BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS MUSLIMS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ADMINISTRATION OF ISLAM IN THE FEDERATED MALAY STATES, 1874-1920S

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Abstract: The late nineteenth century marked the beginning of British policy of intervention in the Malay states with the signing of the landmark Pangkor Treaty in 1874. The imposition of British power in Malaya brought about radical changes in many spheres of life: demography, economy, law and politics. This article describes the historical background of the imposition of British suzerainty in Malaya, and the development of Islamic beliefs and practice in colonial Malaya. It focuses on two important issues; namely British policy on Islam and the development of Islamic bureaucracy in the Federated Malay States. This study contends that British adopted a cautious approach in dealing with Muslim matters in the Malay states, so as to ensure its policy did not offend the sensitivities of the Malays. British interference in the Malay States marked the seizure of the political power from the Malay sultans. In response to the abrupt decline of their political power, the Malay sultans in the Federated Malay States were left with authority over matters concerning religion (Islam) and Malay customs only. Thus, accordingly, the sultans embarked upon the establishment and consolidation of well-organised Islamic bureaucracy in the Federated Malay States.

Key words: Islam in Malaya, British and Islam, Bureaucratization of Islam, Majlis Agama Islam, History of Malaysia

Introduction

Colonialism or imperialism is not a modern phenomenon. Greer and Lewis state that actually "Imperialism itself is as old as history." Indeed, Western expansion and domination of the large portion of the world, started at the end of the (European) middle Ages. One of the most successful imperial powers of the ancient times was the Roman Empire, which ruled the Mediterranean for several centuries. Western exploration and domination of the World continued vigorously from the 16th century into the 18th before slowing down about 1750. After 1880 Western colonization in Asia and Africa restarted intensively and became known as the new imperialism. The term new imperialism refers an intense competition among the European powers to colonise various parts of Asia and Africa from the 1880s to 1914. During this period, one after another country in Asia and Africa was either colonised or came under the influence of Western colonial powers. Tanah Melayu, which later became known as Malaya was no exception. This article discusses the advent of Western “colonialism” in Malaya with special references to British approach in handling the Muslim matters and the development of Islamic bureaucracy in the Federated Malay States.
Historical Milieu

Francis Light’s acquisition of Penang in 1786 (which eventually became a British colony) marks the beginning of the imposition of British influence in the Malay states. In 1819, Stanford Raffles acquired Singapore from the ruler of Johore as another trade settlement for the company. This was followed by the British acquisition of Malacca in 1824. By 1826, Penang, Singapore, and Malacca were incorporated into the British colony, and became collectively known as the Straits Settlements. The Anglo-Dutch treaty in 1824 divided British and Dutch spheres of influence in the Malay-Indonesian world. Making the Malacca Straits a frontier, the British took the Peninsula as their “preserve”, while the Dutch took Sumatra and all islands to the south of Singapore. The 1824 treaty effectively determined the future boundaries of the British and Dutch colonial “possessions” in the region, and also of the nation states that would emerge from the colonial era, Malaysia and Indonesia.

In the 1820s, the British were satisfied with their control over the Straits Settlements and had no intention of entangling themselves in the peninsula. Until 1873, the British adopted the policy of political non-intervention in the Malay states outside the Straits Settlements. However, this policy changed with the conclusion of the Pangkor Engagement in 1874 that marked the beginning of British indirect rule in the Malay states. According to the terms of the Engagement, the Malay ruler remained the head of state, but had to accept the advice of British official, the “Resident,” in all matters of administration and government. The engagement also stipulated that the British would not interfere with the affairs of Malay custom and religion. According to Andaya, the treaty represented:

… a turning point in the formal relationship between Britain and the Malay states ... the Pangkor Treaty had been concluded it essentially became a question of how and when British rule would be extended across the entire peninsula.4

