Islam in Brunei Darussalam: Negotiating Islamic Revivalism and Religious Radicalism

IIK ARIFIN MANSURNOOR

Abstract

Bruneians have shown great earnestness in their adherence to Islam. Religious life in Brunei, however, is characterised by a marked degree of peace and harmony which is indicated by the absence of schismatic tensions. Moreover, the Bruneians’ allegiance to Islam did not problematise their encounter with the religious others.

This paper attempts to study the phenomenon and seeks to explain it. While its fuller explanation requires a multi-dimensional analysis, the paper focuses on a careful examination of the religio-ideological factor and arrives at the conclusion that the characteristic Islamic orientation in Brunei—its inclusive approach, its accent on moderation, its ability to incorporate change without creating social convulsion, etc.—is largely because of the Bruneians’ adherence to a well-established traditional Islamic school in which they are firmly rooted.

Introduction

The interesting feature of religious life in Brunei is its peace and harmony. The question is: what made such an achievement possible? As a social phenomenon, perhaps its definitive explanation is not easy. A historian can refer to some evidences and offer some explanations. Yet, it stands to reason that they must be grounded facts.

In some of my earlier writings on the relevance and persistence of certain interpretations of Islam in Brunei and Southeast Asia, I have argued that the long-established approaches in practicing Islam continue to enjoy popularity and loyalty.1 The consistent and firm endorsement of the ahl al-sunnah wa l-

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Janā'īb approach (hereafter referred to as *ahl al-sunnah* approach) to Islam in its inclusive form has been the key to Brunei's resilience, forward-looking philosophy, and open policy. Brunei has also been fortunate to be spared terrorist convulsions. This is obviously due to a complex of factors. However, at the intellectual level, one of the factors contributing to it is the kind of Islamic understanding that this country has had almost all along.

How can we explain the factors underlying the success of Brunei in ensuring internal security from the perspective of religion and ideology? Policies relating to security and intelligence activities can be best studied by experts in that field. However, as far as I am concerned, I will focus on identifying the sources of Bruneian moderation in the application of Islamic teachings. Despite the importance of political and security measures in establishing and maintaining law and order it must be stressed that Brunei's characteristic orientation in the understanding and practice of Islam are of crucial importance.

In order to locate the maintenance and resilience of the *ahl al-sunnah* model in Brunei, it is necessary to trace the historical development of that model in the country. The major historical episodes or themes and religious networks such as radical revivalist trends and their impact, the spread of new religious interpretations and exchange of teachers and students will be especially examined. All these aspects are considered vital in Islamic globalization and thus the renewal of religious activism throughout the Muslim world and among Muslim minority communities. What is interesting in this regard is that a vigorous Islamic renewal has taken place in the country and yet there has been a resilient maintenance of its known religious characteristics and identity. After advancing this argument, the discussion will focus on the crucial and difficult period following the Asian economic crisis of 1997 and the 9/11 tragedy. What do these major events mean to Brunei's Islamic agenda? How could the country respond promptly and responsibly to the challenges of turbulent activism. Why did it remain immune from the terrorist networks despite its strategic location in the regional communication of Southeast Asia which did not remain altogether beyond the access of these terrorist networks?

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Historical Background

Brunei Darussalam is the oldest uninterrupted Malay state. During its heyday it occupied a strategic position in the northern fringe of the Malay Islamic world. Its territories extended to almost all parts of Borneo and the Philippine islands. When Europeans came to Brunei in the early part of the 16th century, they could still witness the splendour of the court in the capital. The increasing presence of Europeans in the region, especially of the Spaniards, the Dutch and the British, eventually brought about the decline of Brunei as a centre of political and economic activity. If in 1776, Thomas Forrest, a British traveller, still reported on the coming of Chinese junks from mainland China to the Brunei port twice a year, such vessels were absent in the 19th century. By 1843, the control over Sarawak proper was handed over to James Brooke, a well-known British adventurer, for his crucial help offered to the Brunei government to suppress local rebellions. Slowly the Brookes acquired almost all land which is today called the State of Sarawak. By 1890 Brunei saw its territories reduced to the four districts that constitute today’s Brunei Darussalam.

It has generally been recognized that Islam has played, and is still playing, a very central role in the history of the Brunei sultanate. This can be seen clearly, for example, in the structure and content of the state ideology: Melayu, Islam, Beraja (MIB). Islam, indeed, remains the cornerstone of modern Brunei. Since the 9th/15th century, Islam has been the foundation of a stable state in the region. The first renowned ruler with imperial stature, at least according to our present historical knowledge, was Awang Alak Betatar (d. 805/1402). The defence of Brunei in 1578 was buttressed by the fighting spirit of Muslim Bruneians who saw the Spanish advance as a threat to the maintenance of their political institutions and, no less important, to the propagation of their faith.

Indeed, the earnestness of the Bruneians and their effort to understand and practice Islam can also be seen in the admittance of some scholars from the Middle East to the Bruneian society, including Sharif ‘Ali (d. 835/1432), who was later enthroned as sultan (r. 828–835/1425–1432). Moreover, during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Hassan [Muhammad Hasan] between the late 10th/16th century and early 11th/17th century, a legal digest, which contained important elements of Islamic law and jurisprudence, was promulgated. We are, however, less informed about the development of “scripturalization” of Islamic practices in the later centuries. Why do we have only a meagre access to this development?

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2 It should be noted that the use of dates for pre-sixteenth century Brunei has not universally agreed upon by historians. The dates cited here are those officially accepted in the Brunei circle.
Undoubtedly various factors had contributed to the weakening of intellectual life in Brunei when the central government was facing trouble in its peripheries. This raises some questions about the extent to which the state was actually involved in the patronage of intellectual life, including Islamic education. It is argued that in Brunei, unlike several other Malay sultanates, it was the mosque more than any other place, which emerged as a centre of religious propagation. Is there any direct link between the decline of central power and the deterioration of intellectual life? We cannot answer this satisfactorily unless we are acquainted with the state of religious education in those periods.

**Major Watersheds of Islamization in Brunei**

The lack of evidence about Islamic activism and movement in the 13th/19th and early 20th [mid 14th AH] centuries is often seen as a reflection of the general weakness of intellectual activities among Bruneians in the past. I argue that this is not necessarily true for the long centuries of the process of Islamization in Brunei. By the time the British Resident was sent to Brunei in 1906, Islam in Brunei had found a firm base.

*Islam during the Residency Period (1906–1959)*

Although according to the Agreement of 1905/1906, the British Resident was not given any role in the administration of religious affairs in Brunei, he had a hand in various institutional changes concerning Islam. How did that happen? Our immediate reaction would be that the ubiquitous influence of the Resident could not let him remain aloof from “reforming the existing laws and institutions and bringing modernity to Brunei.” In other words, when the

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3 A quotation from *Silsilah Raja-Raja Berunuai* (SRB) there, indeed, indicates that on occasions, religious of course, the highest princes and prominent religious officials gathered in the mosque. Most probably they performed the prayers (Fridays, or 'Ids) or attended ceremonies, speeches and prayers (dhau’a) related to the celebrations of Islamic holydays such as mawlid al-rasul, al-Isra’ wa’l-Mi’raj, and 'Am al-Hijrah. Thus the occasions can be interpreted as administrative or intellectual meetings.

4 The Agreement of 1905/1906 was certainly a key for the formal admission of the Resident to Brunei. The nature of his authority was specified in it, for example: "... The Resident will be the Agent and Representative of His Britannic Majesty’s Government under the High Commissioner for the British Protectorate in Borneo, and his advice must be taken and acted upon on all questions in Brunei, other than those affecting the Mohammedan religion...." M.B. Hooker, ed. *Laws of South-East Asia: European Laws in South-East Asia* (Singapore: Butterworth & Co., 1988), 2: 437.

Resident moved in to improve the rule of law and the legal system in the country he may also have felt the need to improve the application of Islamic law. This may have been particularly so since theoretically Islamic law (shari‘ah) encompassed all aspects of life. The Resident, of course, was more inclined to institute the western legal system rather than to apply Islamic law. Indeed, his agenda was focused on limiting the application of Islamic law to personal and family matters. Whatever the case may have been, his initiative struck a responsive chord among the leaders and ‘ulamā’ of the country as ideas of religious reform had already taken roots in the region. In order to provide a background to our readers it is important to discuss briefly the position of Islam in Brunei until the residency period.

