CONCERNING ONE NAME MENTIONED IN THE TUHFAT AL-NAFS B:
TWO INTERESTING REVELATIONS

Malay Muslim historical chronicles from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries are well known and recognized as one of the most important sources of the history of the Malay world, including the history of Islam in this area. Malay historical chronicles are narrative works in the Arabic script Jawi, written at the courts of the Malay Muslim rulers (sultans, Yang Dipertuan) and dedicated to their activities, lives and great service to their countries.1 Usually these texts have some common structure, containing both genealogies (silsilah) and a narrative part.2

Malay Muslim historical chronicles contain much information and references concerning the history of Islamization in the Malay world: when it was begun, who brought the 'new religion' to the Malay Archipelago

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1 As one of the exceptions to this rule we can mention one Malay historical text Hikayat Siak, written by one of the followers of the Siak-Minangkabau aristocracy, which was in opposition to the court of the ruling sultan of Johor and his Buginese vice-rulers. See: Muhammad Yusoff Hashim. 1992. "Hikayat Siak." Dirawikan oleh Tengku Said. Diselenggarkan oleh. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka: Kuala Lumpur.

and who spread Islam there; where Islam came from, etc. These are still the subject of scientific and political discussion today.

We have described elsewhere\(^3\) some aspects of the history of the conversion of the Malays to Islam and some information about the degree or level of Islamization of Malay society in Brunei, Singapore, Malacca, Johor and other states of the Malay Archipelago.

It is a well-known fact that some close and long-standing connections and relationships in trade and intellectual life existed between Nusantara (Southeast Asia) and the Middle East. We can find information about these contacts in Malay and Arabic historical texts as well as in scientific works.\(^4\)

Many Malay Muslim historical chronicles contain information about Muslims from Arabia and other Muslim countries. In particular we find them mentioned in Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai, Sejarah Melayu, Hikayat Acheh, Peringatan Sejarah Negri Johor, Tuhfat al-Nafis, etc. Conversely, in Malay texts there is not much information about Muslims from the Middle East. Mention of neighbours, i.e., the Javanese, Dayaks, Bataks, Klings etc. as well as the Europeans and the Chinese are more detailed and voluminous and are found more often in comparison to that of Middle Eastern Muslims.

Information about Muslims from the Middle East can be divided into two groups: the first is the reference to the people from the so-called windward countries in the Malay world; the second concerns stories about the Malays’ journeys (voyages) to Arabia (the Middle East).

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A comparative analysis of these chronicles’ texts makes it possible to define the most often found topics and to reveal some features of information and facts they contain. Among the most important subjects or topics are, in particular, the following:

– Information about sayyids and ‘ulamas
– Information about ship’s captains, navigators and navigation
– Information about trade and traders
– Information about Middle East Muslim treatises and discussions in science and theology
– Descriptions of the hajj

The content analysis of this information about the history of dakwah of Islam in the Malay world gives us good reason to conclude the following:

– That Islam was brought by Arab Muslims into the Malay world, first of all by ‘ulamas and sayyids directly from the Middle East (from Mecca, Medina, Hadhramaut, Siraf, Baghdad, etc.) and not by Indian and/or Persian traders from India or Persia.
– First contacts between the Malays and the Muslims from windward countries dated already from the first century of the Hijrah, and not from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries A.C. as assumed by some European Orientalists.
– The spread of Islam was a gradual and peaceful process lasting several centuries.
– The Malays accepted Islam in full manner, and not formally or perfunctorily, as some Orientalists claim.
– The spread of Islam aroused very significant, revolutionary changes in Malay society, in Malay history, Malay culture, Malay language and in intellectual and social life in the Malay world in general. According to Thomas Arnold, “[T]hus, within a short span of time, the lives of millions

inhabiting the thousands of islands in the Malay Archipelago were radically changed. Civilization replaced barbarism; ignorance gave way to knowledge and literacy; organization and order superseded anarchy; and heathenism was replaced by belief in God.\(^6\)

According to the information contained in Malay historical chronicles from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Muslims from the windward countries were playing a great role in Malay history in the Middle Ages as well as in New Modern History. Reaching the land of the Malay Archipelago already in the first centuries of the Hijrah, these Muslims from the Middle East brought to the Malays not only a new faith but also assisted in the economic and cultural development of this region, thereby facilitating its integration into the Muslim world. Arabic goods and ships, the Arabic language and treatises written by Arab-Muslim scholars were well-known in the Malay world since the thirteenth century. Contemporary Orientalist Moshe Yegar from Hebrew University notes correctly that “Arabs contributed to the shaping of Muslim civilization of Malaya, and its religion, morals, language, political organization, customs and law are still marked by their influence.”\(^7\) Numerous historical sources (Arabic, Chinese, Malay, etc.) contain reports about this religious and cultural influence. However, there is no evidence in them of an Indian or Persian origin of Malay Islam, in spite of the fact that these concepts are most popular in Western Oriental Studies.\(^8\)

