

Ucuptama / Keynote Address

Malay National Narrative and Malaysian Historiography: Before Postmodernity and Its Discontents, and After Too (*)

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ABSTRAK

Penerbitan, yang asalnya diterbitkan secara berasingan antara 1964 dan 2007, dan yang kemudiannya dikumpulkan ke dalam satu jilid koleksi esei William R. Roff mengenai Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia, amat bermakna dalam dua aspek. Selain merupakan kejayaan peribadinya, koleksi ini menandakan satu kejayaan, kemuncak kepada kerja yang telah Roff lakukan untuk selama 50 tahun mengenai Melayu dan sejarah sosial Islam, iaitu semenjak beliau bertapak di Kampung Jawa, Kelang pada tahun 1959. Koleksi ini juga menandakan satu peristiwa penting dalam konteks Kajian Malaysia dan dengan itu, merupakan satu peluang untuk menilai dan meneliti semula bidang kajian ini. Semenjak kajiannya yang begitu autoritatif dan meyakinkan mengenai The Origin of Malay Nationalism (1967), Roff merupakan seorang intelektual yang disegani. Kalibernya yang terkemuka dan hasil kerjanya yang sentiasa relevan dibuktikan melalui koleksi 15 buah esei yang amat terperinci, terfokus, dan berkaitan antara satu sama lain ini. Hasil kerja Roff ini memberikan satu kerangka yang jelas dan secara umumnya merangkumi yang penggantinya dalam bidang kajian Melayu dan sejarah Malaya, dan yang menerima inspirasi pasca-modern cuba persoalkan dan juga menggantikan, tetapi sehingga kini masih belum berjaya untuk menyamai jauh sekali untuk mengganti.

Kata kunci: William Roff, Melayu, Islamisasi, historiografi Malaysia, pascamodernisme

ABSTRACT

The publication together in one volume of William R. Roff's collected essays on Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia, which originally appeared separately between 1964 and 2007, has a double significance. It marks a personal milestone, the completion of fifty years of continuing work on Malay and Islamic social history since his arrival in Kampung Jawa, Klang in 1959. It is also a major event in Malaysian Studies and hence an opportunity to take stock of the field's, as well as simply Roff's, achievements. Since his magisterial study of The Origins of Malay Nationalism (1967) Roff has been a towering intellectual presence. His eminent stature and the continuing relevance of his work are confirmed in these fifteen detailed, closely focused and intimately interconnected essays. Roff's work provides a well-shaped yet broadly inclusive framework that his postmodernist-inspired successors in Malay and Malayan history have sought to question and even displace but which they have never overturned or equalled.

Keywords: William Roff, Malays, Islamisation, Malaysian historiography, postmodernism

I

If there is one essential book, towering over all others, for the understanding of Malaysia today, it is surely William Roff's *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Yale U.P. 1967).

In a *tour de force* of detailed, closely documented and elegantly argued social, intellectual, cultural and ultimately political history, it shows how 'the Malays' as a prospectively unified people in modern Malaya were produced: first in their own social consciousness and self-understanding and, second, in the midst of the 'plural'

social and political world of twentieth century 'British Malaya' surrounding them.

That is, first, the widely diverse Malays of the various peninsular states, Federated and Unfederated and from the Crown Colonies, and from very diverse historical origins - including many Javanese, Minangkabau, Acehnese, Mendailing, Bugis and Riau backgrounds, to name but a few - came to see themselves as one people, an emerging and coalescing community of shared national fate.

Second - on the other side of that same coin, in the other half of this same historical process - possessed and

driven by this new sense of a shared destiny, they began to mobilise as 'the Malays' of the Peninsula against the marginalisation and systemic humiliations inflicted upon them by their so-called British 'protectors'. They also mobilised against the peoples of different backgrounds, mainly Chinese and Indians, who, arriving in the Peninsula in increasing and prospectively overwhelming numbers under colonial protection, that they characterised as 'immigrants' and saw as a growing threat to their own standing and, as they saw it, their 'historic birthright' in their ancestral lands (whether or not they and their families hailed originally from peninsular backgrounds).

