

# Examining R.O. Winstedt's Perspective on the Impact of Islam and Hinduism on Malay Culture: A Critical Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

R.O. Winstedt, a British administrator who served in Malaya, was an orientalist whose thinking was influenced by logical empirical positivism. This philosophy emphasized the use of intellect as the primary approach to acquiring facts through systematic and thorough research methods. Winstedt's perspective rejected the use of revelation or religious proofs as evidence in historical studies, considering them irrelevant. This article examines Winstedt's viewpoint on the impact of Islam and Hinduism on the lives of Malays, focusing on four selected writings and academic perspectives toward his ideas. The authors employed historiography, comparisons, and content analysis to analyse these views. The study revealed that Winstedt's approach to assessing the influence of Hinduism on Malay community life, particularly in areas such as culture, law, and mythology, was questionable and biased. He believed that the community's development and civilization were shaped by Hindu culture, disregarding the contributions of Islam. This understanding stemmed from Eurocentric thinking, which placed Europe at the centre and portrayed it as a superior and civilized nation compared to others. This Eurocentrism led to a lack of understanding regarding the essence of Islam. It propagated the idea that European nations were the "ambassadors of civilization" and the saviours of less civilized peoples.

**Keywords:** Winstedt, Hinduism, Islam, Malaya, the Malays



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the intriguing discussions surrounding the Malay culture centres on the roles and contributions of Islam and Hinduism in shaping the civilization of the Malay Archipelago. This topic has attracted Western orientalists to delve deeper into examining the influence of Islam and Hinduism among the Eastern people, particularly in the Malay world (Rani, 2005 & Rahman et al., 2020).

According to Rahman et al. (2019), the main objective of these orientalists was to dissociate Muslims from the core principles of their faith, thus diminishing the practicality of religion in their daily lives. In the case of Malaya, for instance, these individuals limited the role of Islam to matters of worship and religious rituals, such as weddings. Adams (1975) and Said (1977) shared a similar perspective on the orientalists' thinking, suggesting that this classical mode of thinking was based on logical reasoning.

Zakaria (1999) argued that the orientalists attributed people's suffering to their adherence to the concept of God, which led to their unwavering loyalty to religion.

During Winstedt's tenure in Malaya, he made efforts to introduce changes that were unfamiliar to the Malay people, particularly when it came to imposing his conservative personal views on Islam (Rahman & Kadir, 2017). One of these views involved his assumption regarding the negative impact of Islam on the development of the Malay world, while emphasizing the significance of Hinduism in shaping Malay culture. Therefore, the authors have selected four of Winstedt's writings—*The Malay: A Cultural History*, *Shaman, Saiva, and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic*, *A History of Malaya*, and *Kitab Tawarikh Melayu*—to illustrate his perspective on the influence of Hinduism in the lives of Malays.

## **2. R.O. WINSTEDT'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMPACT OF ISLAM AND HINDUISM ON THE LIVES OF THE MALAYS**

### **2.1 The Malay: A Cultural History (1961)**

In this work, R.O. Winstedt examines the lives of Malays in Malaya, focusing on the influence of Hinduism on their belief systems before the spread of Islam. Winstedt delves into customary laws, particularly those of the Minangkabau, arguing that orientalists viewed Islamic law and customary law as separate entities. The book also explores the formation of Malay culture, starting from the Malacca Sultanate and extending to interactions between Malay kingdoms in terms of history, language, literature, and social aspects.

At the beginning of the book, Winstedt asserts that it provides a comprehensive study of the Malays in Malaya and defines culture as a collection of ideas, practices, and techniques that have profoundly influenced their way of life. He believed that the Malay people's entire existence was shaped by their belief systems, culture, language, social structure, and literature, which were influenced by both Hinduism and Islam. Winstedt argues that Malay culture encompasses a reverence for nature spirits, a recognition of "unbecoming" behaviour rather than sin and crime, the practices of shamans, Hindu rituals during royal installations, celebrations of the Islamic New Year, sermons in mosques, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and Sufi mysticism.

Winstedt suggests in his writing that Islam in Malaya had significant similarities with Hinduism and had been influenced by it. He refers to Marco Polo's findings in 1292, which indicate that Hinduism was the dominant faith before the arrival of Islam in Samudera and Pasai, shortly followed by its spread throughout the Malay world. Based on this observation, Winstedt suggests that Malaya initially had a strong Hindu influence, which rendered Islam vulnerable to external influences, thus making it appear weak.

Furthermore, Winstedt compares Islamic law and customary law, particularly the Minangkabau customs, regarding matters such as marriage, criminal activities, and inheritance. He posits that the Temenggong customary law was influenced by both Islam and Hinduism, while the Perpatih customary law represents the original legal system of Malaya, unaffected by these religions.

