual or a collective actor may have many diverse identities. However, such diversity is a source of stress and contradiction in self-representation and social action.

From such a complexity, identity has become a source of meaning and experience. Callhoum says:

> *We know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made….Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others.xvii*

So, how to interpret Malay identity? Ronald Provencher describes that there is no other word to replace the word "Malay". This word entails regional sub-ethnics and identity based on heredity, dialects, rituals and specific food. This identity is usually commenced with conversation with such-and-such persons such as Javanese, Bugisnese, Kedahs, Kelantanese, Pattans, and others.xviii

The word Malay itself is the name of a trading country of the 17th century in the Jambi Sea in Sumatra, near Malacca. The royal family of Malacca port, claiming to be heirs of Jambi monarch, were among those who first adhered to Islam. Since then, they converted to Islam. Whatever ethnic identity they were born, they were considered Malays. xix

5. Cosmopolitan Identity and Hybrid

These two words point to similarity and difference at once. Cosmopolitan is an idea of humanity in relation to a single moral community, while hybrid is a mixed set of various types combined into one. Cosmopolitan was an idea coined by Greek philosopher, Diogenes Sinope (412 BC), and was developed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).xx Kant described humans as individuals who tend to conflicts for differences. In *Anthropology from A Pragmatic View*, Kant said,

> *Man was not meant to belong to a herd, like cattle, but to a hive, like bees…The simplest, least artificial way of establishing a civil society is to have one sage in this hive (monarchy). But when there are many such hives near one another, they soon attack one another, as robber bees (make war), not, however, as men do, to strengthen their own group by uniting the other with it – here the comparison ends – but only to use the other's hard work themselves by cunning of force. Each people tries to strengthen itself by subjugating neighboring peoples, whether from a desire for aggrandizement or from fear of being swallowed up by others unless it steals a march on them… The character of the species, as it is indicated by the experience of all ages and all peoples, is this: that, taken collectively (the human race as a whole), it is a multitude of persons, existing successively and side by side, who cannot do without associating peacefully and yet cannot avoid constantly offending one another. Hence they feel destined by nature to [form], through mutual compulsion under laws that proceed from themselves, a coalition in a cosmopolitan society… a coalition that, though constantly threatened by dissension, makes progress on the whole.xxi*

Therefore, Malay identity itself is susceptible to clashing with other identities. Nevertheless, Malay identity is facing considerable challenges because of criticism of the idea that "being Malay" means becoming Muslims. This idea is criticised of denying the long history of Malay, including culture, religion, and even nation. The A biography of Eddin Khoo described below will shed some light on who should reformulate "being Malay."

Historically, textual criticism is used to describe events in the past. However, it is not only a rational reconstruction based on existing evidence, but it is also a collective memory in which humans gain self-knowledge through reflection of the past. As suggested by Henry Immerwhr, we as readers not only recognise it as a human autobiography. It also reconfirms the relation between the past and the present in a new fashion.xxii

Eddin Khoo may be a "hybrid" as well as cosmopolitan Malay figure. As a poet, writer, translator and cultural observer, he has tried to maintain Malay art heritage. His great interest in such disciplines were realised by the establishment of Pusaka (Pusat Kajian dan Dokumentasi Pementasan Tradisional Malaysia—Centre for the Study and Documentation of Malaysian Traditional Performance) and a publishing house which translated world poetry and literatures into Malay.

Born into Chinese-Indian family and trained in politics and Islamic philosophy at Newcastle University, England, he adhered to Hinduism, which is in Malaysia identical with

India. He dedicated his life to the development of Malay culture.xxiii Considering this fact, a reassessment of Malay identity is crucial to do.

Conclusion

Bahr al-Lahut contains orthodox and heterodox teachings, and thus it also deals with thoughts beyond mainstream *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah*, namely Shi'ah, is related to *Nur Muhammad*, and open to Greek philosophy like discussions on *ousia* or *jawhar* called macrocosmos.

In addition, *Bahr al-Lahir* is open to various opinions on such issues as *nur Muhammad*. The author inserted local doctrines in order to explain Quranic verses pertaining to the concept of light. He also used a philosophical analysis in accounting for God's existence. But at the same time, he was not trapped in syncretism, and instead proclaimed himself as the adherent of pure monotheism. However, as a Sufi, he believed that groups other than his deserved to receive the truth and salvation as well. He became Malay who was open to knowledge regardless of its origins. The difference which had become a challenge changed to enrich his experience.

In short, Malay identity assumes cosmopolitanism transcending hybrid. The contemporary change is how to maintain Malay heritage as inspiration for daily life. The heritage is not only a site for tourism, but it is also a reference for political, social and economic affairs.

Reference

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[2]   Ahmad Sahidah. "Melayu Islam Klasik dan Manifestasi Kontemporari," *al-Islam* Magazine, December 2007/Zulhijjah 1428.

[3]   Ahmad Sahidah. "Pemikiran Progresif Ulama Nusantara: Sebuah Telaah terhadap Teks *Bahr al-Lahut*", *Tashwir al-Afkar*, January 2008.

[4] al-Attas, Syed Naquib, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995)

[5] _____. *The Oldest Malays Manuscript*: *A 16th Century Malay Translation of the Aqaid of al-Nasafi* (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya Press, 1988).

[6] 'Arif, Abdullah. *Bahr al-Lahut*, versi Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, MMS 1314 (U).

7_____, (3)   Copy from Bencoolen. f. 33r-37v. 18th c.?

8_____, (3)   Copied for Snouck Hurgronje from the former. f. 21v-24r.

9_____, (1)   Copy from Bodjonegoro (Java). p. 17-28.

10_____, (1)   Copy with interlinear translation in Javanese. f. 1v-9r.

11_____, (1)   Idem. f. 3v-15r, 1912.

