



# AL-SHAJARAH

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# AL-SHAJARAH

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## ***Book Reviews***

**Ramli Ngah Talib, *The Malays: Pathfinders and Trailblazers*. Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia, 2022. 477 pp. ISBN: 9789674609139.**

*Reviewer:* Mohamad Hazizie Sulkafle, Assistant Professor, Department of History and Civilization, AHAS KIRKHS, IIUM. Email: haziziesulkafle@iium.edu.my

Launched on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2022 by His Royal Highness the Sultan of Perak Darul Ridzuan, Sultan Dr. Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah, this book indeed had brought a new perspective in understanding the Malay history, culture, and civilization. The launching of this book took place not long before the premier screening of *Mat Kilau*, a box-office film in Malaysia which recently had achieved an unprecedented collection of almost RM100 million (as of 13<sup>th</sup> September 2022). Although these two phenomena were not directly related, yet the publication of this book and the outburst of *Mat Kilau* film may be seen as part of the recently growing consciousness among the Malays regarding their identity, history, culture, and civilization. The author himself, for example, stated in his Introduction “Malays are at the crossroads. Is there hope for the Malays to find the way out of these self-inflicting mortal wounds?” (p. xxvi). Hence, using history as the reference, the author hoped to present the answer to that question to the Malay people.

This book is divided into two parts; the first part focuses on the historical development of the Malay society and its religion, culture, and language starting from pre-Srivijaya era up to the Independence of Malaya in 1957. This is one of the unique features of this book. This book did not view the historical development of the Malay society started with the emergence of the Melaka Sultanate, but instead stretch it far back to pre-Srivijaya era when the Malays were roaming freely in the seas as the “pathfinders and trailblazers”. The second part of this book is of further interest to the readers when the author reserved it to debunk several misperceptions about the Malay

people. Among the issues discussed by the author are the foreign perception of the laziness of the native Malays, the Malays as a docile people, the Malays as pirates and the so-called “Indianization” process of the Malay society during the Hindu-Buddhist period. In total, this book comprises 31 chapters with the first 25 chapters forming its Part One and the remaining 6 chapters constituting its Part Two.

The author sought to highlight two salient features of the Malay civilization; first, the Malays were great sailors; hence, their civilization may be viewed as a maritime civilization. This inference is reflected in the subtitle of the book itself, which refers to the Malays as “pathfinders” and “trailblazers”. *Merriam-Webster* defines “pathfinder” as “one that discovers the way, *especially* one that explores untraversed regions to mark out a new route”.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, “trailblazer” is defined as “pioneer; one that blazes a trail to guide others”.<sup>2</sup> Although both terms seem synonymous, the word “trailblazer” has a leadership connotation. A “trailblazer” does not only showing and exploring the path, but lead others to it. The author argued that in reflecting their past, the Malays appeared to be not only pathfinders, who explored the world, but also trailblazers, who led others in exploring the world through their innovations in ship building and sailing technology. One of their main innovations was the introduction of balanced-lug sail, an invention that proved to be of great global significance in human history. This balanced-lug sail can be pivoted sideways, which makes it possible to sail into the oncoming wind at an angle or to tack against the wind. This invention was later adopted by the Arabs, Indians, and Chinese, which enabled the ship to sail even against the wind.

The Malays in the past were able to explore and sail up to Madagascar leaving their trails there. Recent studies have shown that contrary to the widely accepted narratives, it was the Malays who had found the Indians and the Chinese first, not the vice versa. Hundreds of years before the arrival of the Indians – and their religions and culture – to the Malay Archipelago, the Malays themselves had set their foot on the shores of the Indian sub-continent for trades. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pathfinder>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trailblazer>

Malays encountered the same situation with China. As early as the third century of the Common Era, the Malays – the *kun-lun po* – were known to have arrived at the ports of China, linking trades between the two regions. This further led to the emergence of several maritime empires in the Malay world starting with Srivijaya followed by Majapahit, Melaka, Aceh, and Johor.

The second salient feature of the Malay civilization highlighted by the author pertains to the historical role and status of the Malay language as the *lingua franca* in this region. This emphasis on the Malay language not only aims to instil a sense of pride among the contemporary society regarding the role and status of Malay language as the official language for the country, but also to prove the ability of Malay language to be used in academic and professional fields.