In concluding his work, Winstedt questions the intellectual capabilities of the Malays, suggesting that they are still like children of nature in a sophisticated world awaiting exploration. He speculates that if any Malay were to develop a literary talent, it would more likely arise from densely populated Java or even Sumatra rather than from the two and a half million Malays on the peninsula, though this outcome is not always predictable.

## 2.2 A History of Malaya (1988)

In this work, R.O. Winstedt explores the history of Malaya, covering the influence of Hinduism and Islam, the Malacca Sultanate, the colonial periods of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, the Sultanate of Johor after the fall of Malacca, the relationship between Malaya and Siam, the Japanese invasion, and the eventual independence of Malaya. The book also includes discussions on culture, literature, society, and religion.

Winstedt believed that his writing provided comprehensive answers to questions about the history of Malaya. He acknowledges that, due to the vast scope, it was not possible for him to conduct firsthand research in all the areas of Hindu, Malay, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and English history. Therefore, he acknowledges his indebtedness to other researchers whose works are cited in his bibliography. He specifically mentions the *Suma Orientalis* of Tome Pires, which he found helpful in his research into the early history of Malacca.

In his work, Winstedt classifies the population of Malaya into four major racial groups: Negrito, Sakai, Jakun (or proto-Malay), and the civilized Malays. However, it is noted that his categorization reflects the perspective of the orientalist and exhibits elements of bias and prejudice, emphasizing negative aspects more than positive ones.

Winstedt also questions the intellectual capabilities of the Malays, associating their abilities with foreign cultures rather than their own community. He suggests that the intellectual abilities of the Malays were derived from foreign cultures, such as those of the Arabs and Indians, which were copied by the Malays. Furthermore, while Winstedt discusses the influence of Hinduism in the life of the Malay community in this work, it is not as comprehensive as his previous book, "The Malay: A Cultural History." The discussion mainly focuses on the period during the reign of Sri Vijaya and Majapahit in the region before the spread of Islam and the establishment of the Malacca Sultanate.

In concluding the work, Winstedt asserts that the Malays lack their own distinct identity, emphasizing the significant foreign influences they have experienced. He mentions the influence from India, which introduced three religions, new forms of magic and medicine, Hindu and Islamic law, sculpting techniques, gold and silver craftsmanship, silk-weaving, two alphabets, and a secular and religious literature enriched with Sanskrit words representing abstract concepts. He stated:

*The Malays have experienced many foreign influences, incomparably the greatest being that from India, which gave them three religions, a new magic and medicine, law Hindu and Islamic, the arts of sculpture, gold and silver-work and silk-weaving, two alphabets and a secular and religious literature, full of Sanskrit words for abstract concepts such as danger, intellect, kindness, language, name, price, profit, property, religion, heaven and hell.*

(Winstedt 1988, 263)

## 2.3 Shaman, Saiva, and Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic (1925)

In this work, R.O. Winstedt explores the influence of Hinduism and Islam, specifically in the realm of medical practices within the Malay community. The discussion revolves around the extent of belief in magical elements within the community and whether such beliefs continue to be practiced despite the adherence to Islam. Examples of magical activities include farming rituals and special ceremonies celebrating childbirth.

Through this work, Winstedt attempts to establish a connection between Islam, Hinduism, and the Malay community, suggesting that Islam in Malaya originated from South India. He refers to the folklore story "Hikayat Raja Pasai" to support this claim. Winstedt also highlights similarities between

Hindu mantras uttered during official ceremonies and the prayers frequently recited by Islamic medical practitioners. For example:

*Genies of supernatural power!  
Your home is at the navel of the sea,  
By the tree on the broken rock!  
Enter not the line drawn by my teacher!  
Else will I curse ye with the words!  
"There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet"  
OM! I neutralize all evil,  
O Solomon! In the name of God*

Winstedt further suggests that Malay magicians, upon the arrival of Islam, learned from Hindu pundits and adopted their divination techniques and talismans. They incorporated the names of Allah and Muhammad into their existing incantations, sometimes in inappropriate contexts.

Based on Winstedt's perspective, it is evident that he believes Islam, as embraced by the Malay communities in Malaya, was brought from India, and that their religious beliefs were weak, influenced by Hinduism, and easily susceptible to other beliefs. He posits that even before the introduction of Islamic mysticism, Hinduism had already encouraged Malay magicians to enhance their powers and captivate the gullible through ascetic practices.

## **2.4 Kitab Tawarikh Melayu (1927)**

This work, written with the assistance of Daeng Abdul Hamid Tengku Muhammad Salleh, is considered the first scholarly work on general Malay history written in the Malay language. According to Winstedt, a historical work should be based on factual evidence that supports the truth of events. He argued that any work containing myths and fairy tales from previous Malay literature should be completely disregarded.