Despite the political and economic decline during the 13th/19th and early 20th [mid 14th AH] centuries, Islam continued to assert its presence. The control, and perhaps influence, of the palace on religious matters continued to be a crucial factor in making religious ideas uniform and less prone to harmful external influences. From quite an early period a religious bureaucracy emerged. It was directly responsible to the ruler. Interestingly, the remnants of that bureaucracy survived until the coming of the Residency period. For example, a higher religious official (pehin tuan imam), Haji Mohidin [Haţi Mu‘hîyî ’l-Dîn] (d. 1356/1937), continued to serve during the Residency. Indeed, during the 1910s, religious and traditional officials were promoted in large numbers. The maintenance of a religious bureaucracy kept Islam in a high profile. Nevertheless, the formal status and popularity of Islam seem not to have resulted in intensive intellectual activities. As I have shown elsewhere, the intellectual tradition in Brunei did not surpass those in other centres of Islamic learning in the region.

Reform in various fields during the early part of the Residency paved the way for reform in the administration of Islamic affairs. What happened in Brunei at the turn of the century cannot be isolated from its ties with the Muslim world; and, more importantly, detached from its past.

In Brunei “scripturalization” was marked by new waves of religious and administrative development such as the introduction of the Shâdhîliyyah, Qâdirîyyah and Naqshbandiyyah orders, emphasis on referring to the standard fiqh texts of the Shâfi‘î school, and the introduction of a new system of government since 1905/1906. All these developments facilitated the

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36. The term ‘ulamā’ will be used in this paper throughout for Islamic religious scholars.
institutionalization of Islamic teachings and administration within novel institutions and forms.\footnote{For more details on these, see, Iik Arifin, “Historiography and Religious Reform in Brunei during the Period 1912–1959,” \textit{Studia Islamika}, vol. 2, no. 3 (1995), 77-113.}

What was novel in the Bruneian society by the turn of the century? The agreements of 1888 and 1905/1906 made the ruler, more than ever before, the paramount symbol of Islam in the state. The ruler responded to this favourable socio-religious development by establishing closer ties with the Ottoman Caliph, Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II (r. 1293–1327/1876–1909). In this context it is not surprising to find, as reported by W. H. Treacher, that a Bruneian youth was sent for study and training in Istanbul by the 1880s.\footnote{W.H. Treacher, “British Borneo: Sketches of Brunai, Sarawak, Labuan and North Borneo,” \textit{Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society}, 20 (1889), 40.} Indeed, parallel to such identical phenomena in Southeast Asia, it is possible that more Bruneians would have had access to the Middle East, particularly through pilgrimage and prolonged stay among the Jawi community in Makkah. Moreover, these ties were confirmed in 1903 by a letter allegedly sent by the Brunei Sultan to the Ottoman Sultan, requesting for help against the threat of the Brookes.\footnote{See a copy of the letter dated 17 Safar 1321 AH (May 15, 1903 CE), kept at the library of the Brunei History Centre, Bandar Seri Begawan.}

In brief, the Residency heralded a new development in the application and administration of Islamic law. The religious officials and administrators, however, continued to be recruited from the existing religious bureaucracy. This was unavoidable because the Sultan continued to be the highest authority in religious affairs. Since the early part of the Residency, the application of Islamic law was restricted to family matters. Yet under the Residency system the application of the law became more systematic and fixed. Previously most of the legal issues were dealt with at the local levels through the ‘ulamā’ and other local leaders. It is only if no solution could be reached at this level that they were submitted to the ruler. But by this time certain legal cases were reported and transferred to the Qādī court. Although such a legal institution was not a novelty in Islamic law and Islamic history, in Brunei it meant much in terms of the systematization of Islamic reform and institutionalization of law. In the light of this development, it is surprising that it was only from the mid-1950s that most of the changes and reform in the administration of Islamic affairs were started in earnest.

The conventional way of looking at the religious reform movements normally focuses on external factors and internal dynamism. A better understanding of religious reform can be achieved by relating the diverse
changes in the society to it. During the British Residency, Brunei experienced changes in various fields of life. A detailed study of the period has been done by several scholars. They have shown in different ways the administrative and economic reforms introduced by the Resident.\textsuperscript{11}

It is interesting to note in this context that during the Residency period (1906–1959) some educated segments of Bruneians were involved in the discussion of religious reform. The distribution of various reform journals, pamphlets and books in the country was an important channel for the dissemination of new ideas or response to them. For example, a Malay periodical, \textit{Fajar Sarawak} published a letter from Awang Ahmad Shah of Tutong in Brunei. In the letter he reacted to the criticism against the established ‘ulamā’ or the old generation of Muslims. For him they were not backward and ignorant since not even a single tradition from the Prophet (peace be upon him) contains any criticism of such people.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, he questioned the benefit of endless debate among different groups of Muslims. He stressed that instead of engaging in such debates they should have focused their attention on studying proper religious texts and practicing the teachings embodied in them (“...membaca seperti surat-surat, cerita-cerita sahaja tidak ada gunanya. Biar kita baca satu kitab sahaja yang cukup dan menerangkan rukun Islam yang lima sudah memadailah. Asal kita betul-betul tabu mengetahui serta dikerjakan”).\textsuperscript{13} Religious experts, he maintained, should not quarrel and debate among themselves because the less informed masses would be more prone to following their example.\textsuperscript{14} In this case it is clear that Awang Ahmad Shah, a celebrated Brunei writer, rejected the new ideas propagated by the Malay reformists and modernizers known as Kaum Muda. However, it can also be assumed that the idea of religious reform had already reached Brunei by the time.

The events which took place following the defeat of the Japanese in 1945 were conducive to strengthening the trend towards the improvement of religious services and reform in Brunei. Until the coming of the Japanese,


\textsuperscript{12} “Buat perkara hukum Allah Ta’ala tidak boleh dikatakan orang tua-tua dahulu bodoh sebab tidak ada satu dalil dan hadith yang diturunkan Allah Ta’ala pada orang zaman sekarang...dan segala hukm shara’ mulai dari zaman Nabi sampai pada akhir zaman tidak berubah-ubah.” See, \textit{Fajar Sarawak}, 8–9 (1930), 107.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} See, ibid.
steady improvement was being made in many aspects of socio-religious life. This included the standardization of religious courts, the codification of Islamic law, the establishment of religious schools, and the reorganization of religious officials. More importantly, the salient position of the Sultan in the Islamic domain led to positive results. The organization of Islamic affairs became the sole, and the de jure, jurisdiction of the sultan. Thus it received his utmost attention. At the same time, it provided him with a high degree of legitimacy vis-à-vis the British Resident. Under these circumstances it is understandable that the ruler took advantage of the momentum to reform during the post-Pacific War period to improve the organization of Islamic affairs. Indeed, many major institutional changes were introduced in 1948 when a board comprising various experts was established. This Board consisted of 19 prominent figures, not all religious experts, of Bandar Brunei.

Despite the inadequacy of the communication system and the small population of Brunei at the time, the religious developments during the 1950s were a major achievement. Changes can be seen, among other things, in the establishment of separate organizations such as the Persatuan Ikhwanul Muslimin in Kuala Belait and the Persatuan Kesatuan Islam in Bandar Brunei. The improved economic conditions, rapid social change and greater access to a broad range of information invigorated the religious life of the population.

New Religious Institutions: Education and Administration

Concomitant with the introduction of formal schooling in Brunei since 1914, several attempts were made to improve religious education. The absorption of kadi [Qāḍīs] into the modern bureaucracy indirectly stimulated the more organized preparation and training for the new candidates to the post. Seen from this perspective, we can better understand the increasing number of ‘ulamā’ who graduated from the Burung Pingai balai around the period.\(^{16}\)

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that in 1922, the muṣallā (surau) which belonged to the Sultan’s household, perhaps in Kampung Air, was, by his permission, used as an educational centre. Here we have a clue to the relationship between the palace and education. The idea of permitting the sultan’s surau for educational purposes seems to suggest that previously a section of the palace (istana) was specifically set up as a special educational centre, popularly known as the palace school. Perhaps more research is needed

\(^{15}\) Since 1908, the idea of a Malay school had been circulated in the meetings of the State Council. See, Minutes of State Council from 29th June, 1907 to 31st August, 1949 (Bandar Seri Begawan: n.d).

to reconstruct a better picture of the palace school in Brunei, in order to better understand the role of palace in disseminating knowledge among the Bruneian population. Later, in the 1930s, voluntary religious instruction was given twice a week in the afternoon, following the regular classes in some public schools in Bandar Brunei. This was followed by the establishment of a private religious school (madrasah) in 1941. Its foundation was approved and supported by the ruler. The madrasah was unique in many ways. Its activities, however, stopped with the coming of the Japanese forces to Brunei in December 1941.