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European colonization of the Malay world beginning in the sixteenth century did not exclude Islam but, on the contrary, led to further Islamization of Malay society, turning Islam into the banner of struggle against common foreign enemies. Even in the nineteenth century, i.e., after hundreds of years of European presence (colonization) in Nusantara, Johor and other Muslim states, the intensive cultural, religious and economic or commercial relations with the Muslim countries, first of all with Mecca, continued. Performance of the hajj, 'umrah and visits to other sacred places of Islam was widespread. There was a well-regulated system of hajj and 'umrah arrangements, in which local as well as foreign ships and navigators were involved. The Malays went not only to the pilgrimage, but also stayed in Arabia for a long time to study fiqh (islamic law) and usuluddin (islamic theology) from famous Meccan 'ulamas, sayyids and murshids. The Malay aristocrats frequently owned waqf property in Mecca and Medina. All these facts indicate that the Malay society of Johor and other Muslim states was deeply islamized and that Muslim scholars and religious leaders had a big influence on public consciousness. As Yegar contends, “The Hajis who made the pilgrimage to Mecca were held in high esteem and were extremely influential through their proselytizing efforts, as reformers and missionaries alike”. Some information about Middle Eastern Muslims in Malay historical sources has already been elucidated in my article “The Middle East’s Muslims in Malay historical chronicles (XIV–XIX cc.” and some other publications.

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As a subject of evidence of the above, in this short essay we choose only one report found in Raja Ali Haji’s chronicle the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* (1866–1870) and only one name mentioned in it. To our mind it should be very interesting and important to share the information we have found, because it directly concerns the person, whose contribution to the intellectual life of contemporary Malaysia as well as the Muslim world can scarcely be exaggerated. This person, who indeed gained unique merits in international and Muslim science is *Yang Mulia*11 Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

The information found in the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* is the following:

Concerning the *hajj* of Raja Ahmad and Raja Ali Haji in Syaaban 1243 (February 1828)


Journey to Madinah


The subject of our interest is the name Sayid Muhammad Attas and his son. Does this person have any connection to the Seyyid family from Hadramaut which played such a great role in Malay history? Has this Sayid Muhammad Attas any connection to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and his genealogy?

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First of all, the chronicle tells us about noble pilgrims from Riau-Johor–Raja Ahmad Bin Raja Haji (1778–1878) and his companions. They met with this Sayid Muhammad Attas and his son. Second, according to the text, this anak Raja Jawi pihak negeri Riau was considered a sahabat of Sayid Muhammad Attas. This means that there were some close relations between these Johor aristocrats and this Sayid. And third, as we know from the biography of Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, his family has not only some relationship the with Johor-Riau aristocracy but also his grandmother, Roqayah Hanum, was married to Ungku Abdul Majid, the younger brother of the Sultan of Johor, Abu Bakar (d. 1895). In addition, her sister Khadijah became a wife of the Sultan of Johor himself.\textsuperscript{13}

We are thus in a good position to prove our assumption by being able to compare the report found in this historical text with information from a primary source (a scientist rarely gets such an opportunity!), i.e., from a member of the al-Attas family, namely, Professor al-Attas himself. He first confirms that the spelling of Sayid Muhammad Attas' name is identical with that of his own family surname. He then checks his genealogy and his family sources, revealing to us the following facts, namely, that, to his mind, this Sayid Muhammad Attas mentioned in the text of the Tuhfat al-Nafis is probably Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Muham- mad bin Muhsin bin Hussein bin Syeikh al-Kutub, al-Habib Umar bin Abd al Rahman al-Attas. As far as it is known, he actually did live in Mecca in the beginning of the nineteenth century and passed away there at the end of that century. The exact date of his death is unknown.

Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas had a son whose name was Syed Muhsin al-Attas. Like his father he lived in Mecca, too, and passed away there in 1280H/1863 A.C. According to the chronicle, he was in service under the ruler of Mecca Syarif Yahya\textsuperscript{14}(d. 1827). \textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} About the biography of Professor Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, see, in particular: Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud. 1998. The educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization. ISTAC : Kuala Lumpur.

\textsuperscript{14} Syarif Yahya, i.e., Sharif Yahya bin Surour (nephew of Sharif Ghalib bin Musa’ed (1788–1813)). Syarif Yahya was Grand Sharif of Mecca in 1813–1827, installed by the Egyptian Pasha Muhammad Ali. Syarif Yahya was killed in 1827. See: M. Th. Houtsma et al., eds., E. J. Brill’s first Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1913–1936, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 8 vols. with Supplement (vol. 9), 1991, pp. 445–446.
We know from the text that “anak Syed Muhammad Attas (i.e. Muhsin)” met in Badar’s Jumaa’ mosque with Raja Ahmad (Raja Ahmad bin Raja Haji 1778–1878), i.e. the author of the short chronicle, Tuhfat al-Nafis, and the father of Raja Ali Haji (1809– after 1872)–the author of the long chronicle. Muhsin told Syarif Yahya about this meeting and said that Raja Ahmad “anak Raja Jawi pihak negeri Riau setengah daripada sahabat bapanya” (i.e. Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas) needed help and protection on the way to Madinah. And Syarif Yahya gave to Raja Ahmad and his companions some guards’ escort and protection:

Maka Syarif Yahya pun memberilah aman kepada Raja Ahmad itu serta segala kafilah yang bersama-sama dengan dia itu. Maka apabila Raja Ahmad itu balik kepada khemahnyanya maka disuruhnyalah beberapa banyak askarnya badwi itu menjagai segala khemah-khemah itu serta dipasangkannya api hingga sampai esoknya.

