

### Book Review

**PETER G. RIDDELL (2017), MALAY COURT RELIGION, CULTURE AND LANGUAGE: INTERPRETING THE QUR'ĀN IN 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ACEH, LEIDEN & BOSTON: BRILL. 348 PAGES. [ISBN: 978-90-04-33949-1 (HARDBACK); 978-90-04-34132-6 (E-BOOK)]**

Isaac Donoso\*

The study of Qur'ānic exegesis in the Malay world is a fairly recent and fascinating endeavour. *Tafsīr* is a major Islamic science, since it provides a deeper understanding of the Qur'ānic Revelation as the fundamental source of the Islamic faith. Sooner or later Muslim societies develop an interest in elaborating a local tradition of Qur'ānic exegesis. Beyond the canonical Arabic commentaries, many Muslim societies need to explore the meanings through their own language. Given this vitally important role of *tafsīr* for the intellectual life of all Muslim communities, the case of the modern Malay-Indonesian world is atypical. Being one of the most populated and fast-growing Muslim regions in the world, little was known until recently about early Qur'ānic commentaries in the Malay language. This fact contrasted with the considerable attention to the discipline in modern times; needless to mention personalities like *ḥajjī* 'Abd al-Mālik Karīm 'Amr Allāh / عبد المالك كريم عمر الله (1908-81), better known by the acrostic Hamka, and his *Tafsīr al-Azhār*.

This atypical situation has changed substantially with the works of the Australian scholar Peter Gregory Riddell. Years ago, he identified the relevance of Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45 for the history of Malay Qur'ānic commentaries, and since then he has been working in elucidating the origins of *tafsīr* in Southeast Asia. Indeed, he followed the steps of A. H. Johns and his innovative paper "Islam in the Malay World: An Exploratory Survey with Some Reference to Quranic Exegesis" (in R. Israeli & A.H. Johns (eds), *Islam in Asia*, Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, 1984, vol. II, pp. 115-161). Following this pioneering research, Riddell unearthed the significance of the Sūra al-Kahf Malay commentary preserved in Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45: "It is only by undertaking a search among the MSS collected by European seafarers and kept in Europe that we find the final, and most important key to solving this puzzle. This key is provided by a little known manuscript in the Cambridge University Library collection catalogued as MS Ii.6.45. This MS contains commentary in Malay upon the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'ān, and originally belonged to the private collection of the Dutch Arabist Erpenius (d. 1624). It was brought back to Europe from Aceh at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, hence it must have been composed around 1600".

This is what Riddell said in 1989, when he undertook the first partial translation and analysis of the manuscript and its contents: "Earliest Qur'ānic Exegetical Activity in the Malay-Speaking States" (*Archipel*, 1989, vol. 38, p. 112). From this moment he has committed—between other research obligations—to provide a feasible narrative of early Malay *tafsīr*. The work is necessarily comparative in nature, making use of other surviving material; for instance, the short commentary fragments of Ḥamza Faṣṣūrī / حمزة فنصوري (m. c. 1590) or Shams al-Dīn al-Samaṭrā'ī / شمس الدين سمطرائي. Riddell meticulously does this in pages 29-33 of the present volume. Nevertheless, the comparison needed a better specimen to fill the gaps, which was provided by 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Singkilī / عبد الرؤوف السنغكلي (c. 1615-1693) and the *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*, the first full scale Malay commentary on the Qur'ān.

Overall, this is the context where the present volume is situated. *Malay Court Religion, Culture and Language: Interpreting the Qur'ān in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Aceh* is a study of the religious environment in the court of the Sultanate of Aceh from the last part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>. In doing so, the book presents an edition and translation of Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45, and its corresponding part in *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*; namely, the sections related to Sūra al-Kahf. The goal is to elaborate a feasible narrative of early Qur'ānic commentary in the Malay world and provide the linguistic and cultural evidence. Perhaps this is why the title of the book is not something like "*Origins of Malay Tafsīr*", but focuses on "Court Religion, Culture and Language." Beyond explaining a history of Qur'ānic commentaries, Riddell wishes to elucidate—precisely by using the history of Qur'ānic commentaries—the conflictive religious atmosphere at the court of Aceh during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. We have to remember the drastic methods of Nūr al-Dīn al-Ranīrī / نور الدين الرنيري (m. 1658) used against the supporters of the *wujūdiyya* / وجودية. In fact, this is a topic where major research has been done in the last decades; for instance, the landmark study of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A*

\* Isaac Donoso, Lecturer, Área de Estudios Árabes e Islámicos, Departamento de Filologías Integradas, Universidad de Alicante, Spain. Email: isaacdonoso@ua.es.