In his magisterial work Roff quarried a rich vein of local literary and documentary as well as oral sources in Malay. He showed how, and why, earlier forms of Malay political self-affirmation, couched in Islamic and populist pan-Malay terms, failed to catalyse a concerted, widely-backed Malay political movement; and how and why, at first haltingly and piecemeal, the basis for such a movement was gradually assembled under aristocratic auspices and among the well-born English-educated Malay bureaucrats and government functionaries, ready to erupt as the anti-Malayan Union movement in 1946.

Hence the cries of '*Hidup Melayu!*', the popular defence of the co-opted and shamelessly suborned Malay Rulers, and hence too the UMNO and modern Malaysia - a country that even now, in charting its way into the twenty-first century, still returns, obsessively some would say, to argue over what the period 1946 to 1957 was about, how it is to be seen and read, and what, if anything, its immutable and uncontested legacy may be. Or, in other words, 'the rest is history ...'.

One perhaps needs say no more - but I will. Roff's contribution to modern Malaysian studies, and to this nation's understanding of itself, is not a matter of one moment, one indisputably great book. It has been a scholarly lifetime's work now extending over half a century. Apart from *Origins*, that contribution is to be found, especially, in a number of no less detailed, focused, fine-grained and finely crafted essays, each of them smaller in scope but no less substantial and authoritative in character than *Origins*. These essays, indeed this scholarly harvest, begins with, but is not confined to Malay and Malaysian historical studies. Rather, it extends to and searchingly covers a far wider field, including the Malay world of Southeast Asia and beyond, the comparative study of modern Islamic societies and social history, and the historical basis and trajectories of contemporary Islamic social movements worldwide.

Scattered over the years, not to the winds but among a wide range of scholarly journals and specialist edited volumes (as the 'product' of most academic careers often is), these essays have become in many cases hard to find. Regrettably what cannot be readily accessed is soon, and at times undeservedly, even cruelly, forgotten. A sad fate, but one that in this case - thanks to NUS Press in

Singapore - has been thwarted by their republication, in one another's mutually enhancing company, in this superb volume. Their reappearance now is not only welcome. It represents a major moment in Malaysian Studies. The bringing together of these important essays is not only an appropriate way to mark Roff's half century of scholarly work in this country and his current return visit to Malaysia. It also provides Malaysian historical studies, and Malaysia itself, with the opportunity to congratulate themselves - this time deservedly - and to acknowledge their truly notable achievements and unfolding progress.

II

Bringing together most of Roff's important essays on 'Islam and Society in Southeast Asia' - the earliest first published in 1964, the latest in 2007 - the volume to be launched today consists of fifteen very distinctly focused, but intimately and complexly interconnected, essays, presented here not chronologically, but topically in five sections, with three essays in each 'set'.

The first deals with some general issues of historical method and approach in Islamic social history in Southeast Asia and beyond; the second triad with some key patterns, agents and 'sites' of Islamisation in the Malay-Muslim world; the third with some influential connections and mutual interactions between the Islamic worlds of this Nusantara region and Arab world of the Middle East; the fourth is focused on developments within the culturally, politically and religiously distinctive, often pioneering, state of Kelantan; and the fifth with the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

In the first section 'Islam Obscured?' deals with the writing of Southeast Asian Islamic history by the great twentieth-century Dutch scholars, with their own preconceptions and, in consequence, their arguably distorted views and conclusions. It explores the relations between Islam and *adat*, their varying interplay in different contexts, and what these differences may tell us about the processes and patterns of Islamisation in Nusantara. The second essay similarly considers what may be learnt about Islamic society and the Islamisation of societies from changing patterns, practices and conventions of personal naming. The third, with satisfying acuity, addresses a central historical, and more than simply historical, question, namely the theme, in C.G. von Grunbaum's terms, of 'unity and diversity in Islamic civilisation'. Is Islamic society, and are Islamic social movements, one or many? Is there one normative Islamic message or many so-called 'local Islams'? Both, Roff replies. The ideal lives among people only through their attempts to actualise it, flesh it out, which they do in specific places and times, shaped by evolving cultural contexts and historical forces. The many are the one, the one lives in the many.