This information makes possible the following conclusions:

1. Syarif Yahya was probably acquainted with Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas or knew his name. Obviously, this acquaintance was accepted as a sufficient reason to give Raja Ahmad protection and to put some soldiers at his disposal, for even Syarif Yahya himself was in a difficult situation during those days and had many enemies.

2. Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas and his son Muhsin had a close relationship with the Malay rulers of Johor, including the family (clan) of the Buginese Viceroys of Johor, in particular with Raja Ahmad and Raja

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15 There are some problems with these dates: Syarif Yahya passed away in 1827 (according to E.J. Brill Encyclopedia). At the same time according to the chronicle Tuhfat al-Nafis, Raja Ahmad arrived at Mecca on the 18th of Sha’aban 1243H, i.e. on the 4th of March 1828. This means that Raja Ahmad met with Muhsin al-Attas in Badar after this date, not before. Muhsin informed Syarif Yahya about this meeting (he was at Friday prayers praying in a mosque in Badar). Therefore in March 1828 (or after) Syarif Yahya was still alive. Since the information from the Tuhfat presents information from an eyewitness, this date (i.e. pertaining to Syarif Yahya’s death) in Brill’s Encyclopedia may not be correct.


JAH 44/2 (2010)
Ali Haji.

We know very little about Muhsin bin Muhammad al-Attas, but his name has gone into the history of intellectual life in the Malay world because of his son Syed Abdullah al-Attas who became well-known under the name of Habib Abdullah bin Muhsin bin Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas or Habib Keramat Bogor. He is regarded as waliu'llah and ahli kasauf, he is an ‘ulama Murobi’ and Sufi Murshid, well-known in Indonesia.17 He was born in 1275H/1858 A.C. in Huraydah (Hadramaut). He obtained his first religious education from his father Muhsin and Mualim Syeikh Umar bin Faraj bin Sabah. Habib Abdullah wrote many books on usulu’ddin, tasawwuf and the philosophy of Islam. He devoted his entire life to the mission of the Islamization of the Malay world and the strengthening of Islam there. He passed away on the 29th of Zulhijjah 1351H/24th of April 1933 A.C. Until now his followers revere his grave in Empang Bogor in West Java. Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is the grandson of this Habib Abdullah bin Muhsin bin Muhammad bin Abdullah al-Attas or Habib Keramat Bogor.

This information is another eloquent testimony to the great role and influence of the Hadramaut Seyyid families upon Malay society over the centuries. Moshe Yegar has written the following:

The Hadramautis were prominent in the Arab community. (...) The Malays…stood in awe of them, and addressed them in the same respectful terms as they used towards their rajahs.18

The Sayyids were the only group of outsiders accepted by royalty as equal in status. Once married into a dynastic family, they were addressed “Yang Mulia Engku Sayyid.” (...) Children of such marriages were addressed and treated as members of the royal house.19

Syed al-Attas’ family favoured the development of the relationship between the Malay aristocracy and Mecca’s ulama and religious leaders, and assisted and supported the intellectual and spiritual connection be-

between the Malays and scholars of the Middle East. In this context, we can understand better the scale and significance of Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas’ work in contemporary Malaysia. The professor is carrying on the same mission started by his ancestors many centuries ago, i.e., the great mission of the intellectual Islamization of the Malay world. In my interview, the professor emphasized again that the Islamization of the Malay world was a great and deliberate mission of the chief ulamas from the Hadramaut and not by any means merely a casual consequence of commercial activity by Arab traders. The information derived from the *Tuhfat al-Nafis* and some other historical sources is most valuable in proving the correctness of this conclusion.

The entire life of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and his great enlightening work are truly another demonstration of this fact. Both the man and his works should by right be regarded as the national treasure of Malaysia and as the national pride of the Malaysian people.

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20 Concerning some other members of Syed al-Attas family and their contribution to the history of intellectual and religious development in Malay society, see: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. 1999. *The Rare Gift and the Key to Opening the Door of Union. The Ratib of our Master, the Luminant Exemplar, the Pole Versed in the Knowledge of the Lord, the Dispeller of Distress, the Beloved 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Attas (d.1072H/1660M in Huraidah).* Translated from the Arabic with notes and explanatory remarks by Sayyid Muhammad Naqib b. 'Ali b. 'Abd Allah b. Muhsin b. Muhammad al-Attas, The Ba’Alawi Mosque. Singapore.