The Pangkor Treaty thus pioneered the formula by which the British would impose its authority in the peninsular states. Constitutionally, the states would be “protected” sovereign states, retaining their rulers. Practically, the Resident (or in some cases Adviser) could extend his control as far as the British wished. By the 1880s, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Pahang were under such a system. In 1896 these states became the Federated Malay States (FMS) with their federal administrative center in Kuala Lumpur, a young city growing out of a tin-mining camp.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, British control in the Malay Peninsula covered the Straits Settlements, and the newly formed Federated Malay States. However, five other states, Johore, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, and Terengganu, remained independent of British control. With the conclusion of the Bangkok Treaty between the British and Siam (Thailand) in 1909, the four northern states, Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, and Terengganu, came under British control. British control of the whole Malay Peninsula was completed in 1914 when Johore agreed to accept a British Resident. Johore and the northern states were not brought under federal administration and became the Unfederated Malay States (UMS).

The period of the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries saw rapid political, economic, social, and cultural changes in Malaya. Politically, the signing of the Pangkor Engagement in 1874 marked the beginning of British “protectorate” (or “colonization”) of the peninsular Malay states outside of the Straits Settlements. The advent of “colonialism” served as an important impetus for many-concerned Malay intelligentsia that the plight of the Malays
would be in danger if they did not take the necessary steps to rectify their weaknesses and shortcomings. For these intellectuals, the gradual submission of the Malay states to the British signified that the Malays had slipped into a political decline.

One major consequence of British “colonialism” that was bound to shape the politics of Malaya in the years to come was a dramatic demographic change. Largely aborigines and Malays populated the Malay Peninsula at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The peninsular Malays cannot easily be distinguished from the Sumatran Malays, who had since time immemorial always migrated to the peninsula. During this time a large proportion of the Malays were mainly concentrated in Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang, and Perak, which were predominantly Malay states.

Statistics of population in pre-colonial Malaya are not available. However, it can be safely assumed that during this period almost all if not all populations of Malaya were either the Malays or the aborigines. The advent of colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century was about to introduce gradual and eventually dramatic changes in the demography of Malaya. In order to support the colonial economy, the British encouraged the migration of a substantial number of Chinese and Indian workers to the Malay states. Since the mid 1800s, large numbers of Chinese laborers entered Malaya to work in the rapidly growing tin industry, followed by Indian laborers in 1910s to work in the rubber industry. The colonial regime adopted an open-door immigration policy up to 1930. As a result of this immigration policy, by 1891 there were 896,000 Malays out of the total population of 1,401,000. This open door immigration policy, which continued until 1930, brought about a dramatic demographic change by the second decade of the twentieth century. Consequently, by 1921, Malays became a minority in their own country, forming less than half the population. Furthermore, by the 1930s, many Chinese and Indians began to regard Malaya as their permanent homeland and had gained a strong foothold in commerce, while the Malays were generally left behind economically.

Divisions between Malays, Chinese and Indians, already culturally profound, were deepened by British perceptions and policies. Racial stereotyping meant that the Malays were effectively excluded from the modernizing economy. Their upper class was encouraged to think about an English public school-style education and a career within the branch of government that administered the Malays. Ordinary Malays were envisaged as rice farmers and fisher folk, and their vernacular education was tailored to such humble goals.

The growing towns and cities of colonial Malaya, predominantly populated by Chinese, became alien places to most Malays. Naturally, the Malays felt uneasy with this alarming situation, which they believed would pose a serious threat to their position as the natives of the country. The socio-economic dislocation experienced by the Malays was particularly apparent in Singapore, where the Malays were displaced. The plight of the Malays in contrast to the Chinese immigrants in this crown colony has been described by Roff as follows:

They (the Malays) found a city overwhelmingly Chinese, to an extent unknown in even the larger towns of the peninsular states; below the level of government and the big trading houses, all departments of life were dominated by the Chinese... The typical Malay situation was the reverse.

The dislocation of Malay life in the face of the dominating presence of the immigrant communities served as an impetus for concerned Malay societies to awaken the Malays from the slumber and to safeguard their interests in Malaya. Writing in al-Imam, the reformist al-
Hadi deplored the condition of the Malays in Singapore who were forced to move from the center of the city to the poorer areas. Al-Hadi writes: “If this pattern continues, and it most certainly will, the Malays and Muslims of this island (of Singapore) will eventually have to run to Papua (Irian) or to those places where the inhabitants are still naked!”