After opening with a portrait of the complex Malay-Muslim world of late nineteenth-century Singapore, with its elite religious trend-setters intimately connected with Middle Eastern and South Asian developments, the two succeeding essays in the second section consider the changing ways in which Malay and Malaysian Islam has been promoted and developed, the changing media (from oral to print to broadcasting and electronic) through which orthodox and approved forms of Islamic belief and practice are diffused, the changing ways and institutional contexts in which religious experts are created and religious expertise authenticated, the changing ways in which the *haj*, or Meccan pilgrimage, has been organised.

Overall, while the means have changed, the underlying objectives and tendencies towards 'high-minded rectification' of approved everyday practices have remained impressively constant. Behind accelerating change since colonial times have been two key 'drivers'. The first has been the bureaucratisation, or modern administrative streamlining and expansion, of the management of Islamic affairs. The momentum of institutional innovation, begun during the colonial years, has increased markedly since national independence. So too has the second trend. Superseding older, more diffuse and informal, and hence less systematic means and measures of management and control, the modern state has facilitated the increasing, and increasingly determinative, recourse to the enactment of statute law, and the related issuing of regulations, to centralize, 'rectify' and standardise Malay Islam. Imam Shafe'i and his strict constructionist adherents may be the doctrinal source of these developments, but the 'godfather' of their means and method has been Max Weber.

The essays in the third section explore the experiences, and subsequently significant religious and political influence, of the Malay and Indonesian students who studied in Cairo in the heady 1920s, a time of continuing religious controversy and new political upheaval; the role of people of Hadrami Arab background, as proprietors and editors, in the new Malay journalism of the Peninsula under twentieth-century British rule; and the fascinating story of the notoriously unsolved murder of a prominent Hadrami Arab, Syed Abdul Kadir Alsagoff, in Singapore in 1908. Was the reason business rivalry, personal jealousy, doctrinal disagreement over the propriety of marriages on a basis of equality between *sadah* (*sayyid*) and lower-ranked Hadrami Arabs? Or perhaps a basic, but subterranean contestation among the Singapore *sadah* Arabs between those with crypto-Shi'a sympathies and their censorious Sunni opponents? We will never know, we may now only wonder and speculate. As Roff wisely concludes, *Wa Allahu'alam ...*

The fourth section provides Roff's detailed analysis of the origins of the Kelantan *Majlis Agama* or state religious council that was to become a model and

precedent for similar developments in the other Malay states; and an essay about the literary activity of one of the *Majlis*'s founders, Muhammad bin Muhammad Said (and whether his Malay rendering of a 'Nick Carter'-type detective story as *Kecurian Lima Juta Ringgit* in 1922 was the 'first Malay novel').

Just as the preceding section finds its powerful focus in 'Murder as an Aid to Social History' and the Alsagoff case, so too does this section find its centre in a conflict situation, a great confrontation. Here, it is the dispute, prompted by the Raja Muda Kelantan's insistence on keeping an elegant Dalmatian hound and his sister, the Tengku Maharani's personal and religious detestation of his doing so. The question whether dog saliva, and the keeping of dogs, are absolutely polluting detonated a struggle between religious modernists and traditionalists that divided Kelantanese society from the very top that was ultimately referred to Al-Azhar in Cairo for a definitive *fatwa*. The cover of Roff's new book is graced with a picture of the leading modernist scholar, a key protagonist in this dispute, Haji Abbas Taha with the Raja Muda's hound. For some pious conservative Muslims of the late 1930s, the offending 'Spotted Dog' was something other than the Selangor Club and its famous bar, but something no less defiling and dangerous.

The final section on the *haj* deals with its religious and symbolic dynamics, as discussed by anthropologists; and with the attempts of colonial authorities - forever concerned with political subversion, real and imagined, from anti-colonial radicals, Wahabi or caliphate Islamists, and communist puppets, and, quite rationally, with health and sanitation problems, then cholera and smallpox just as now it is swine flu - to regulate *haj* procedures and monitor the pilgrims. This concern led to the appointment, traced in the third essay here, of the writer and former teacher Abdul Majid bin Zainuddin as Malay Pilgrimage Officer from 1924 to 1939, in which capacity he also provided, far less assiduously than his services to Malay pilgrims, political intelligence to the colonial police authorities. This essay provides the essential complement to Haji Abdul Majid's autobiography, *The Wandering Thoughts of a Dying Man* (Oxford U.P. Kuala Lumpur 1978) that Roff saw to publication.