During the Japanese occupation, religious education continued to be conducted voluntarily by private citizens, especially the ‘ulamā’ in their religious-cum-educational centre (balai). Although the Japanese had generally adopted a conciliatory policy toward the Muslims, this policy was not specifically applied in Brunei. Indeed, the Japanese military commanders in Brunei never applied a specifically designed policy to administer Muslim affairs, comparable to that implemented in Java during the same period. In the field of education, the pupils of Muslim parents in the “primary schools” were taught Japanese and asked to respect the Japanese emperor at the beginning of the school days. However, on Friday noon they were specifically organized and guided to perform the Friday prayers in the mosque.

Shortly after the end of the Japanese occupation, religious instruction was revived in the public schools. Moreover, by 1950 the Brunei government was able to send three of its more promising students to pursue their religious study at a higher level at the Madrasah al-Junied al-Islamiah of Singapore. If in the past the Bruneian students went abroad to study on their own, from now on intending religious students, like their teacher counterparts, were funded by the state. From 1950 to 1956 they were sent to the Madrasah al-Junied in Singapore. Beginning with 1956, after some of these students had completed their education in the school, they were sent to the Islamic College in Klang, Selangor (Malaysia). In 1959 four of them continued their higher studies at al-Azhar in Cairo. Thereafter, for some time, these three Islamic educational institutions became the main destinations for the Bruneians pursuing higher religious education. Even today, after the opening of higher religious institutions in the country, al-Azhar continues to be the preferred place for university education in Islamic studies among the Bruneians.

The impact of religious bureaucratization during the Residency on the Islamic institutions in Brunei deserves much closer examination. The demand for greater efficiency and better skill in the modern bureaucracy required well-planned training of government officials, including religious functionaries. The sending of religious students and teachers abroad was, among other things, intended to meet the challenge of modernization.

The religious reforms in Brunei have been accelerated since the accession of the Sultan Begawan to the throne in 1950. Many Islamic institutions were reformulated and reinvigorated. Islamic education and the management of Islamic affairs were reformed in accordance with the new spirit.

Attempts at making the administration of Islamic affairs more efficient and in line with the modern system of administration eventually led to the formation of various religious institutions. The most important of all was the establishment of a department which specifically supervised and managed Islamic affairs in the country. Indeed, its impact upon the future development of Islam in Brunei was immense and decisive. It absorbed the most talented and best educated individuals available in the country and, in some cases, beyond to serve in Brunei. Although the Department’s higher rank was first dominated by established religious personalities, since mid-1960s it slowly opened its door to homines novis from among the Bruneians who graduated from al-Azhar University. In this way change and reform in the administration of Islamic affairs were introduced without involving glaring cleavage and rivalry. In the final analysis, the newly emerging figures had in one way or another been the students, or even relatives, of the established religious leaders.

On July 1, 1954, a new department was established. It was called the Department of State Customs, Religion and Social Welfare. After the implementation of the 1959 Constitution, the Department was reorganized, being divided into the Department of Religious Affairs and the Department of State Customs and Social Welfare. During its early period, no clear and specific responsibilities were assigned to it. Only after the formation of the Religious Council (Majlis Ugama Islam dan Adat Istimadat Negeri) in 1956 and the implementation of the Islamic Laws of 1955 (Undang-Undang Ugama 1955), the Department’s function was clearly specified. It was required to perform the function of an executive body to the Council. More specifically, after the proclamation of the 1959 Constitution, the Department of

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18 Its early activities included the provision of religious instruction, the management of the pilgrimage to Makkah and the organization of Islamic missions (da’wah).

19 Islam was declared the official religion (agama rasmi) in the 1959 Constitution (II, 3,1).
Religious Affairs had clearer responsibilities to perform. Its field of activities included religious instruction, propagation of Islam, application of Islamic law, implementation of Islamic teachings, and actualization of the Constitution’s declaration that Islam was the country’s official religion.

_The Religious Enactments of 1955_

The overall administrative reform in Brunei required other government bodies, including the religious bureaucracy, to work more efficiently and professionally. In the eyes of the Resident, for instance, the codification of Islamic law was necessary. Further developments during the post-Pacific War period even created a pressure on Islamic leaders to proceed expeditiously in this direction. Eventually they came up with a plan and a set of religious enactments.

The enforcement of the Religious Council, State Custom and Kathis [Qādī] Courts Enactment of 1955 led to various changes in the administration of Islamic affairs in the country. For one, it automatically led to the abrogation of the Mohamadan Laws Enactment of 1912, the Mohammedan Marriage and Divorce Registration Enactment of 1913, and the [Kathi] Courts Enactment of 1951 (No. 6). The 1955 Enactment No. 20 came into force on February 1, 1956. With regard to Islamic affairs, the Enactment had provided for the establishment of a religious council for Muslims and for matters relating to marriage and divorce. It also revised the powers and duties of the Kathis Courts. Nevertheless, one important outcome of the 1955 Enactment was the re-organization of religious courts (Kathis Courts). They were soon freed from the magistrate courts, thus acquiring an autonomous status.

After the implementation of the 1955 Enactment, the offices of kathis were established in all districts. One major result of the 1955 Enactment was the establishment of the Religious Council (Majlis Ugama Islam dan Adat Istiadat Negeri) in 1956. The Council was given the highest authority in religious affairs, and at the same time its function was to assist and advise the Sultan in religious matters. The members of the Religious Council were appointed by the Sultan for a fixed period. In 1957 the Sultan appointed the 10 members of the Religious Council from among the core nobility, higher

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However, it also guarantees the right of other religions to be performed satisfactorily and peacefully. See, _The Constitution of the State of Brunei, 1959_ (Bandar Brunei: Brunei Museum, n.d.).

20 The Enactment was adapted from the Islamic Laws Enactment of Kelantan. Some adjustment was made in accordance with the local conditions.

21 A member of the Council should be male, Muslim, literate in Malay, and over 21 years old. The Council should have a chairman, his deputy and at least 6 other members. The Mufti is automatically an _ex officio_ member of the Council.
officials and the ‘ulamā’. Interestingly, most members of the new Council had served in the Religious Consultative Council established in 1954. Until the proclamation of the 1959 Constitution, the Sultan acted as the chairman of the Religious Council.

The 1955 Enactment is indicative of the strong hold of Islam in Brunei. Nevertheless, it also explains the influence of the British in the administration of justice in the country. It is stated, for example, in Chapter 39 of the 1955 Enactment that the Council should consider and implement the meaning (kehendak) of all written laws in the country, the Islamic law (Hukum Shara’) and the state customs. Since the written laws were derived mostly from Western and British laws, it is clear that the Majlis could not fully implement the Shari‘ah. In fact the 1955 Enactment did not fully reflect the Shari‘ah.

Prosperity, Renewed Vigour and Islamic Revivalism

Since 1970s Brunei has seen the intensification of efforts to make Islam a practical proposition to a greater extent than in the past. Not only did the government launch various programmes and institutions, but the public also took advantage of the trend. Teachers, preachers and activists established communication with many segments in the country. To better understand the local context of this phenomenon, we need to go back to its historical roots. However, a few words need to be said on a stimulating point recently raised by Roger Kershaw. According to him, Brunei has been working toward a dualistic policy: one serving the international community and another the domestic community. Domestically, Brunei has been highly responsive to the Islamic trend in the country by having recourse to all symbolic expressions of Muslim sentiment, including religious revivalism and Islamic solidarity. On the other hand, it has been active on the diplomatic front in supporting

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22 According to the 1955 Enactment, the religious Council is responsible to many aspects of religious affairs and activities in the country. Its authority includes: i) collection of the tithes (zakat and fitrah) [No. 114]; ii) issuance of permits to mobilize funds for religious purposes (No. 122); iii) supervision of mosques throughout the country (No. 123); iv) registration of new converts (No. 164); v) supervision over the belief and practice of the Muslims according to the concept of the Abl al-Sunnah wa ’l-Jama’ah and the Shafi’i school respectively (No. 42–3); vi) taking care of wealth and property (amanah) which are left without inheritors (No. 9, 99); vii) dealing with other parties in all matters under its authority (No. 7–8); viii) supervision over the implementation of Islamic law (Hukum Shara’); and ascertaining that all written laws in the country and the state customs are observed and implemented (No. 39); ix) the highest body in managing Islamic affairs and the assistant/adviser to the Sultan (No. 38).

international causes and addressing humanitarian concerns. We, however, disagree with this portrayal of Brunei’s religious policy as essentially manipulative and pragmatic.

Let us now move to examine some relevant historical episodes indicative of Brunei’s religious moderation.