The focus of this writing is on the history of Malay civilization, the influence of Hinduism and Islam in society, the era of the Malacca Malay Sultanate, and the period of colonization in Malaya. Winstedt takes a sceptical and biased stance when reviewing Malay works, stating that tales from ancient times are of no use if they involve gods and magic, as they lack historical significance.

The paper also discusses the various races found in the Malay Archipelago, particularly in Malaya, which Winstedt refers to as mixed-race people. He underestimates the indigenous Malay tribes such as the Semang and Sakai, considering them primitive compared to the more civilized Malay community. Winstedt emphasizes the influence of Hinduism in the lives of Malays, stating that the first teachers who guided the Malays in matters of progress and civilization were Hindus. He asserts that Hindu influence began in the second century, coinciding with the occupation of Java by Hindus.

Winstedt believes that Malay civilization was primarily influenced by Hinduism rather than Islam. He suggests that even after embracing Islam, Malays did not fully adhere to its teachings. In the early spread of Islam in Malaya, religious teachers were not highly respected and often looked down upon by society.

### 3. ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF ISLAM AND HINDUISM ON THE LIVES OF THE MALAYS

#### 3.1 View on the Myth

Winstedt (1961) disagreed with using myths as evidence for historical events, considering it illogical. He specifically pointed out works like *Salasilah Raja-Raja di Negeri Kutai*, *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, *Sejarah Melayu*, *Hikayat Aceh*, *Hikayat Siak*, and *Tuhfat al-Nafis* as examples. Winstedt assumed that the Malay community had less knowledge compared to Western societies, aligning with the historiography approach that facts should be logically proven. According to Maier (1988), Winstedt recognized that he was interpreting texts rather than reality, leading him to conclude that Malay historiography operated under different rules and regulations of knowledge, making it incomparable and inferior to modern Western historiography.

Denisova (2011) stated that myths were present in works related to Malay Islamic history from the 13th to the 19th century. These works included semi-historical narratives connected to pre- and post-Islamic traditions. The narration of these historical works in the form of folklore was commissioned by the government to praise and highlight the greatness of the administration at the time. The authors emphasized the need for critical and comprehensive study to discern the truth in these works. The orientalist argued against considering these historical works as less valuable or rejecting them as important historical sources.

Denisova (2011) also highlighted the transformation influenced by Islam in these myths, where elements of traditional mythology gradually diminished and were replaced with information related to Islamic civilization. The myths incorporated definitions and characters from various cultures, such as Arab, Persian, Indian, Macedonian, Turkish, and others, revealing the openness and wider intellectual relationship of the Malay world.

#### 3.2 View on Malay Culture

Snouck Hurgronje, an orientalist, was the first to link the history of the Malay world with elements of Indian culture (Rahman et al., 2016). This reference became fundamental for Western orientalists in studying the history, cultural practices, and religious influences in the Malay world. According to Elias (2012), many cultural practices in the Malay world seemed similar to those of the Muslim community in the Indian subcontinent or pre-Islamic practices, supporting the notion that Muslims were unlikely to have come from Arab lands or to have been disseminated solely by Arabs. He stated:

*Dalam konteks pengkajian orientalis terhadap sejarah Islam di alam Melayu, persamaan rupa zahiriyah pada banyak amalan yang bersifat kebudayaan dengan masyarakat Islam di benua India atau amalan pra-Islam telah menguatkan andaian bahawa Islam di sini tidak mungkin pada fikiran mereka berasal dari tanah Arab atau disebarkan oleh orang-orang Arab. [In the context of the orientalists' research on the history of Islam in the Malay world, most of the cultural practices seemed to be similar with Muslim community in the subcontinent of India or the pre-Islamic practices confirmed the assumption that Muslims were unlikely, to their mind, coming from the Arab lands or disseminated by the Arabs.]*

(Elias 2012, 613)

The Malay world has a rich history of interacting with Indian, Chinese, and Arab civilizations. With its capacity to embrace other cultures, Malay civilization was open to accepting and adapting foreign influences. However, this openness did not diminish its core identity or entirely transform its structure, as Deraman (2000) argued. Malay civilization will always be influenced by other cultures, but it is

important to judiciously adapt elements from other cultures in accordance with the will and values of the cultural philosophy.

Fadzil (2006) emphasized that Islamization does not require the complete elimination of local culture, as Islam does not seek to eradicate all culturally indigenous elements. Not all indigenous cultural elements are negative; many are positive. In worldly matters, Islam follows the principle of "al-Bara'ah al-Asliyyah" or "al-Ibahat al-Asliyyah," which means that everything is allowed except what is forbidden.

According to Malek (2014), Winstedt argued in his writing that Malay culture was deeply rooted in India until the 19th century, encompassing various aspects such as lifestyles, political systems, medicine, literature, art, and carpentry. However, Fadzil (2006) asserted that certain beliefs and customs of pre-Islamic Malays were distorted, deviant, and should be eliminated. These customs may have originated from Hinduism, Buddhism, animism, or other indigenous beliefs. Nonetheless, there were also customs that did not contradict Islamic law or values, particularly those derived from the observation of nature.