12_____, (2)   Idem. p. 11-21, 1903.

13 Arnold, T. W. *The Preaching of Islam* (Delhi India: Low Price Publications,1990).

14 Brubaker, Rogers and Frederick Cooper. "Beyond Identity" in *Theory and Society* 29: 1-47, 2000.

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Notes

i I got this manuscript with the help of Silvia Compaan-Vermetten, Special Collections, Leiden University Library. I owe my debt to Martin van Bruinessen, An Islamic Studies Scholar from Netherland, who has helped me to get the copy from the Library. For this, the Library charged me 72.40 Euro.

ii Hawash Abdullah, *Ilmu Tasawuf dan Tokoh-Tokohnya di Nusantara* (Surabaya: Bina Ilmu, 1981), p. 10.

iii In this regard Arnold refers to Snouck Hurgronje, Dutch orientalist, in L'Arabie et les Indes Néerlandaises (Revue de l'Histoire des Religion, vol. lvii, ms. 69).

iv Arnold refers to De Hollander, *Handleiding bij de Beoefening der Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch Oost-Indie,* Breda, vol. 1, 1884).

v In *Naskhah Jawi Sejarah dan Teks Jilid 1* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka dan Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1994), especially pages 36-40 which discuss on Abdullah 'Arif and page 41 which deals with the content of Bahr al-Lahut breifly and pages 78-88 which contain the Latin transliteration of *Bahr al-Dahut al-Kitab fi Bayan al-Alif* and its original copies (pp. 89-97) found in the Perpustakaan Tanoh-Abee Aceh which is also known as Perpustakaan Kuno Tengku Chiek in Tanah Abee, Acheh Besar. This *perpustakaan* (library) is an orld library with the abundant number of Malay manuscripts on Islam. See also *Islam di Alam Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1998), especially pages 43-58.

vi See his *Pemikiran Umat Islam di Nusantara: Sejarah dan Perkembangan Hingga Abad ke-19* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990) chapter four, especially part 3 on Sufism ms. 81-93.

vii See *Perkembangan Ilmu Tasawuf dan Tokoh-Tokohnya di Nusantara* (Surabaya: Al Ikhlas, 1980), especially part one, pages 9-16. See also *Khazanah Karya Pusaka Asia Tenggara 1* (Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Fathaniyah, 1991), especially part one on Syeh Abdullah 'Arif dan *Bahr al-Lahut*. Wan Saghir refers to the manuscript available in Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia MS 1314 pages 351-355.

viii "To write" in Aceh language is *teumuleh* and in Javanese *nyerat*, which is closer to Malay.

ix *Weltanschauung* means "worldview" by which one can speak and think. More importantly, it refers to the conceptualization and the interpretation of the world. According to Naquib al-Attas, from the Islamic perspective, a worldview is not only related to the physical world, but also the human involvement in historical, social, political and cultural activities. A worldview is not based on philosophical speculation reached through a research of sensuous data. In Islam, it has to do with the hereafter life. Everything in Islam focuses on the hereafter life but without neglecting the mundane world. See further Syed Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995), p. 1.

x 'Abdullah 'Arif, *Bahr al-Lahut*, Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, p. 454. This sentence is not found in either Malay version of Leiden or Javanese translation.

xi Hamid, Ismail. "Kitab Jawi: Intellectualizing Literary Tradition" dalam *Islamic Civilization in the Malay World*, ed. Mohd. Taib Osman (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka dan The Research Centre for Islamic Art and Culture Istanbul, 1997), ms. 201.

xii Abdullah 'Arif, *Ibid.*, ms.452-453. See the explanation of Ismail Hamid on the concept of God, *op.cit.*, ms. 218-220. It is said that even though Ash'arite doctrinces are dominant in Islamic theology in the Malay world, *Bahr al-Lahut* shows that Shi'ite doctrines were dominant in the early coming of Islam into Malay. The Ash'arite accepts Greek dialectics in order to formulate the logical and rational basis for their doctrines. To prove the existence of God, Ash'arite authors introduce such logical categories as *wajib*, *mustahil*, and *ja'iz*.

xiii 'Abdullah 'Arif, *op.cit.*, p. 452.

xiv Ismail Hamid, *op.cit*, p. 220. Here I refer to Mohd. Nor Ngah, *Kitab Jawi: Islamic Thought of the Malay Muslim Scholars* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982), p. 11.

xv See Sheldon Stryker and Peter J. Burke, 'The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory, in *Social Psychology Quarterly*,' Vol. 63, No. 4, Special Millennium Issue on the State of Sociological Social Psychology (Dec., 2000), pp. 284-297

xvi See Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 6.

xvii Ibid.,

xviii See "Malays" in Carol R. Ember & Melvin Ember (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Medical Anthropology: Health and Illness in the World's Cultures*, vol. 2 – Cultures (London: Springer, 2004), p. 804.

xix *Ibid*. It is not an exaggeration that in his lecture on Dua Serumpun: (Cabaran (Tantangan) at Universiti Sains Malaysia on 18 December 2008 Yusril Ihza Mahendra suggested that the spirit of Malay is Islam. However he did not explain further what kind of Islamic understanding Malays adhere to is. This needs a further discussion on the diversity of Islam.

xx On cosmopolitan, read further Ulrich Beck, *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006) and Derek Benjamin Heater, *World Citizenship: Cosmopolitan and Its Opponents* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

xxi Quoted in Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay Worlds* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), p. 167.

xxii Roxanne L Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton dan Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 49-50.

xxiii For a further detailed account of how generation of hybrid express their opinion, see Khalid Jaafar's interview with Eddin Hoo in Adil Zalkapli (ed.), *Kerohanian dan Pencerahan* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kajian Dasar, 2007), pp. 9-31.