Religious Movement: Ṭarīqah and Revivalism

As a part of the wider Islamic world Brunei has always felt the impact of changes occurring among the Muslims worldwide. In fact, Brunei has been a nodal point of Islamic networks. Religious features formed the strongest link in the networks. They generally persisted and survived the vicissitudes of political conflicts and the overall unsatisfactory state of affairs in the country. The intensity of Brunei’s ties with the outside world depended much on the country’s attractiveness to and Brunei’s ability to communicate with it. This explains why Brunei remained, to a large extent, unaffected by the reformist activities during the early part of the 20th century. It is primarily because of local initiatives, though weak, that only modest ties were maintained with external reform movements. This was in contrast to the intensive contacts with them in the earlier period when Brunei enjoyed power and wealth, especially during the 10th/16th and 11th/17th centuries. The rapid changes that took place in Brunei following the Pacific War also provided a better opportunity to strengthen ties with the outside world, including the Islamic countries. More importantly, by 1959 the residency system had ended. Thereafter the sultan assumed full control over the internal affairs of the country in addition to maintaining his authority over religious affairs.

Since the late 1960s, the Bruneians have seen the emergence of various religious activities. Most of them were offshoots of parent organizations abroad. Interestingly, some features of these activities were related to martial art forms (silat). The most influential grouping at the time was the Nasrul Haq [Nasr al-Haq]. It grew very fast in the Malay Peninsula following the May 1969 crisis. In Brunei a comparable movement took the form of a martial arts association called Silat Lintau. It was propagated in the late 1970s by a certain Ishak bin Hassan of the Malay Peninsula. It had a strong impact on the youth, students and some personnel of the armed forces and the police. Undoubtedly its strict discipline, protrusive symbols and promise of supernatural power appeared to be very attractive to many. In the early 1970s, a sergeant in the army propagated the teachings of the Mufarridiyyah order. The order won

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24 Ibid., 46. I must add immediately that Kershaw has given an interesting, and naturally controversial, brief assessment of Brunei’s moderate Islamic approach and its roots.
following among diverse segments of the population, primarily due to its liberal ideas regarding salvation. When these orders got more support among misinformed masses the Mufti of Brunei issued a fatwā condemning them as un-Islamic.

More serious movements emerged in Brunei with the increasing activities of better-known orders. Since the early 1980s representatives of the Ahmadiyyah order (not to be confused with the Ahmadiyyah of South Asia), the Jamāʿat al-ʻArqam and the Tablighī movement extended their preaching to Brunei.25

The Tablighī movement has indeed won some following among Bruneians, though their numbers were not very large. It attracted a few, albeit dedicated followers among the educated Bruneians. Perhaps due mainly to its low profile presence, eyebrows of the religious authorities were on the whole not raised against them.

The leaders of the Aḥmadiyyah established a branch in Brunei in 1982. Since then it has developed into an active group, providing religious guidance to its followers. It holds regular weekly meetings. As a group it has become an effective source of spiritual and socio-religious identification for the increasing numbers of its followers.

The influence of the Jamāʿat al-ʻArqam was evident in Brunei from the early 1980s. Many Bruneians who joined al-ʻArqam never formed a formal network linking them to its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur. They joined the movement, through as individuals. The followers of al-ʻArqam in Brunei, however, appeared in public quite similar to their brethren in Malaysia. Since they did not formally establish a branch in the country, their activities centred on the already existing traditional religious patterns. For example, they organized meetings concomitant with religious gatherings (majlis) such as tablīl, tadārūs, and the rites of life passages. As their numbers increased, regular meetings were also held, especially to strengthen their bond and spread the teachings of the movement. Nevertheless, the stronger nucleus revolved around the individual family. It was here that the Arqamis of the country first implemented the religious model established by their leaders in Sungai Pencala in Kuala Lumpur.

When the leadership of the Arqam started to propound controversial teachings around 1988, their impact upon the Arqamis in Brunei became insignificant. The notorious opinion held by the Arqam leadership during the period was that Muhammad bin ʻAbdullah al-Suhaimī, the founder of Dār al-

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Arqam, will emerge as the Saviour (al-Mahdi al-Muntazar). The Arqamis gradually became more exclusivist and acknowledged the supreme authority of the Arqam leader, Ustadh Asy’ari Muhammad. This is reflected in the very high position given to his picture in the homes of the Arqamis. Even many Arqamis went to Sungai Pencala to attend special gatherings (majlis al-yaqa’a) led by Ustadh Asy’ari to publicly confess their allegiance before the audience. Such exclusive gatherings were effective in making the Arqamis more humble under their leader. When the Arqamis became more aggressive in their drive to win followers and uphold their ideology, on 12 February 1991 the Brunei government banned the propagation of the Arqam teaching in the country.

The Arqam phenomenon in Brunei clearly shows the enthusiasm of the Bruneians for Islamic activities. More specifically, it confirmed the link between Brunei and other centres of Islam beyond its borders.

Islamic Resurgence

Brunei also actively participated in invigorating Islamic resurgence during the second half of this century. The concerted efforts at improving Islamic education and restoring Islamic institutions during the 1950s were a Bruneian response to the ongoing awakening in the Islamic world. In Brunei, it was the ruler who took the initiative and introduced many changes in religious administration and activities. The restoration of Islam as the official religion of the state, was laid down in the 1959 Constitution, confirming Brunei’s firm commitment to Islamization. Indeed, during the 1960s more concrete steps were taken in keeping with the spirit of the 1959 Constitution. More religious schools were established, religious classes were started for adults, mosque committees were revamped, and more religious literature began to be published. The return of the newly educated Bruneians from many higher education centres in the region and the Middle East gave impetus to this Islamizing trend. These qualified Bruneians were soon appointed to key positions in the religious bureaucracy. Some of them published fresh and stimulating articles on Islam. Moreover, in 1967 the Sultan urged the Bruneians to strive to implement Islam as a way of life.

Although Brunei never witnessed the emergence of an Islamic party, the echo of Islamic revivalism is quite clear from a number of things. First of all, the opening of religious schools since 1956 created the opportunity for girls to receive religious instruction. Accordingly, Bruneian women who became

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26 In 1964 the Islamic Council of Brunei formed a central committee of mosques. It became a model for the local mosque committees throughout the country. In 1970 the number of mosques reached 40 which had 77 officials, including 54 imāms.
mothers since mid-1960s have had a much better knowledge of the basic Islamic texts. In the long run they were more prone to adopt and practice many features of orthodox Islam, including the training of their children, their public appearance and mode of dress. Indeed, by the late 1970s, more and more Bruneian women covered their heads in public. Islam has also become the language of public discourse in Brunei. Even those who had advocated a secular lifestyle showed respect for the return to the pristine teachings of Islam. Religious gatherings and lectures became usual features in the government departments and, after independence, government ministries. The initiatives of the ruler in bringing Brunei closer to the Muslim world had a lot to do with the formal adoption of the Islamic trend in the government circles.

The advent of the 15th century Hijrah contributed to the awakening of Muslims worldwide. The dawn of the new century created an opportunity to evaluate the past achievements and hold discussions and meetings on the subject. Special sessions and celebratory functions were held in conjunction with the coming of the new Islamic century. As part of the common belief that at the turn of every new century Islam is rejuvenated, the 15th century was welcomed, and there arose expectations that it would herald a new prospect for Islamization. Events in the Muslim world during the past decade also created the optimism that wholesome developments would take place in many Muslim countries. This has had a positive impact in so far as commitment to Islamic teachings in the country was strengthened.

*The Flow of Ideas and Ideologies: Pilgrimage*

As an integral part of the Muslim world, Brunei has increasingly played an important role in reinvigorating Islamic brotherhood. Historically, the spread of Islam to the region was due mainly to trading activities and commercial exchanges. The acceptance of Islam intensified the link between Brunei and other Islamic countries. This link was further strengthened by religious, economic and social networks.

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27 A senior officer in the Department of Religious Affairs complained in December 1979 that many prominent Bruneians wanted to negate the role of Islam in public life by encouraging, among other things, the opening of more places for entertainment. Yet it was these same persons who felt uneasy about the juvenile delinquency and thus advocated “quite seriously” about the provision of Islamic teaching to the public. See, Hj. Abd. Aziz Juned et al., *Lambaiatan Islam* (Bandar Seri Begawan: Jabatan Hal Ehwal Ugama, 1982).  

28 Since independence Brunei has become member of various international and regional Islamic bodies and organization, including the Organization of Islamic Conferences. Moreover, the Islamic influence on government officers grew stronger.
The importance of pilgrimage for Muslims is well-known, but in Brunei it has a special social significance. The Bruneians paid special attention to the performance of pilgrimage and made efforts to organize it properly. During their stay in the holy cites of Makkah and Madinah, the Bruneian pilgrims, like their counterparts from other countries, learned a lot of things. On their return, the pilgrims followed some of the newly found ideas, lifestyles and activities. Yet a strict application of the religious norms (fiqh) and belief system ('aqidah) according to the recognized schools limited the adoption of glaring religious novelties.