Furthermore, the advent of “colonialism” and the introduction of modern institutions such as English and even the vernacular Malay schools also caught the Malays in a dilemma as how to deal with modernity. Initially, the Malays were very skeptical of the English schools. The general Malay attitude was that it was dangerous to send their children to the English schools because they believed that their children would be Christianized by attending such schools. This kind of attitude is attested by a statement made by a prominent Malay intellectual, Za’ba, who, in 1953 wrote that 50 years earlier the Malays did not allow their children to attend English school, or even Malay vernacular schools. In the case of female children, they only managed to attend school in the last 20 years (circa. 1930s).

**Islam: Beliefs and Practices in Malay**

When and how Islam arrived in the Malay world in general, and the Malay Peninsula in particular, remains a contested issue. Without going into the details of the debates, Islam might have come to the Malay world in the early centuries of the hijrah as argued by some scholars. However, by and large, it only became well established and manifested through socio-political institution by the fourteen century. Like a majority of the Sunni Muslims in the Malay Archipelago, the Malays follows the Shafi’i school of Islamic law and adhere to the theological school of al-Ash’ari (d. 936) and al-Maturidi(d. 944).

The prominent Malay Islamic scholars from the seventeenth century through the nineteenth century produced numerous works on Islamic laws in the Malay language to explain the basic elements of Islamic worship to the masses. These texts on Islamic positive law written in Malay were based on the Shafi’i classical commentaries and glosses on jurisprudence by scholars like al-Nawawi (d.1277), Zakariyya al-Ansari (d. 1520), Ibn Khatib al- Sharbini (d. 1569), Ibn Hajar al-Haitami (d. 1567), and al-Ramli (d.1596). The earliest known Malay text on Islamic positive law (fiqh) is al-Sirāt al-Mustaqīm by Nuruddin al-Raniri (d.1666), a famous Gujarati Islamic scholar based in Acheh, published in 1644. This important work is based on several important texts of the Shafi’i jurists, especially Minhāj al-Talibīn of al-Nawawi, Manhāj al-Tullāb (an abridgement of the former) and Fath al-Wahhāb by al-Ansari, and Mukhtasar al-Fatāwā by Ibn Hajar al-Haitami.

The dominant position of the Shafi’i school was further consolidated at the lower level through traditional Islamic learning. Traditional Islamic learning that took place in the palaces, mosques, and prayer halls and later in pondok (traditional Islamic learning institutions) placed a great emphasis on Islamic positive law, which was the single most common subject taught in the pondok. Islamic law books used in these studies were exclusively from the Shafi’i school. Furthermore, the official ulama that served as the vanguards of traditional Islam considered adherence to a specific school of Islamic law as obligatory upon Muslims. As Za’ba noted, the conservative ulama would condemn any departure from traditional forms of belief and practice and from established Islamic opinions; any new interpretation to accommodate Islam to modern demand was labeled as heretical. This religious mentality strongly championed by the traditional ulama was bound to create a collision course with the reformist scholars who attempted to liberate the Muslims from the shackles of uncritical traditional Islam.
The degree to which Islam had transformed the Malay world-view has caused considerable debate. For example, J.C. van Leur argues that Islam was merely a superficial coating lying over an assortment of pre-Islamic, Hindu and pagan belief systems.\textsuperscript{16} Naquib Al-Attas, on the other hand, argues that Islam brought about a radical transformation in the Malay worldview, “turning it away from a crumbling world of mythology … to the world of intelligence, reason and order.”\textsuperscript{17} Without delving into this controversy, a closer look into Malay belief and practices in colonial Malaya indicates that despite their conversion to Islam, the remnants of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices had not been totally displaced. Rather, pre-Islamic elements of beliefs and practices still formed a part of the Malay belief system and practice. According to Willer, the retention of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices after their conversion to Islam was due to the very fact that Islam was primarily propagated by Sufi scholars in the Malay world. These sufi preachers adopted a pragmatic and accommodative attitude toward local Malay tradition.