While these essays are grouped for convenience topically into the five 'triadic' sections, they constantly speak to and implicate one another across those section boundaries: on questions of the *haj*, of Islamisation and Islamic intensification, Islamic institutional elaboration and legal codification, Malay involvement in wider 'Islamic world cosmopolitanism', or police and detective work - from the Alsagoff case, to Muhammad bin Muhammad Said's *Kecurian Lima Juta Ringgit*, to Haji Abdul Majid's desultory police reporting work. The craft of history itself, after all, as this wonderful collection evidences, is itself a kind of top-drawer detective work, just as classical opera and folk-singing are kindred pursuits.

III

A quarter-century after the publication of Roff's *Origins*, its postmodernist, pluralist, 'discursivist' rejoinder (here spiced with a dash of Germanic flavour courtesy of a conceptual "grab" from Habermas) arrived.

I speak of course of Tony Milner's *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*. Now, in it, no more Malay 'nationalism', no more three candidate variants thereof (Islamic, vernacular-populist and aristocratic-bureaucratic with their distinctive *évolué* elites) emerging under colonial rule. Instead, remember, first, Lévi-Strauss and his view that in archaic societies 'the myths live and speak through us without our realising it'. Likewise in modern societies, for all who follow in his intellectual wake, discourse. It lives, its various forms live their own reality, and we, unaware of it, are the medium through which they do so. We see ourselves as authors and subjects, but we are mere effects of the operation of discourse in and upon us. The primary reality is not us, people, but discourse, of which we humans are nothing but effects and moments, sites and instances. (A bit, all this, like Richard Dawkins's view that, at the natural biological level, the real story is that of our genes, while we, for all our delusions of consciousness and choice, are but the medium, or enabling environment - the happenstance 'packaging' - in which they live, and through which they may produce their history, and thereby write the story of life itself).

So too, for Milner, no 'nationalism' in his title or theme (his is not one story, but many, and so definitively none), no rival variant candidates for Malay national mobilisation, no new elites organically and substantively connected to these variants, as creators, promoters and also aspiring beneficiaries. Instead for Milner there are three key discourses, three main discursive foci or thematics - *agama*, *bangsa* and *istana*.

Milner's book is an excellent book (I said so in the publisher's promotion of it), a valuable book, at times an original and profound book, and a book, too, that is a product of and responsive to its times. But excuse me! Its simultaneous but discrete discourses and discursive foci - *agama*, *bangsa* and *istana* - sound to some of us, especially the 'grumpy old men' of the trade, very much like Roff's earlier magisterial account restated for the subsequent 'pluralist, no-grand-narratives, don't-privilege-the-standpoint-of-the-state-and-nation' era.

People like Roff and also myself, I venture to say, now live - or live on - in an intellectual age born of our younger colleagues' insistence (now for twenty years and more) that 'there is no grand narrative'. Well, that precisely is, of course, theirs. Unacknowledged perhaps as such, that is their framing orientation and conviction, their ontological ultimate and absolute.

It is based upon the trite and hence unexceptionable view that at any time, in any ample place, not just one thing, but many things, are usually going on. But 'we all

knew that already when we came in'. We all did, people of my generation, as kids who every Saturday afternoon went to the cinema, the *panggung wayang* or *pawagam*. There too, in the reflections it offered of life, anything and everything might happen - and before 5 p.m. usually did. But whether what we were watching was a cowboy story or Abbott and Costello slapstick, we wanted to see, and sought to discern, what frail elements of coherence might be found amidst, or brought to bear upon, all the 'anything goes' mayhem and madness, what sense might be made of them, what there might be within the unruly spectacle that these stories provided that was amenable to human reason and analysis. What else, after all, did we have, does anybody, to work with?

This, we might wryly note - those who may still care, if I may so put it, for so preposterously 'pre-postmodernist' a field of enquiry as the philosophy of history - was pretty much Hegel's position in the matter when he sought to discern, by recourse to human reason, the workings of reason, its struggle for objective realisation, in the world, in human events, in history (as he put it) as an abattoir, a slaughter-house of people and peoples, a butcher's block for nations and human hopes.