Nevertheless, as the number of pilgrims rose, there was no guarantee that they would remain immune to new, and possibly unwholesome ideas and attitudes they encountered during their stay in the Holy Cities. The higher number of the pilgrims was also accompanied by the diversity of their backgrounds. Many pilgrims were young and well-educated. Their participation in the pilgrimage has often led them to become more involved in the efforts to understand Islam with new perspectives. For instance, they became interested in reading religious literature written by well-known Muslim authors such as Yūsuf al-Qaraawi, Abul A'lâ al-Mawdûdi (d. 1399/1979), Maryam Jameelah, Buya Hamka and 'Alî Shari'atî (d. 1397/1977). More specifically, their encounters in the Holy Places with diverse Muslims could

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29 It is important to mention in this context that the travel by sea caused the pilgrims to stay outside the country much longer than today’s pilgrims. Not only did they spend more than a month in the ship alone, but they also had ample of time to stay in Makkah, Madinah and Jeddah, mainly because of the ship schedule. For more information on a comparable phenomenon, see, Iik Arifin, “Contemporary European Views of the Jawah: Brunei and the Malays in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” The Journal of Islamic Studies, vol. 9, no. 2 (1998), 178–209; Mary Byrne McDonnell, “The Conduct of Hajj from Malaysia and its Socio-economic Impact on Malay Society: A Descriptive and Analytical Study, 1860–1981,” Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, New York, 1986.

30 Until 1965 the Bruneians officially performed the pilgrimage by sea. For the period before 1955, no detailed report on their numbers has been discovered. A report of 1911 cited that larger number than usual went on Ḥājj including the first pilgrims that have ever gone from Temburong. From 1955 to 1965 the number of the pilgrims ranged from 33 (the lowest) to 144 (the highest). Pilgrimage by sea was terminated in 1975. For quite some time, those few who went by plane had to make private arrangements. Only in the 1966 Ḥājj the government of Brunei officially launched a pilgrimage package by air in cooperation with the pilgrimage organizers in Singapore and Malaysia. From 1966 to 1974 the number of pilgrims who went by sea continued to decline; from 189 in 1966 to 36 in 1974. On the other hand, those who went by air were on increase: from 8 in 1966 to 406 in 1974. Moreover, during the 1970s and 1980s their number became even higher; in 1975 it was 521; in 1980 it was 1149; and in 1985 it become 2684. Figures are taken from various editions of the relevant Pelita Brunei.

31 It is interesting to note that under the British Residency, Ḥājiphobia never influenced the policy makers in the country.
not fail to give the Bruneian pilgrims some new horizons in their personal view of Islam. It should also be emphasised, however, that the expression of new ideas has to be worked out in a Bruneian way, that is, not to create a controversy; or at least to keep such controversial ideas confined to a small section of close friends. It seems that pilgrimage for many Bruneians was a strictly religious performance and a matter of personal commitment. This is especially so because the time for stay in Arabia for the performance of pilgrimage has been reduced due mainly to modern air travel facilities and the end of prolonged stay to study in the Haramayn.

Pilgrimage continued to play its traditional role in the Bruneian society. It provided many Bruneians with spiritual satisfaction, affinity to the wider Islamic world, access to many different ideas about other fellow-Muslims and, a generally more positive attitude towards their religion. The shorter period to stay and the diminished opportunity to mingle with other Muslims in the Holy Places, however, allowed little opportunity for a more serious interaction.

In the economic field Brunei has enjoyed an improved position after the Pacific War. Brunei derives its financial strength from oil. The spending of its economic surplus and the development in the country eventually brought many Bruneians into contact with outsiders, quite a few of whom are Muslims. First of all, the improved financial situation introduced many Bruneians to, and made them aware of, a variety of achievements of other Muslims. In retrospect, some new ideas might have emerged which were of benefit to Bruneians and their country. A good example can be seen in the establishment of new mosques. Many of the mosques were built on a combined concept of Bruneian-Islamic architecture and modern architectural style, something not too different from the styles developed in other Muslim countries. Moreover, the newly-acquired wealth of the country has attracted many overseas traders and businessmen to Brunei. While we should not exaggerate the role of such persons in spreading religious teachings, the fact remains that those involved in such economic ties have indirectly contributed to the emergence of new ideas in their country’s religious life.

Religious Writings and Publications

Concomitant with the spread of modern education, Brunei saw the increase of written materials about religion and the participation of Bruneian writers in the expression of their views of Islam and their religious experiences.

The higher rates of literacy achieved through modern educational institutions increased the circulation of written materials. Knowledge has become more and more a public domain thanks to the availability of, and
interest in, written materials and publications. Although in the past many Bruneians were versed in the Arabic script, they had only limited access to reading materials. Knowledge, especially religious knowledge, was generally transmitted orally. The erudition of a good number of Bruneians during the recent decades paved the way for the provision of reading materials on various subjects, including religion. The graduation of many Bruneians from higher institutions of religious learning facilitated the writing of religious works in tune with the local conditions. Indeed, during the 1960s more works on Islam were written by Bruneians in different forms than before.

The return of Bruneian graduates to the country was usually followed by their employment in public offices. For example, the Azhar graduates during the 1960s joined the Department of Religious Affairs (DRA). Although these graduates were soon occupied with office duties, many continued to devote a part of their time to writing. As can be seen in the religious column of the Pelita Brunei of the period after the mid-1960s, these graduates contributed highly informative views of Islam and society. More specifically, under the sponsorship of the DRA, religious publications became more frequent and regular. For example, since 1962 DRA has published a quarterly journal, Majalah Jabatan Hal Ehwal Ugama. Its contents include various religious topics, the Mufti’s views, and a variety of DRA activities. In 1964 another series, Sinaran Suci, was published. It was designed to respond to the popular need to become better acquainted with religious teachings.

During the 1970s, more publications were introduced by the DRA, including a religious journal, al-Huda, and a series of works on Qur’anic exegesis, Tafsir Darussalam. The role of the newly graduated Bruneians in these undertakings was significant. Interestingly, a score of books on Islamic literary works by Bruneians were published during this period. Among them were Puisi Hidayat. Several books and monographs were also published after 1979 in connection with the celebration of the 15th century Hijrah. Moreover, during the 1980s a number of religious seminars were held in the country. They brought together experts in different fields from around the country to discuss various religious topics. On several occasions the participants were also drawn from abroad. The proceedings of these seminars were mostly published by DRA. Yet the fast growing publications of religious materials cannot be separated from the general trend of Islamic revivalism in the country and beyond. The impact of Islamic revivalism could be seen clearly in the speeches and actions of the leaders, political elite, and religious scholars of the country.

Several examples can be cited to illustrate the increasing influence of the Bruneian graduates of al-Azhar. The predominance of the Azhar is in the DRA was structural and consequential. The official promotion of a “moderate”
version of Islamic practice ensued from restricting the available educational facilities to a few educational institutions alone, the most prominent of them being al-Azhar. Since the majority of the religious leaders had been educated at al-Azhar it only follows that a vast majority also became the future cadres of DRA. Evidently publications on religious subjects were produced by the Azhar graduates. This can be seen in the writings of the former Mufti, Pehin Mohd. Zain, Pehin Abdul Hamid, Pehin Yahya, Pehin Abd Aziz Juned, Dato Abdul Saman and Pehin Badaruddin. All belonged to the top religious officialdom. It should also be mentioned here that in addition to having had religious education at al-Azhar, all these leaders-cum-scholars had also studied at the religious schools in Singapore and Malaysia. Some had also spent time in higher learning institutions in the West. For example, Dato Saman completed his post-graduate programme at the University of Birmingham following his graduation from al-Azhar.  

The division of scholarly work in the field of Islamic studies in Brunei is worth noting. Despite the strong expression of Islam in public life, the writing on Islamic subjects in Brunei has become the sole domain of fully trained religious scholars. It is true that some Bruneian students who had completed secondary religious school opted to pursue careers not directly related to religious matters. Nevertheless, it is exceptionally rare that the Bruneians who did not have religious education would write on religious issues. The emergence in other Muslim countries of a class of writers on Islam who have had no higher religious education seems not to have encouraged their counterparts in the country. I do not see that this has anything to do with the type of religious practice and understanding held in Brunei. It has more to do with the formal regulations about the spreading of Islamic teaching. A teacher of Islam is required to obtain a teaching license before he starts teaching Islam. In our opinion, the present arrangement has positively contributed to the religious harmony and stability obtaining in the country. Religious innovations are discussed internally and when necessary introduced slowly and unostentatiously. Open religious polemics and debates hardly ever took place.

**State Response to Terrorism**

In the wake of the September 11 incident, Brunei also joined the rest of the world community in launching strategies and policies to forestal and stamp out terrorism.