Consequently, Islamic teachings in Malaya frequently became intermingled with traditional Malay customs, and thus could not really be considered as an orthodox form of Islam. Such a condition allowed the continuation of syncretic elements in Malay Islam, especially in hinterlands far removed from major port cities, which had relatively greater access to the “pristine Islam” from the Middle East following their greater interaction with the Middle East.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the retention of pre-Islamic customs in the Malay life after the conversion to Islam served as one important impetus for the emergence of Islamic reform in Malaya. The reformist scholars who were exposed to the Middle Eastern reformist currents made this agenda of rectifying and cleansing Malay Islamic life from the remnants of pre-Islamic customs as a serious task to fulfill.

Syed Hussein Ali informs us that although Islam is strongly entrenched in Malay society, the traditional animistic beliefs coexist with Islam in many villages. For example, the traditional Malay beliefs recognize the existence of ghosts and spirits, which are completely different from the Islamic notion of \textit{jin} (genie). These supernatural entities are believed to reside in nature – mountains, hills, seas, rivers, land, trees and so forth. In daily activities people must give them due respect; otherwise, they are believed to have the capability to cause suffering and disaster.\textsuperscript{19} In short, the remnants of the pre-Islamic and animistic beliefs and practices continued to be present in Malay life despite Islamization. Indeed, this issue of the admixture of un-Islamic elements into Malay religious life would receive the attention of Muslim reformist in their attempts to restore the “purity” of Islam, free from any forms of superstition and innovation.

\textbf{British and Islam}

The nature of British “colonialism” in Malaya can be characterized as indirect rule, known as the Residential system. The basic objectives of this system as formulated by Frank Swettenham are: “To preserve the accepted customs and traditions of the country, to enlist the sympathies and interests of the people in our assistance, and to teach them the advantages of good government and enlightened policy.”\textsuperscript{20} In order to ensure the success of indirect rule, it was very important for the British to get the cooperation of the Malay ruling class, which initially was the most hostile toward the British advance in the Malay states. To this end, the British administrators made conscious efforts to appease the Malay elites and the masses.
One area where the Malays were (and still are) most sensitive was in Islamic matters. Through the British early experiences with the Malays, they learned that Islam was a significant and sensitive issue in Malay life and that Malay cooperation would be impossible if Islam appeared to be threatened. In lieu of that, British officials adopted a careful policy affecting Islam in Malaya. The Pangkor Engagement has established the foundation for British policy towards Islam. Thus, “British policy towards Islam displays fairly consistent non-interference, implicitly as a matter of course in the Straits Settlements, and as a matter of explicit stipulation in the treaties concluded with Malay rulers”. In brief, British policy towards Islam in Malaya is characterized by non-interference in matters related to the Malays’ religion and customs as guaranteed in the treaties they concluded. In contrast to the Dutch early policies on Islam in the Netherlands East Indies, British official policy did not consider Islam as a serious threat. Dutch authority in the East Indies, on the other hand, showed their distrust of the hajj and considered it a subversive political influence on returning pilgrims. This suspicion led to their policy of discouraging their subjects from performing the hajj by imposing restrictive regulations. On the advice of Christian Snouck Hurgronje in 1898, the policy began to change; the restrictive policy was finally abandoned in 1902. Comparatively, the British administrators in Malaya were more tolerant towards the Malay-Muslims. As a result of this cautious and prudent approach, British took the necessary steps to avoid offending Muslims’ sensitivities. For example, colonial rule prohibited Christian missionaries from proselytizing among the Malays particularly in the Malay states, where Islam was the official religion. Even in the Straits Settlements where Islam was not the official religion, similar missionary activities among the Muslims were discouraged, fearing possible Malay reactions to such efforts.

It may be useful for a better understanding of British-Malay relations to take a closer look at the British policies on the pilgrimage. Unlike Dutch colonialism in the Netherlands East Indies, British administrators did not impose severe restrictions on the Malays’ conduct and performance of the pilgrimage. Although some British officials had suspicions of the potential problems posed by the pilgrim returnees, their suspicions were comparatively moderate and did not go to the extent of blaming the pilgrims for political unrest, as was the case with the Dutch in East Indies.