So our aim too - whether older or younger, modernist-progressivist or anti-teleological postmodernist, Roff or Milner - is never, and can never be, to say everything about everything but something, ideally something precise and specific, about something that (from some arguably 'strategic' viewpoint) may be important, significant; that is revealing; that gives some shape to the otherwise chaotic flow of events and our understanding of them; that suggests some themes and connections of some far-reaching, or at least non-trivial, import and consequence.

There is no difference here between the 'Whiggish' pre-postmodernists and the 'anti-progressivist' teleology-refusing postmodernists - no difference, that is, other than the fact that many of the postmodernists, enamoured of their pluralist commitments, fail to see that their accounts too are as selective, and perspectival and hence exclusionary, and as selectively 'privileging' as those of their modernist predecessors. Theirs are as presumptively, if covertly, 'hegemonic' as anybody else's. You disagree? Try saying so, putting a different view that is critical of theirs, their epistemology, in any supposedly self-respecting 'cosmopolitan' university faculty of humanities and social sciences these days!

Few of us here can remember, or can have any idea, of what Malaysian studies, especially modern Malayan history, were like before Roff's *Origins*. One read a variety of things, big and small - traditional Malay historiography, Fabian-inspired studies of various plans for and problems of Malayan decolonisation, grand tomes by Swettenham and other imperial 'grandees' (and also dwarfs) - and then tried to make some sense of it all, to say 'what it was all about and added up to', to compose from those disparate and fragmentary materials an overall composite picture:

in the fond hope or decided belief that history was not just one damned thing after another, or a whole lot of damned things, some more palatable than others, crowding one another out, shouting one another down with their various partisan voices.

Then came Roff's *Origins* which provided a theme, some shape and form, an encompassing yet hospitably inclusive perspective, that suggested some coherent patterns and processes, some insistent dynamics, within the apparently incoherent flow - that not only threw light upon its own period from the 1890s to the 1930s, but in its resonant final paragraph, outlined on that basis 'the shape of things to come': the Malayan Union confrontation and the popular Malay struggle, sustained alike by commoners and aristocrats and Islamists, to rescue themselves as Malays - and also as beneficiaries of their common self-defence, their hapless, already defeated sultans and rulers - from further political exclusion and humiliation. (Note carefully my choice of words here. The sultans and Malay Rulers, I said, were at that time 'hapless', not 'hopeless'; not that, in the face of the Malayan Union demands, they lacked hope or inspired none - '*tak boleh harap*' - but that, in that historic moment and predicament, they were without recourse, incapable of independent resistance, '*tidak berupaya lagi mempertahankan kedudukan serta kepentingannya sendiri yang tercabar*').

Their sources and emerging shape over the preceding half-century traced so subtly by Roff's masterpiece, these were decisive developments. These events gave shape to, and provided the theme and set the terms for, the entire post-war transition to independence from 1946 to 1957. Other things too were happening, but this was the central terrain of their occurrence as well.

Some years ago Tim Harper wrote a very interesting and important book about this period, *The End of Empire and the Making of Colonial Malaya* (Cambridge U.P. 1999). Like Milner's, it too is a very valuable and scholarly book. Its theme, his argument, was that over this period there was not just one thing (Malay-based Malayan nationalism) going on in this land, but many - not all of them mutually congruent.

True, of course. Again, 'we knew this when we came in the door'. Things could not have been otherwise. But not all of these things were equally fateful. By all means, certainly, all are parts of the story. We must acknowledge and consider them. We must look at 'the roads not taken'. Yet we must also see that they were not taken and wonder, and seek to explain, why not. Why not? Because, in short, many of them were not viable or lacked the means to make themselves so, to impress upon others, and the course of history, their sense of their own consequentiality.

Yet to read Harper's account—his insistence that lots of different things were then going on - was, for this 'grumpy old man of the trade' at least, like drinking the elixir of youth, to become once more not just a young man, but the young man he once was. The old dinosaurs

were plunged back by Harper's book into that far-off era when, since that is all there was, we read all those Colonial Office reports and studies, Fabian-inspired essays and polemics, imperial grandee memoirs and liberal reformist tracts - and wondered 'what it was all about' here in 'once-British Malays', what it all added up to and where things might be heading. Harper's book plunged us, threw us back intellectually in other words, into the pre-Roff era.