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In the first place it is absolutely important to note that Brunei’s special conditions—its size of population, the centralization of its religious affairs, the close relations that link the people and their ruler, and the relative affluence of the country cannot be ignored while attempting to understand Brunei’s immunity to home-grown terrorism. In this era of globalization, no country can claim that it is totally safe from all possible influences of international terrorism. Yet, Brunei’s success in preventing its citizens from being lured into terrorist training camps is worth examining, especially when other parts of the region have been somewhat affected by this trend. Brunei has always succeeded in dissociating itself from radical movements. As a modern state, its achievements in this regard are astonishing. However, from time to time it had to contend with some recalcitrant citizens involved in radicalism.

**Vigilance against Controversial Ideas and Unorthodox Teachers**

Brunei’s Islamic identity was able to develop the capacity to face external challenges and to a very large extent insulate itself from extraneous interpretations of Islam, especially the radical forms of scripturalism about which the generality of Bruneians feel ill at ease. Consonant with most other Malay states in the Peninsula which were not prone to welcome Wahhābī and Kaum Muda movements, Brunei has consistently tried to keep its doors sealed against these movements. Although some scholars, such as William R. Roff and Moshe Yegar, have suggested that such a religious policy can work better toward maintaining the religious and political status quo, it is clear that the prevailing religiosity and Islamic discourse in Brunei have no other option but to lend support to the maintenance and implementation of the local, inherently moderate approach to Islamic teachings.\(^{33}\) It remains to be seen as to how this policy was implemented in Brunei to maintain its established religious approach and practice. It did not allow the development of religious conflict between the conservative generation (Kaum Tua) and reformist (Kaum Muda) experienced in other Muslim communities in the Malay world. The well-known argument on this issue can be found in the Mufti Pehin Dato Ismail bin Umar Abdul Aziz’s address concerning Wahhabism or its roots and offshoots, “It is useless to repeat [the call] propagated by Ibn Taymiyyah [to oppose] religious innovations (bid’ab).”\(^{34}\) The emphasis in Brunei is on

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adherence to the understanding and practice of Islam by the teachers of religion regarded as authoritative. Other scholars have no place in religious structure. For instance, in rejecting the opinions of the reformist Muḥammad Rashid Rida (d. 1354/1935) and his source of inspiration, Taqī al-Din Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-Ḥalim Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728/1328), the former Muftī Ismail argues that these two well-known scholars were never known to have studied under authoritative teachers (tiada mempunyai guru) were thus heavily dependent on their own ideas without referring them to standard Islamic books (hanya ia membaca kitab-kitab dengan sendiri dan menggunakan akal berlebih-lebih). The Kaum Muda are strongly criticized for their dismissal of other opinions and for being more concerned with portraying themselves as true Muslims at the expense of coexistence and pluralism.

Several factors have combined to buttress the centralized management of Islamic affairs:

- Brunei has enjoyed stability and prosperity, especially after the oil boom period since the mid-1970s. Although, or rather due to, the fact that the country continues to maintain its emergency rule following the 1962 rebellion, it has succeeded in maintaining peace and order without any major political upheavals, let alone unrest.
- Effective welfare system has been universally established in the country since the 1950s. Despite the relatively low oil output, Brunei’s oil wealth suffices to implement its generous welfare system for its population, which reached 329,000 in 2000, including some 30% expatriates.
- Centralization in various aspects of society, religion and state has been effectively pursued.
- In implementing Islamic law, Brunei has strictly followed the Shāfi‘i school. For example, as stated in the Islamic Laws Act (Undang-Undang Ugama Islam) of 1955, it is only in cases when public welfare (maḥālah) necessitates recourse to exceptional measures that the doctrines of any school other than Shāfi‘i may be followed. According to the former Mufti Ismail, who refers to a Shāfi‘i scholar, Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Kurdi (d. 1194 H), every fatwā should be based on the unanimous opinion of the Shaykhān of the Shāfi‘i school: i.e. Abū Zakariyya Yahyā b. Shara‘f al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277) and ‘Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Ra‘īsī (d. 623/1226). As for the pronouncements of scholars of a relatively lower standing (laysū min ahl al-tarjīḥ) decisions should be referred either to the works of Abū ‘l-‘Abbās Ahmad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥajar al-Haythami (d. 973/1566) or those of Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī al-‘Abbās al-Ramlī (d. 1004/1596).

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35 Ibid., 123.
36 See, ibid., 102–14.
37 Ibid., 122–23.
key in this respect is Brunei’s insistence on rejecting movements that aim at pursuing the-only-correct approach to Islam. This policy has been smoothly implemented mainly because, on the one hand, Brunei has kept its Islamic institutions open and available to all. Centralization obviously works well to achieve this result.38

In 1907, a note of warning was issued by an anonymous writer on the necessity of relying on recognized authorities for religious opinions. This brief text is very important for our understanding of this period and for determining the level of scripturalization in Brunei by the turn of the last century. The author warns the Muslims not to follow “the teaching of the ignorant people who did not study under the knowledgeable figures” (pengajaran orang yang jahil yang tiada mengambil daripada orang yang ‘alim).39 It is clear that the text was written in response to the confusion in society resulting from the spread of the teachings of a particular religious group discordant with the religious tradition of Brunei. Interestingly, this religious group ridiculed those who followed the conservative/Sh fi’i ‘ulamā’ (fuqahā’)s way of reciting the verbal intention (niyyah) in the beginning of prayers (salāh) as being “novices.” The arguments contained in the group’s criticisms and the alternatives they offered indicated that the group based its views on the Sufi approach to divinity. What mattered most to these people was the attainment of union with God. For example, the niyyah was not just pronouncing the intention to pray but, more importantly for them, it connoted approaching God directly (apabila hadirlah dhat Muhammad di dalam hati maka serasa hadir kan zat Allāh ta’ālā).40

Yet it is possible that the reason for writing the text was to resolve the controversies around the niyyah raised by the literalists and followers of Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905). For them the pronouncement of the niyyah, “Uṣulli, etc.” was regarded as useless or even religiously wrong (bid‘ah). But for the Shāfī‘is niyyah connotes three basic elements, that is qaṣd (purpose), ta‘arrud (concentration), and ta‘ayyun (specification), which usually materialized in the wording of “intention” for the prayers. As far as the study of intellectual history is concerned, the response of the ‘ulamā’ to the reform movement can be clearly categorized as counter-reform, internally also means

40 For more details on this, see, Iik Arifin, “Socio-Religious Change in Brunei after the Pacific War,” Islamic Studies vol. 35, no. 1 (1996), 45–70.
re-adjustment which also, to an extent, reform, especially in the context of
Islam in the thirteenth/nineteenth and fourteenth/twentieth century
Southeast Asia. Anyway, this response also contained many elements of
readjustment and restatement of well-accepted religious practices and ideas.

If the above discussion of intellectual religious history shows the internal
dynamism of Islamic society, then the administrative reform and socio-
political changes launched under the patronage of the British residential
system since 1906 can be regarded as external factors to the religious reform.

The Impact of Islamic Revivalism on Brunei after 1970s

As early as 1967, the idea of implementing Islam as a way of life had begun to
win some public support in Brunei. The return of some students from al-
Azhar University from 1964 onwards, as noted above, injected a new religious
vigour in the country, giving rise to religious sophistication as well as to new
institutions and to a new Islamic policy. Consequently, Islamic revivalism was
carried out in a more confident and consistent fashion. This is evident from
the organization of a series of conferences, establishment of Islamic financial
institutions, and handling of religio-political issues.

Islamic Conferences and Committees

Although Brunei has enjoyed full control over its foreign affairs only since
1984, it unofficially participated in many international Islamic forums. For
example, during the 1960s and 1970s several religious leaders of Brunei
participated in international Islamic conferences held in Baghdad, Mogadishu,
Cairo and Kuala Lumpur. During this period Brunei’s participation had a
rather low profile. The situation greatly changed after Brunei gained full
independence in 1984.

Brunei quickly joined various international Islamic bodies. Concomitant
with its official admission into regional and international organizations such as
ASEAN, United Nations, and the Commonwealth, Brunei also became a full
member of the Organization of the Islamic Conferences (OIC). Indeed,
shortly after its admission, the Sultan of Brunei attended the summit
conference of the OIC held in Casablanca on January 16, 1984. Again, the
Sultan actively participated in the summit conference of the OIC held in
Dakar in December 1991. By formally joining OIC Brunei also gained access
to OIC affiliates such as Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and Islamic
Economic and Social Council (ISESCO). In 1989 Brunei held an international
seminar on “Islamic Civilization in the Malay World” in cooperation with
ISESCO. The seminar was attended by prominent Muslim and non-Muslim
scholars from all the five continents. Also, as we shall see, Brunei benefited from the experience of IDB in Islamic banking in its effort to set up its own Islamic financial and banking system.