There are two issues that this review would like to highlight regarding the narratives of this book. Firstly, the author had brought readers' attention to further re-think about the so-called "Indianization" process of the Malay world. According to the author, since 1960s, Malay children had been taught in schools that "If you scratch the skin of the Malay, you get an Indian" to emphasize that "the Indian cultural influence is so strong and pervasive in the Malay [culture] that the Malays are almost Indian culture-wise" (p. 449). The author had referred to the opinions of John Miksic and Nik Hassan Suhaimi regarding the "Indianization" process claim. According to him, Miksic (and Suhaimi as well) had "watered down the then widely held view of the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism on the Malays by saying that the new religious beliefs elaborated existing attitudes rather than creating a radical break from the past" (p. 70). It is important to note that one of the earliest people who claimed on this "Indian" influences was Sir Stamford Raffles. This claim was further elaborated by later British colonialists such as R.J. Wilkinson and R.O. Winstedt, and then systematically developed by George Coedes in *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (first published in 1944). This book helped popularize among scholars the theory of the "Indianization" of the Malay world. Yet, upon careful reading of Coedes's argument especially in the introductory part, he himself had warned readers to not over-emphasize or exaggerate this

so-called “Indianization” process. For Coedes, this “Indianization” (if it really happened) was a dynamic process whereby it was the Malays who chose what to adopt (for example, the Malays never adopted the caste system) and “Historians agree that, under an Indian veneer, most of the population preserved the essentials of their own culture.”<sup>3</sup>

The second interesting issue to be highlighted is when the author pointed out several opinions regarding the fall of Melaka in 1511. For example, the author stated that one of the main reasons for the fall of Melaka was its lack of a standing army and a strategy in fighting the Portuguese (pp. 168-174). However, if the absence of a standing army was the main reason, then Melaka should have fallen much earlier than 1511 during the Siamese attacks in 1445 and 1456. Besides, contradictory to this view, the Portuguese themselves in their records acknowledged that Melaka was well protected by enough manpower up to the point that they faced a fierce resistance from the Malays during the attack, and the Sultan of Melaka had a well-prepared strategy to face the Portuguese. The Sultan for example, by delaying the negotiations, had ordered the army to further strengthen the fortifications along the coastal areas of Melaka. To further understand this issue, a recently published book chapter by Azmi Ariffin is important to be read. For Azmi Ariffin, the betrayal of the Javanese army and the foreign traders in Melaka were the main reasons for the fall of Melaka.<sup>4</sup>

In my view, this is a must-read book for anyone interested in deepening his or her understanding of the history, culture, and the achievement of the Malay people. For the Malay people themselves this book may help them to find answers to lingering questions about their own cultural identity and to instil confidence of their historical heritage. It is strongly recommended that this book be critically discussed in academic forums such as seminars and book discussion sessions. It would also be a good move, if this book could be

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<sup>3</sup> George Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Azmi Ariffin, “Kejatuhan Kota Melaka 1511: Antara Feudalisme Melayu, Kekejaman Raja dan Pengkhianatan Orang Asing”, in *Kesultanan Melayu Melaka: Warisan, Tradisi dan Persejarahannya*, edited by Azmi Ariffin, Abdul Rahman Haji Ismail and Abu Talib Ahmad (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit USM, 2021), 314-387.



translated into Malay language (with more affordable price) so that a greater segment of the Malay society can benefit from it.

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**Santhiram R. Raman, *From Decolonization to Ethno-nationalism: A study of Malaysia's School History Syllabuses and Textbooks 1905 - 2020*. Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (SIRD): Petaling Jaya, 2021, 111 pp. I still don't have it from the reviewers; please go ahead without it.**

Reviewers: Dr. Wan Ali Wan Mamat is Senior Academic Fellow (ISTAC-IIUM); Email: [wanaliwm@iium.edu.my](mailto:wanaliwm@iium.edu.my); and Abdul Rahman Ali, Malaysia Historical Society, Email: [abdulrahman41@gmail.com](mailto:abdulrahman41@gmail.com)

The history syllabus and textbooks in the Malaya/Malaysia education system became a matter of interest only within the few years before the country's independence in 1957 to eventually become a controversy among concerned educationists and academicians. During the British colonial period, the syllabus and textbooks, despite being European-centric/English oriented and far from being Malayan in form and content, were generally accepted without much dispute, perhaps because during this period the number of local historians and educated elites were still small. Education in the country was then under the colonial dominance. Furthermore, history teachers, having been educated under the British colonial system, even after some years of independence were more familiar and at ease with the old colonial curriculum. However, after Malaya (later Malaysia) gained Independence from the British in 1957 and Malaysia in 1963, the controversy about the right approach in the teaching of Malayan history came to the fore. The main contentious issue about the history curriculum was Malayanization and Malaysia-centric versus Euro-centric syllabus.

Later with changes in the curriculum and textbooks a new kind of controversy arose over the predominance of Malay and Islamic

## TRANSLITERATION TABLE

### CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h <sup>1</sup>	h <sup>1</sup>
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḏ	ḏ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a <sup>2</sup>
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al <sup>3</sup>	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	q	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

<sup>1</sup> – when not final

<sup>2</sup> – at in construct state

<sup>3</sup> – (article) al - or l-

### VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form i)	iy (final form i)
	و	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

### URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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