Back into the past for us, but not for others, for the field, for Malaysia. For us there had not then been anything definitive said, no sense-making guide-rail to hold onto, so we sought, for better or worse, to say a few things. None did so better than Roff or came anywhere close to him. By contrast, now, these days, there is, thanks mainly to Roff, something to say, something that tells more than its own story. We are not bereft, we do not now lack some well-grounded and persuasive orientation. But it is something that you can't say any more - not in polite, progressive, 'post-Enlightenment enlightened', politically correct, postmodernist, post-colonialist-discursive academic company. Yet that view, that politely unutterable viewpoint, did not wither or die. It has not gone away. Abandoned by the scholars who might have handled it carefully, and been its responsible custodians, it was (recklessly, I believe) surrendered to the exclusive and ever-less-than-tender care of the implacable, and decidedly a-historical, '*Ketuanan Melayu*' activists and bully-boys, the zealots.

The problem here is that, once you say that everyone has his (or her) perspective, that every party and player its own narrative, and that there is no discursively secure and sustainable basis upon which one might presume to say that one or any of them might be worse, or better - more accurate, or comprehensive or inclusive, and hence, while less than perfect and total, more credible, and worthy of our attention and respect - than any other, you disarm yourself. You leave yourself, by your own criteria and choice, no grounds upon which to stand to question the hand-and-foot-chopping Islamists, the market-logic economic fundamentalists, the *Ketuanan Melayu* ethno-supremacists, or anybody else. You have already sawn off, from the tree of knowledge, and thrown away the branch on which you need to stand in order to do so. You have stated why you yourself may, and must, accept their narrative, and with it heed their claims made upon its authority, but not established any basis whatsoever, intellectual or moral, of mutuality upon which they must acknowledge yours - or anybody else's beyond their own exclusive concerns and exclusionary perspective.

This principled, and all too fastidious, even precious, retreat of the scholars, not from a politically and supposedly eternally 'Malay-dominant', but from a culturally 'Malay-centric' understanding of modern peninsular Malayan history, has been a great victory for all that is grand and, among the self-proclaimed cosmopolitans, praiseworthy in contemporary international intellectual fashions. These great academic

victories, and now that of discursively-based postmodernist indeterminacy, sometimes come, alas, like those (well pondered by Hegel) of the great Napoleon himself, at a terrible human, public and historical cost.

Whatever the shorter-term vagaries of scholarly style, fashions and approaches, William Roff's great scholarly work and contributions remain, undeniable in their singular presence and authority. Offered in his imposing *Origins of Malay Nationalism* and in the many substantial if shorter related essays in the same spirit - arrayed, like individually sparkling finely cut gems in a master jeweller's ring, as they are now made available here again, and together, in one another's mutually illuminating company, in this newly-published collection - these magisterial studies constituting Roff's great *oeuvre* will stand, and remain the essential and indispensable historical works, for as long as people, not just academic people, talk about Malaya, Malaysia and the Malay peoples of this land and region.

Before I declare this latest book well and truly launched, one final thing. Meant sincerely, I fear it may sound mawkish. But say it I will. There is often something awkward in the relationships among men - especially those with some hint or echo of relations between fathers and sons - in academic life.

This, over the years, has, I fear, prevented me from adequately acknowledging my huge indebtedness, intellectual and more, to William Roff, both in his capacity as a major international scholar and also as a generous source of personal assistance and support, scholarly and more than just scholarly. Even when he most graciously

provided an essay to my *Festschrift*, I remained - in the midst of other travails - inhibited and tongue-tied, *kekak dan malu*.

So I am truly grateful to the organisers of this event for now providing me with the opportunity to do so - and to do so here, at Universiti Malaya, 'where it all began'.

It is my great honour and privilege now to declare William Roff's *Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (NUS Press 2009) well and truly launched. May it have a long, good, happy, productive and influential life. May it live well, guide, inspire and enlighten for many decades to come.

NOTE

(*) Remarks at the launching of William R. Roff's collected essays on *Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* at Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Kemasyarakatan (FSSK), Universiti Malaya on 30 July 2009.

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