At the regional level, Brunei actively took part in various Islamic committees and bodies. It joined the forum of senior religious officials of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. By the admission of Brunei to the forum, which was set up in 1974, the number of member states rose to four. The forum was originally designed to develop cooperation in the field of Islamic calendar, especially regarding the beginning of the months of Ramaḍān, Shawwāl and Dhū ‘l-Hijjah. Lately, the forum has included in its agenda various religious and social issues concerning the general affairs of Muslims in the region. Moreover, closer cooperation between the members has led to holding several other activities in Brunei with the support of other members. A good example of such activities is the organization of regional seminars on the concept of *ahl al-sunnah wa 'l-jamā'ah* and on Islamic values held in September 1985 and October 1988 respectively.

The active participation of Brunei in various Islamic organizations at the international and regional levels has had a considerably positive impact on Bruneians. Better knowledge and information about Brunei’s link with Muslim countries and their affairs through participation in various Islamic organizations and committees has made Bruneians better aware of their links with the Muslim world. Accordingly, Bruneians became more eager to learn about their brethren and to develop closer contacts with them. Again, the structural links developed at the state level enabled Bruneians to extend their links from the “old friends” such as Great Britain and Singapore to the newly emerging Muslim countries. As a small country Brunei has the advantage of being accepted as a member of various Islamic organizations. On the other hand, Brunei’s wealth reinforces some of the plans of these organizations.

Despite its openness and diplomatic warmth, Brunei is fully aware of its limitations. It is true that Brunei has established diplomatic ties with many Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Oman and Iran. It has also joined other Muslim countries in giving support to the cause of the Muslims in Palestine, Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It has also adopted various symbols of Islamic revivalism such as the establishment of Islamic financial institutions. Yet, Brunei continues to declare its commitment to a long established version of Islamic belief and practice in the country. At the same time, interestingly, several changes have taken place in the organization and administration of Islamic affairs. They have taken place smoothly without the need to use any new labels. Thus despite changes in the
expressions of Islam in the country, Brunei maintains its commitment to its hallowed, time-beaten path.

**New Islamic Economic and Financial Institutions**

The increasing desire observable in many Muslim countries to have an Islamic system of finance has led to the establishment of several new financial institutions. Since the mid-1970s attempts have been made to operate the banking system in conformity with Islamic teachings. Several seminars on Islamic economics were held in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and 1980s. A positive response to the idea of Islamic banking system came from Dubai when the Islamic Bank of Dubai was established in 1975. Before the end of the 1970s no less than seven new financial institutions which used Islamic financial instruments were established, mostly in the Middle East. Outside the Middle East, Pakistan and Malaysia took similar steps when the Islamic system of banking was introduced into the existing banking system in 1981 and 1983 respectively.

In Brunei concrete steps toward the adoption of Islamic financial institutions were taken in 1990. Islamic symbols could be seen at public places and on formal occasions in the country, which is understandable because Islam is the official religion (*ugama rasmi*) of the state. Moreover, Islamic revivalism in the 1970s led to the rise of many Islamic activities, expressions and practices by individuals as well as the society and the state. The celebrations of the new century of the *Hijrah* in Brunei during the late 1970s and early 1980s marked an important milestone in Brunei’s commitment to the Muslim world. The 1980s witnessed several activities concerning the various issues facing the global Muslim *ummah*. For example, in response to an increasing number of Islamic banks established in several Islamic countries, in 1987 a committee was set up to establish Islamic Bank in Brunei. More specifically, a plan for establishing an Islamic system in banking was made after the Sultan announced his support for the enterprise in 1990.\(^{41}\) Indeed, a year later in September 1991 an Islamic savings bank, known as *Tabung Amanah Islam Brunei* (TAIB), was established. It was modelled mainly on the existing example in Malaysia. The primary aim of the institution was to provide financial services and enable business transactions within the Islamic parameters.\(^{42}\) The success of the TAIB

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\(^{41}\) "As a nation with strong Islamic tradition, we have the obligation to take steps forward presenting ourselves among other countries which have set up [Islamic financial] enterprises" (*Sebagai sebuah negara yang mempunyai teras keislaman yang kuat, maka kita adalah wajib melangkah ke hadapan turut menampilkan diri bersama-sama mereka yang telah memulakan usaha*). See, *Pelita Brunei* (2 October 1991), 2.

\(^{42}\) Pehin Tuan Imam Abdul Aziz Juned, *Islam di Brunei* (Bandar Seri Begawan: The Brunei History...
in attracting customers led to the undertaking of another major step in the Islamization of the financial system when on January 13, 1993 the International Bank of Brunei was restructured to become the Islamic Bank of Brunei.

Although Brunei Darussalam was not among the early protagonists of Islamic financial system, it did not want to lag behind other Muslim countries. Its participation in the increasingly popular and successful system shows that Brunei is well aware of its ties with the wider Muslim world.

Religio-Political Issues

Political solidarity among Muslim countries has been seen by many scholars as shallow and non-substantial. Expressions of solidarity have often been regarded as no more than lip-service. The reasons for this tendency are traced back to the internal structure of modern Muslim states and to their relations with the other more developed states, particularly those of the West, as well as their relations with their neighbouring Muslim countries. Yet during the past few years, when in respect of economy and political stability the situation in several Muslim countries has improved, concrete common actions were undertaken. For example, the Muslims took an almost common stand on the question of Afghanistan’s military occupation by USSR. Again, concrete steps were taken by different Muslim countries to help their brethren in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Their solidarity with their co-religionists in these two countries, as we all know too well, was not confined to extending moral support.

In the case of small countries like Brunei, the option to establish “independent” foreign relations may be somewhat limited. Indeed, as an author puts it, the foreign policies of these small countries are heavily influenced by external factors. However, Brunei has succeeded in steering a more realistic approach to Muslim solidarity. It never failed to join any common stand taken by other Muslim countries toward the issues facing Muslims.

Brunei has also strongly supported the rights of the Palestinian people. The support was shown clearly in the speech by Brunei’s Sultan when the country was admitted to the United Nations as the 159th member state in 1984. For Brunei the overall solution of the Palestinian question was the only

Centre, 1992), 1: 188.

answer to the political crisis in the Middle East. As a member state of OIC, Brunei has, not surprisingly, been following the general policy of the organization toward Muslim countries. Similar straightforward approaches were adopted in dealing with the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan and the question of Bosnia-Herzegovina’s independence. Nevertheless, Brunei faces a dilemma not unlike the one faced by other Muslim countries in dealing with political crises among Muslim countries. For example, while Brunei has followed a cautious approach to the Gulf crisis of the early 1990s, it joined other Muslim countries in calling for an end to war between Iran and Iraq. Again, Brunei called for an immediate peaceful solution to the Kuwait crisis in order to establish peace in the region as a whole. Although Brunei officially condemned Iraqi’s annexation of Kuwait, it strongly urged that recourse be made to negotiations and that a political solution to the crisis be hammered out. Indeed, the idea of Muslim unity was reiterated time and again by Brunei in various OIC meetings.

With the increasing awareness of Bruneians about their brethren in other Muslim countries, they began to realize their importance. Thus, diplomatic ties were formally established with many of these countries. At least six Muslim countries have permanent representatives in Brunei. It will be interesting to examine how the official positions toward Islamic issues have been accommodated by, have shaped the public opinion or even religious ideas in the country.

Economic Growth and Islamic Movement in Brunei

There has been much talk among scholars concerning the trickling down effects of oil money from the Middle East to Southeast Asian Muslims aiming to resuscitate Islamization which often meant the spread of the puritanical salafi movement. In many parts of Southeast Asia, such financial and ideological support did bring new vigour to the local communities, strengthening the ongoing the puritanical movement, establishing new roots of the movement and, more significantly, instituting myriad symbols of material modernity and sophistication. These trends can be observed among Muslim minorities throughout South East and some urban Muslim communities in Malaysia. In Indonesia the impact of such oil money-related developments is too obvious to be mentioned. Interestingly, Brunei has been resilient in facing the challenge of the salafi movement despite its quiet and eclectic adoption of reformist spirit and institution, leading to an internal

\[44\] Before the campaign for substantive support to the Bosnian struggles in 1993, Bruneians had mobilized funds for cyclone victims in Bangladesh during the disaster in May 1991.
evolutionary change.\textsuperscript{45} How could this process go ahead smoothly? Being financially and religiously strong, Brunei was in a position to simply close its doors to the infiltration of ideological currents that were unwelcome to Bruneans. To ensure this, it was decided to send most Bruneian graduates in Islamic Studies to complete their master’s or doctoral programmes in Malaysian universities. Put differently, thanks to a well-conceived policy and to the financial strength of the country in the second half of the 20th century, Brunei decided to firmly reject the puritanical onslaught in its diverse manifestations.