The eruptions of two local uprisings in Kelantan in 1915 and Terengganu in the 1920s caused some concern among the British officials about the possible subversive influence of the pilgrims in Malayan society. However, unlike the “Padri” movement in Minangkabau, there were no indications that these two local uprisings were inspired by the “Wahhabi”-like ideas though the leaders of both uprisings were hajis (pilgrims). Furthermore, these revolts (in Kelantan and Terengganu) were local in nature, and thus did not pose a serious threat to British suzerainty in Malaya as a whole. Apart from these two local revolts, there were no other major uprisings spearheaded by the pilgrims. This was a possible reason for the British’s more positive (as opposed to the Dutch’s) perception of the pilgrimage.

Besides adopting less restrictive policies on the pilgrimage, beginning from the 1890s, the British even assisted in improving the conduct of the pilgrimage by introducing legislation aimed at improving the conditions and welfare of the pilgrims. Two motives apparently sparked British involvement in the conduct of the pilgrimage. First, humanitarian consideration—to ensure the welfare and health of the pilgrims. Second, the British had a vested economic interest in the pilgrimage industry. As Yegar has noted, in 1900, 70 percent (close to 14,000 people) of the total pilgrims that went to Makkah sailed in British-owned ships. Therefore, the pilgrimage industry had generated a lucrative business for the British-owned
shipping companies. As the pilgrimage was a very profitable business for the British, the improvement in the services for the pilgrims would benefit British companies as well.

Three decades after their initial involvement in the conduct of the pilgrimage, the British became more active in the administration of the pilgrimage. Thus, in 1923, they appointed Abdul Majid Zainuddin, as the first Malay Pilgrimage Officer. Abdul Majid was pro-British, and never expressed any sentiment against the colonial power. Stationed in Makkah during the pilgrimage season, Abdul Majid’s responsibility entailed registering Malayan pilgrims, recording their departure, keeping their return tickets in safe custody and helping the pilgrims in every possible way.

In brief, the British administrators were prudent and cautious in their relations with the Malays. By and large, the colonial authority tried not to introduce any policy that would offend Muslims and the Malays traditional way of life. It was probably due to this calculated and accommodative policy that there was no serious Muslim uprising against the colonial order as occurred in the Dutch East Indies.

**Bureaucratization of Islam in the Federated Malay States**

The Pangkor Engagement, which was imposed upon the Sultanate of Perak, stipulated, “the only matters specifically to be withheld from the powers of the British resident were to be ‘those touching Malay Religion and Custom’. [However,] when the Federated Malay States were founded in 1895, reference to Malay customs was deleted from the terms of formal agreement but the ‘Muhammadan religion’ remained specifically outside the purview of the protecting power”. Thus, the Malay rulers were stripped of the traditional political power. Deprived of real governing power; the only realm left for them to exert their authority was Islam. Therefore, the sultans focused their attention on religious administration of which they were the symbolic heads. As a result, for the first time, Islam in the Federated Malay States was organized on a statewide basis, and a centralized religious hierarchy was created. Despite that, centralized Islamic bureaucracy in the Malay states outside of what would become the Federated Malay States, actually had predated British “colonialism”. This is so because as Khoo Kay Kim argues although Johore, an un-Federated Malay state, only came under British influence in 1914; it “was the first Malay state to organise Islam on a bureaucratic basis”.

It is difficult to speak of a uniform development of Islam in Malaya before the 1940s. This was because despite the existence of the Federated Malay States since 1896, each of the state was actually organised separately. In order to avoid generalization, our discussion of the bureaucratisation of Islam focuses only on Perak, the first Malay state to come under British control. One major change brought about by colonialism in Perak was the creation of a centralized Islamic hierarchy. On the eve of the 1870s there was hardly any centralized religious hierarchy there, although the sacral power of the Malay rulers included the responsibility for the defense of faith.