### 3.3 View on Islamic Law and Custom

Drawing from Winstedt's works, the authors have examined his perspective on Islamic law and its interaction with customary law, particularly Minangkabau, as discussed in his book *The Malays: A Culture History*. In Malaya, Winstedt noted that Islamic law, regarded as the most impartial law fulfilling human needs, was intertwined with customary laws that were created by men to protect the interests of certain groups, particularly the aristocracy (Rahman et al., 2020).

Winstedt (1961) distinguished between the Temenggong Customary Law, influenced by Islam and Hinduism, and the Perpatih Customary Law, seen as the original law of Malaya influenced by both religions. He described the existence of digests containing traces of indigenous patriarchal law mixed with remnants of Hindu law and overlaid with Muslim law. This patriarchal law was known as Adat Temenggong or the law of the Minister for war and police. Winstedt stated:

*There are digests, containing traces of Malay indigenous patriarchal law, but mixed with relics of Hindu law and overlaid with Muslim law. This patriarchal law is called Adat Temenggong or law of the Minister for war and police.*

(Winstedt 1961, 91)

Winstedt (1988) viewed the arrival of Islam as a significant obstacle to the advancement of Malay law and culture, suggesting that it was not meant to be practiced in Malaya. Yan (2009) also expressed the perception that Islam and Malay *adat* laws were irreconcilable and conflicting due to their differing social contexts, making Islamic laws impractical for meeting the needs of Malays. Colonial writers, according to Yan (2009), considered Islamic laws as static and arbitrary, with a negative impact on traditional Malay laws.

These biased assessments by orientalist, influenced by the hostile classical orientalist approach toward Islam, led to the belief that Islamic law had little influence on the lives of the Malay community and held a lower position than customary law (Rahman et al., 2019). Winstedt even compared the penalties for sexual offenses under Islamic law to those under medieval customary law, suggesting that the latter was more lenient. He stated:

*Those taken in adultery might be stoned to death under Muhammadan Law. But over the relation of the sexes the adoption of that law was as gradual as in order fields of jurisprudence. Brutal as many of the penalties in the Malacca digest are, its mediaeval customary law was more lenient towards sexual offences than contemporary Muslim practice.*

(Winstedt 1961, 105)

Such views led the authors to believe that Winstedt aimed to downplay the influence of Islamic law in addressing community issues in Malaya.

Similarly, the Dutch colonialists in the Indonesian Islands implemented measures to diminish the influence of Islamic law. They emphasized the significance of customary law, which superseded religious law, and applied Dutch law to Europeans in Indonesia while subjecting indigenous people to customary law. Islamic law was regarded as a foreign law with lower priority. Sharia law was considered to promote religious values without carrying legal implications, and it was only practiced if accepted by customary law, as highlighted by Abdullah (2005).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The research presented in this study is crucial for explaining the misconceptions held by orientalists, particularly regarding Winstedt's influence on Hinduism and Islam in the lives of the Malay community. The root of this problem lies in the Western colonial rejection of Islam, considering it an impediment to human progress and deeming its teachings outdated.

Winstedt's perspective on Islam in Malaya clearly exhibits a sceptical and doubtful viewpoint evident in almost all his writings on Islam and the Malays. His judgments were biased and deviated from the actual history of Malay civilization. His approach aligned with the paradigm of evolution and diffusion prevalent in Orientalism. He prioritized logical thinking to such an extent that he questioned the validity of all traditions, customs, knowledge practices, and even Islamic law.

Despite the arrival of Islam in Malaya, the authors recognize its direct impact on the lives of the Malays. The authors view this arrival as a positive development that led to selective syncretization, where customs deemed compatible and non-conflicting with Islam were maintained in their original form. This contradicts Winstedt's perspective, as he believed that Islamic law and tradition could not coexist due to cultural differences and geographical location, according to the Orientalist viewpoint.

Winstedt also depicted the Malay community as lagging behind in various aspects, such as slow progress and modernization, attributing it to their firm adherence to Islam. His failure to understand the community stemmed from his Euro-centric thinking, centering on the belief that Europeans were a superior and more civilized nation compared to people in Asia, including the Middle East and Malaya. Consequently, the British were seen as the "ambassadors of civilization" and the saviours of the Malay world. When Winstedt employed this Euro-centric approach as a yardstick for assessing the history of Malaya, he demonstrated a lack of comprehension of the Malay community and displayed bias in interpreting concerns related to Islam in Malaya.

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Mohd Farhan Abd Rahman is the first author of this writing and is guided by co-authors that have expertise in methodology selection, data analysis, language review, and so on. Each co-author always shares their views and expertise to ensure this writing can be completed within the specified time.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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