The control over the education of its potential religious leaders has worked nicely toward administrative centralization. Many Bruneians were sent abroad to complete various degrees in Islamic Studies. The intellectual training undergone by them in different Islamic educational centres formed the strongest link between the Muslim world and Brunei. If in the past the Bruneians, like their other Southeast Asian co-religionists, had gone to Makkah for higher studies, in the Pacific War period they often joined al-Azhar. Indeed, the leadership of the Department of Religious Affairs, and later of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has been dominated by Azhar-trained scholars. We are not interested in examining the impact of this particular fact on Bruneian society or the possibility that this development was a result of the religious orientation obtaining in the country. Rather, what is worth examining is the relationship between such a religious orientation and the attraction of one of the jewels of the Muslim world such as al-Azhar.

Following the revival of the Wahhābi movement in Arabia during the 1920s, the Bruneians opted to sent their youth to pursue Islamic Studies in the Muslim countries that were not much under puritanical/radical influence. Also, the extent of intellectual contacts with the holy cities were also reduced, being restricted to the formal pilgrimage seasons. Under such circumstances, al-Azhar with its open educational policy concerning the different madhhab\textsuperscript{s} provided a more congenial environment for the Bruneians to pursue their religious study.\textsuperscript{46} Indeed, the Bruneian graduates of al-Azhar continued to influence the prevailing religious system in the country and to uphold the status quo. They did so while introducing healthy changes from within.

Having attained higher standards of scholarship, these Azhar-trained scholars had no difficulty in establishing ties with Muslim scholars throughout the world. Before joining al-Azhar they had studied at the al-Junied Religious

\textsuperscript{45} See, Iik, “Socio-religious change in Brunei.”
\textsuperscript{46} It is necessary to note here that Makkah during this period continued to attract many students from Southeast Asia. Some of them, in fact, emerged as prominent scholars at home.
School in Singapore, and the Islamic College of Malaya in Klang, Malaysia. Under this arrangement, Bruneian scholars after completing their first degree at al-Azhar enjoyed links to diverse academic circles and networks in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Several years of interaction with different colleagues enabled them to be more open-minded and provided them with a wider vision. As noted by Mona Abaza in her study of Indonesian students in Cairo, those students brought home with them outlooks nurtured by diverse social, intellectual, political and cultural exchanges during their long stay in Egypt. Indeed, in 1961 a Bruneian student in Cairo reported that his stay in Cairo not only introduced him to purely religious subjects but also to a number of other disciplines, let alone providing them an opportunity to encounter nationalism and military drills. Again, even a casual reading of the various collections of writings and poems written by Bruneian students abroad, including Cairo, indicate that they read widely and participated in current scholarly debates and developments. Nevertheless, the strongest link maintained by these graduates was with their alma mater, al-Azhar. Talented students continued to be sent to Cairo and, subsequently to ‘Ammān, for higher religious studies. Again, experts in different religious disciplines have come mostly from al-Azhar, whereas middle rank officials generally completed their higher studies at religious institutions in Singapore and Malaysia.

Despite their erudition in religious studies, the Bruneians who graduated from al-Azhar opted for an evolutionary approach toward reform in the religious field. It is interesting to note here that in 1953, a religious organization, al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn, was founded in Brunei, in the new booming oil town of Kuala Belait-Seria, to be more precise. However, it had obviously nothing to do with al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn of Egypt. Indeed, the Ikhwān of Brunei initiated various activities which had a novel orientation. For example, they actively organized public celebrations on important occasions in the Islamic calendar, including the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him), his bi‘rāb and the sending down of the Qur’ān. Yet, as can be seen in the charter of the movement, it is evident that it sought

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47 The first batch of Brunei students joined this institution in 1950, consisting of three students, including the present minister of Religious Affairs. The sending of Bruneians to al-Junied continued until 1983, when the students who had completed the Brunei Arabic Secondary School could have joined al-Azhar University directly without going through the preparatory years.

48 The three students who finished their Islamic secondary education joined the Islamic College in 1956. They were followed by others until the early 1970s, when comparable colleges were founded in the country.

to propagate some mild forms of reformist agenda. Curiously, during this period no Bruneian had graduated from al-Azhar who could be expected to spread such reformist agenda in the country.

ASEAN Crisis and Islamic Response

When the ASEAN countries plunged into a severe financial crisis in 1997, Brunei was no exception. However, its economy which did not depend on DFI, despite heavy dependence on a single export commodity, suffered less shock and took a shorter period to recover. The heavy financial losses that the country suffered, as can be seen in the collapse of AMEDEO, continue to invite several questions. What is relevant to this paper is the fact that despite this crisis Brunei continues to be immune from radical trends in religio-political life. Some scholars suggest that since Brunei had not nurtured any puritanical movement, it could easily eradicate the growth of Islamic radicalism in the country. Let’s examine some relevant undertakings in this direction.

As the number of foreign workers dwindled in the late 1990s, due mainly to the slowing down of the economy, the government also tightened its control over illegal workers. Routine checks over the pockets of possible illegal entrants were intensified as the police and immigration officers rounded them up and detained those who failed to produce the necessary documents, especially passports. However, no suspected terrorist was detained. In one of the many police operations during 2002, several overseas workers in the construction industry in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, were caught under the suspicion that they possessed “old bombs.” However, they were soon released after obtaining expert confirmation that the bombs belonged to the Pacific War period and were apparently of little use.

On the religious front, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Islamic Da’wah Centre resumed their campaign against the deviationists (pengikut ajaran sesat). Public lectures on pulpit, mass media and audio- and video-channels were intensified, reminding Muslims of the danger of controversial teachings and unauthorized teachers. In cooperation with the police and the

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immigration officers, religious officials tracked down the Muslims who entered the country without showing proper Islamic behaviour. Although the operation was declared to prevent the Muslims residing in the country from consuming or purchasing alcohol, it was also effective in detecting the entry of suspected radicals.

**September 11 and its Impact on Muslims in Southeast Asia, especially Brunei**

Like many other countries in Southeast Asia, Brunei was quick to join its neighbours in condemning the tragedy of September 11. At the same time, Brunei insisted that other than direct attacks on the terrorists, the world community should also address the roots of terrorism. Certainly Brunei’s insistence on the need to pursue a comprehensive policy with regard to terrorism does not have anything to do with what Roger Kershaw identifies Brunei’s foreign policy of “an undying hatred of Israel.”51 It is, indeed, the policy of Israel and the undue favour shown to it by the superpowers which are a matter of concern for Brunei and other Muslim countries rather than Brunei’s supposedly dogmatic opposition to Israelis or their state.

Within four months following 9/11, Brunei had participated in three major international conferences to address the problem of terrorism. In October 2001 the Sultan of Brunei joined the APEC summit in Shanghai. Major agreements were signed by all the heads of states attending the meeting. Brunei was among the signatories of the APEC statement on counter-terrorism.52 In November 2001 Brunei hosted ASEAN summit meeting which was also attended by three other top Asian leaders. In the light of the Shanghai statement, ASEAN leaders agreed on two-pronged action plans against terrorism: security measures and political and socio-economic development. The nine-step declaration on counter-terrorism includes such undertakings as: to review and update the national mechanism against terrorism, especially in fields of early warning against terrorist activities, to intensify cooperation among law enforcers on counter-terrorism, to prepare plans on regional cooperation concerning the investigation, the tracing and monitoring of terrorist reports, to cultivate wider cooperation in pursuing counter-terrorism, and to support the leadership of the United Nations in combating terrorism. 53

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51 Kershaw, “Partners in Realism,” 47.
52 The seven-point statement, among other things, specifies cooperation in counter terrorism through eight measures, including the combat against terrorist financing, the tightening of security in air and maritime transportation, the protection over energy security and supply, the insurance of border security, the enhancement of member economies to effectively implement counter terrorism measures and the prevention of negative impact of terrorism on the economy.
At the societal level, the Muslims in Brunei share the grief of the world community toward the 9/11 tragedy. At the same time they share with their co-religionists and support the popular Muslim view that true way to root out terrorism is not so much to have recourse to brute force against those perceived to be involved in terrorism as to establish peace and amity and justice among nations.

So far as, it is convinced that to set the world’s house in order, it is essential that we first put our own house in order. While this is of necessity a multi-faceted effort, one of its highlights is our effort to develop a balanced, moderate and inclusive attitude to Islam.

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54 Kershaw indirectly suggests that although formally Brunei has joined the international community to condemn terrorism, at the popular level sympathy in the country for the terror acts launched by various Muslim groups in the period 2001–2002 still can be felt. See, Kershaw, “Partners in Realism,” 50–51.