In this paper, I would like to draw a portrait of a celebrated Muslim scholar in Malaysia, Syed Naquib al-Attas, and convey a picture of a recent institution in Kuala Lumpur, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). My aim is to communicate the specificity of Malaysian Islam and highlight a form of “gentrified” and institutional Islam which is closely linked with government policies from the “top”. In the seventies, Al-Attas was the intellectual mentor of the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Anwar’s biography informs us that when he was a young, protesting Malay Muslim student, he was jailed because he fought against poverty and this apparently gave him immense credit for a bright political career. During the seventies, Al-Attas’s writings influenced a whole generation of young protesting students, who were related to ABIM(2) circles in Malaysia.

I should perhaps say why I am interested in drawing al-Attas’s portrait. In recent years, social scientists have tended to associate Islamic

1. This is a revised version of a chapter of a Habilitationschrift presented at the Free University of Berlin, with the title of “Re-Thinking the Social Knowledge of Islam. Critical Exploration in the Islamization of knowledge Debate : Malaysia and Egypt”, 1998. This paper was read by Martin van Bruinessen and Mordechai Feindgold. I wish to thank them all for their comments.
2. ABIM = Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia. It was created in 1969, only officially approved in 1971.
fundamentalism with frustrated, anti-government, economically deprived opposition groups. The Middle East scene shows us that this is not an erroneous statement. Islamic groups seem to have become the major opposition force fighting a so called “secular” establishment. They are perceived as popular and their populism appeals to many social scientists who work on the phenomenon of revivalism. They seem to have replaced the vanishing functions of the state in social work in many domains and are thus perceived as fascinating social movements. They seem to be active as NGOs\(^3\) and they should be included as partners in the debate about democratisation and civil society. Their discourse is understood by several Western observers as a replacement of Marxism, which was forceful in the sixties and early seventies. Some view the Islamists as “modern” because they use the latest technological inventions in religious preaching and reshape the public space under new conditions which they label Islamic. However, such arguments seem to dismiss the paradoxical role of state Islamization that is involved in fighting oppositional Islam with, quite often, an identical language and symbols.

My aim in this essay is to provide a different representation of Muslim intellectuals and to trace the extent to which an “elitist” discourse could use the language of protest and be integrated within the official discourse of Islam. A scholarly discourse has influenced visions and political orientations of the Muslim Malay elite. Al-Attas’s Islam represents certainly an entirely different intellectual configuration from that of the leaders of the PAS party in Kelantan,\(^4\) who were viewed as strongly influenced by the Middle East and in particular by the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. ABIM leaders are today established and recognised figures working closely with the government. I should warn the reader that my observations were undertaken before the recent 1998 Asian crisis and the recent house arrest and removal of office of Anwar Ibrahim. The political struggle between Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir Mohammad dates from earlier times. One could read such a clash as denoting the differing stands between the secular, social Darwinist medical doctor Mahathir versus the younger, Islamic oriented Anwar Ibrahim. I will provide a picture of intellectuals in an affluent economic situation, included in the power structure of the state as technocrats, based in “think tanks” and “advisors of the prince”. Even the ABIM circles witnessed a change in their Islamic goals and slogans to shift to “problem-solving” and “corrective

\(^3\) NGO stands for non-government organisations.
\(^4\) PAS = Parti Islam SeMalaysia.

Archipel 58, Paris, 1999
participation” in co-operation with the government.\(^{(5)}\) This coincides with the creation of extravagant, architecturally fascinating “imagined Islamic” institutions. However, whether such a description would still stand after the Asian crisis and Anwar’s arrest is another issue that would need further investigation. I try here to link al-Attas’s discourse of “Islamization of knowledge” which I will explain later with the general policies of Mahathir’s Islamization. The Malaysian scene and the “Asian wonder” have developed a culture of “problem solvers”. In Malaysia, “in spite or rather because” of Mahathir’s authoritarianism, one often hears that the “government delivers the goods”. One can perhaps relate this idiom to Mahathir’s praise of the Japanese model; it is no coincidence that he launched a “Look East” campaign. Let me first provide a picture of the social and political atmosphere of Malaysian Islam and then focus on S.N. al-Attas’s writings and the significance of his institute.

The Malaysian Scene

Malaysia witnessed the construction of a new state discourse on science and Islam which is closely linked to Institutional Islam. The promoters of this discourse of Islamization could be viewed as attempting to enhance a new bureaucratic elite in Malaysia. The promoters of the “Islamization of knowledge debate” are in the centre of power and are spokesmen of the Malaysian government’s vision of Islam. They hold significant positions in academic, publishing and government offices. Although Islam has been the official religion of Malaysia, Malaysia is not an Islamic state. In recent years the government has been constantly confronted by conflicting dakwah (Arabic : da’wah) groups as well as oppositional parties. The government, in an effort to combat the growing influence of Islamic revivalist groups, has been increasingly borrowing Islamic representations to establish legitimacy vis-à-vis the fundamentalists within the state apparatus. Thus the use of religious symbols has become widespread. In order to counter-attack communism and the secular nationalists in many Muslim countries, religious symbols and activities have been employed by these diverse regimes in the fight for legitimacy. It is understandable that the political struggle takes the form of a war of religious symbols, as M. Lyon puts it (this, in fact, applies to the Egyptian scene too).\(^{(6)}\) For instance, in Malaysia, the policies of the

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Mahathir government of the early 1970s were energetically directed towards Islamizing the government machinery, as witnessed by the increase in the number of Islamic programmes and policies. Moreover, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) encouraged Islamization by launching Islamic conferences for the purpose of controlling and regulating Islam in the country. The state also responded to Islamic resurgence by increasing Islamization procedures in mass media and public life. Malaysia furthermore witnessed the promotion of a bureaucratised institutional Islam and as a result the Pusat Islam (the Islamic Centre that promotes an official version of Islam and counteracts deviants) was upgraded. The official declaration of the “Islamization of the government machinery” took place in 1984. The Islamic judges were promoted to the same status as the civil judiciary in 1988. Indeed, there is a prevalent argument among Southeast Asian intellectuals that the state has itself reinforced Islamic resurgence.