Though from time to time individual rulers did appoint religious officials of a variety of kinds beyond those attached to their own mosques, there was a conspicuous absence of a hierarchical Islamic organization capable of systematic implementation or enforcement of Islam at the state-wide basis. In these circumstances, religious functionaries were primarily local in character. Normally, each village maintained either a mosque or at least a prayer house. The local religious officials were selected from among the members of the community whom the village elders deemed the most qualified. Village mosques had no direct connection with other mosques in the area, even less at the statewide level.
Perak, the first state to accept a British Residence, had an active state leader in Sultan Idris (1887-1916) who was a devout Muslim, having deep interests in Islamic law and judicial administration. Under his energetic leadership the institutionalization of Islam as a state religion took place, and the administration of Islam underwent a dramatic transformation. The newly-formed Islamic hierarchy took over the supervision of all Islamic activities, such as Islamic education, publications, legal functions, charity, and doctrinal decisions. The head of Islam in this Malay state was none other than the Sultan himself. The Islamic hierarchy was largely staffed by the traditional ‘ulama. Indeed, the creation of the Islamic hierarchy gave the Sultan, the Malay aristocrats and the traditional ‘ulama the power over Islamic matters in the state. With this power, the Islamic hierarchy was able to centralize taxation system, personal laws, and even to inhibit any form of “subversive” Islamic ideas from being introduced in the state. Apart from the consolidation of Islamic administration, the creation of the centralized Islamic bureaucracy also marked the consolidation of traditional Islam as the official and dominant tradition in colonial Malaya, a fact that hindered the growth of Islamic reformism in the Malay states.

Conclusion

In conclusion, British administrators adopted prudent and cautious approach in managing Islamic affairs in Malaya. Thus, in general, they implemented the policy of non-interference in the Muslim affairs. In so doing the colonial authority tried not to introduce any policy that would offend the Malay-Muslim feelings and sensitivities. It was probably due to this calculated policy that there was no serious large-scale Malay-Muslim uprising against the British as occurred in the Dutch East Indies.

The imposition of British control in the Malay Peninsula brought about dramatic changes in various spheres of life. Politically, it robbed the Malay sultans of their political power. Consequently, to exercise their power, the Malay sultans focused their attention on the transformation of the administration of Islam into a well-organised Islamic bureaucracy. Accordingly, the administration of various aspects Islamic law-marriage and divorce, waqf, zakat, and so forth-were left under the jurisdiction of the Malay Sultans. Though the enhancement of Islamic bureaucracy in the Federated Malay States happened primarily after the Pangkor Engagement; it is incorrect to generalize that the bureaucratisation of Islam happened as a result of British “colonialism” because the creation of a systematic Islamic bureaucracy took place in Johore earlier than in other Malay states before the imposition of British influence. In fact, Johor modernisation as a whole occurred during the reign of Sultan Abu Bakar, 1862-1895, predating the advent of British “colonialism” in the state.37

2 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 2.
8 Ibid., 836.
11 Za’ba (Zainal Abidin Ahmad), “Islam in Malaya” TMs, Za’bas Personal Papers, (National Archives, Kuala Lumpur: SP 18/1A/30,3).

12 For a concise summary of the various theories of Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian world, see especially, Azra, “The Network of Middle Eastern and Malay-Indonesian Ulama’ in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1992), 16-45.

13 Among prominent Malay scholars in this field are ‘Abd Rauf al-Singkili (d. 1693), Muhammad Arshad al-Banjari, (d. 1782) and Shaykh Daud Fatani (d. ca.1847).

14 Za’ba is a well-known acronym for Zainal Abidin Haji Ahmad.

15 Za’ba, “Islam in Malaya”, 3.


20 Andaya, 172.


22 Roff, 186.


24 Ibid., 288-289.

25 Ibid., 67.

26 Means, 276.


28 M. Redzuan Othman, 291


31 Willer, 74-75


34 For a detailed discussion of Islamic developments in various Malay states during this period, see especially Thomas Frank Willer, “Religious Administrative Development in Colonial Malay States, 1874-1941” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1975), 36-72.


37 For further details, see Rahimah Abdul Aziz, Pembaratan Pemerintahan Johor 1800-1945: Suatu Analisa Sejarah (KL: DBP, 1997).