*16<sup>th</sup> Century Malay Translation of the ‘Aqā’id of al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur, University of Malaya, 1988). Theology and Sufism attracted much debate among the sages in the Acehese Sultanate. It was not a sectarian division, but a position adopted according to the context. Riddell exposed it perfectly in the present book: “*This letter points to the ability of the Acehese religious authorities to adapt their language to the occasion: more esoteric expression for internal consumption and more exoteric expression for external requirement*” (p. 40). However, the arrival of the foreigner Muḥammad al-Ḥamīd during two periods (1580-83; 1589-94) proved decisive for the resolution of the debate. Though he tried to adjust his teaching to Malay student demands, his nephew did not. Rather, al-Ranīrī promoted repression and eradication of *wujūdī* mystical thoughts, manuscripts and adepts. Afterwards the consequence was the advent of new and young scholars concerned with reconciliation. This is what Riddell explains in “‘Abd al-Ra’ūf of Singkel: Seeking Reconciliation” (pp. 42-48).

The book is divided into three parts: Part 1-Setting the Scene; Part 2-Examining the Commentaries; Part 3-Texts and Translations. The author deals in the first part with the presentation of the two pieces, with special attention to the extraordinary story of Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45. Accordingly, it is one of the few manuscripts presumably copied by the Dutch merchant Pieter Willemsz. van Elbinck, also known as Peter Floris, who later worked for the English East India Company. Van Elbinck saw the potential for these artefacts to be sold to European Orientalists, as occurred with Thomas Erpenius. After the latter Dutch scholar died, conflicts with the University of Leiden led to Erpenius’ collection eventually being sold to the library of the University of Cambridge, where this Malay commentary of Sūra al-Kahf presently resides. Riddell explains the details, and establishes a possible religious setting for each commentary: “The Wujūdiyya Environment of Tafsīr Sūra al-Kahf” (chapter 2), and “The Reformist Environment of Tarjumān al-Mustafīd” (chapter 3).

The second part is perhaps the most technical and specific, since it deals with the sources of the Malay commentaries and the Qur’ānic readings. The author is able to competently identify the classical Arabic sources, in general terms the *Tafsīr al-Baghawī* for Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45 and the *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* for the *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*. In addition, other named sources are studied and most importantly the question of the *Isrā’īlyyāt*, plus other potential problems, are analysed (chapter 5). By determining the different descriptions of the *Qirā’āt*, Riddell is in a position to conclude that: “*While the earlier commentary paid lip service to the study of the qirā’āt, preferring to focus on storytelling in its essential methodology, the later commentary took an approach much more attuned to pedagogy, presenting a far greater level of technical detail of kind that was suited to formal study situations*” (p. 100).

Finally, the third part reproduces an annotated Romanised transliteration of the texts plus English translation, displayed in consecutive pages; namely, Malay verso and English recto. This is the first time that a full and complete edition and translation is published of Camb. MS Or. Ii.6.45. Riddell subdivides it in eight parts: Introduction: A Warning for the Christians; The Account of the Companions of the Cave; Orders and Prohibitions; The Parable of the Vineyards; The Parable of the Life of this World; Warnings of Judgement and Promises of Reward; The Account of Moses’ Quest for Knowledge; and The Account of Dhū l-Qarnayn. The same parts are applicable for the edited and translated sections of ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf’s *Tarjumān al-Mustafīd*.

As appropriate in any review and in order to supply some notes to this exquisite volume, we could mention the transcription of Ibn Baṭūṭah for Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (p. 6), and the alphabetical location of Bearman in the bibliography (p. 333). We also regret the absence as well of some images and reproductions of the original manuscripts.

In sum, we are undoubtedly dealing with a gigantic contribution to the state of the art on Islamic thought in Southeast Asia. Though some portions of this volume were already communicated in Riddell’s previous works, the whole volume represents a landmark on its own. By elaborating an in-depth narrative of early Malay Qur’ānic exegesis, plus providing the originals and English translations, *Malay Court Religion, Culture and Language* assumes a pivotal role in stimulating further research.