In 1969, Malaysia experienced Sino-Malay ethnic riots after the elections, which reflected the growing resentments of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese and the inefficiency of the government. This led to the launching of the new economic policy (NEP) to encourage the social ascendance of the Malays. The idea was to boost policies to encourage the Bumiputras (meaning the indigenous, the Malays) versus the non-Bumiputra groups, meaning the Chinese. Malay national identity has since then become increasingly interwoven with Bumiputrism and Islam after the NEP (the new economic policies that led to the creation of a large well-to-do Malay middle class). This was coupled with what Clive Kessler calls the “traditionalization” of Malay society. For instance, rituals and titles given by the royalty were reinvented and reinstitutionalized.

In connection with the Islamization policies and Bumiputrism, it is important to state that Malays were granted privileges in higher education. In general, nevertheless, the Malays still lag behind, despite the privileges they were offered in education. For instance, 55% of the places that were

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reserved for the Chinese were given to Malay students. The general mood among the Malays, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review is rather of contempt. We are told that the Bumiputras in 1970, owned 1.9% of the stock market, while in 1990 they owned 19% in the stock market.\(^{(11)}\)

Without denying the strong critiques against “Mahathirism” by intellectuals like Chandra Muzaffar, who sees that the new heroes of culture are all corporate barons,\(^{(12)}\) I am merely highlighting the nuances of the intellectual culture.

**Mahathirism**

The particular political culture of what Khoo Boo Teik rightly defined as the politics of “Mahathirism”, consisting of an amalgamation of nationalism, Islam, populism, capitalism and authoritarianism,\(^{(13)}\) coupled with economic success, adds to the specifically Malaysian way intellectuals deal with the success story. While being a champion of Third Worldist ideology, Mahathir launched the 2020 vision, which he linked with the idea of a Pan-Malaysian “race” to grant equality and partnership among races.\(^{(14)}\) This occurred after having promoted Bumiputram for years. Mahathir has been portrayed as a social Darwinist, a medical doctor, a self-made man of modest origin, an anti-feudal who attacked the fatalism of the Malays as well as the antiquated religious teachers, i.e. the \textasciitilde{ulama}. Moreover, Mahathir directed a strong attack against the Islamists. He blames them for undermining economic development and hindering Malaysia from entering the age of modernity. Mahathir led a campaign against bearded conservative UMNO party members. He called into question “obsessive religious practices”. According to him they stick to ritual at any cost.\(^{(15)}\) Perhaps this attack is to be interpreted as revealing the increasing difference between the secular oriented Mahathir and Islamic-oriented Anwar Ibrahim. But Mahathir is described as an intellectual who wrote in the newspapers and composed an important book, *The Malay Dilemma*. Although *The Malay Dilemma* might be criticised for its social Darwinist undertones, it provides noteworthy insights about inter-ethnic relations, socio-economic activities

\(^{15}\) Asiaweek (19.9.1997).
and the interactive aspects of the three communities. It is indeed an intelligent book, rich in detailed information about inequalities among races, education, job opportunities and the intricate ethnic economic dynamics.

Mahathir today is portrayed as a modernist leader with a secular outlook.\(^{(16)}\) He was described as "... the first non-royal or non-aristocratic incumbent of the position, the first non-lawyer (and apparently the first non-golfer)\(^{(17)}\)" and a man who is uneasy with the royalty and who fought against its corrupt attitudes. Mahathir also faced the challenge and critique of the PAS's demands for an Islamic state as well as ABIM (Islamic Youth Force of Malaysia) and other groups such as the Aliran Kesedaran Negara (National Consciousness Movement). Under such circumstances Mahathir's card was to heighten his Islamic credentials to counteract his Islamic opposition.

The creation of the International Islamic University could be seen as enhancing Mahathir's credibility and popularity in the Muslim world.\(^{(18)}\) Interesting is the fact that Mahathir declared his intention of creating an International Islamic University immediately after a visit to the Gulf States and Jeddah.\(^{(19)}\) This brings us to the ambiguous love-hate relationship which Southeast Asians have with the Middle East. The Middle Eastern visitor would notice that one of the effects of the Islamic dakwah movement has been the growing borrowing of Arabic terminology for status enhancement and authenticity in politics. Also until today the returning Middle Eastern \"ulama\" are viewed with either veneration because of their Arabic background, or fear that their religious education is the result of their failure to enter the secular system, as the Prime Minister of Malaysia Mahathir expressed it in 1992 in his political campaign against the PAS \"ulama.\" UMNO formulated the need to reform the institution of the \"ulama\" on the grounds that they were dropouts from the English medium schools.\(^{(20)}\) In recent years Mahathir has expressed strong anti-Middle Eastern feelings against the feudal politics and Islamic fundamentalism, often portrayed as an export to Southeast Asia. It is precisely that love-hate relationship which

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19. Ibid.
needs further research. On the one hand, the borrowing of symbols, knowledge and academia from the Middle East and, on the other, suspicion about the type of formation of the clergy and the assertion that Southeast Asian Islam is somehow autonomous and different.(21)

In addition, Mahathir Muhammad inaugurated the International Conference on Islamic Thought in Kuala Lumpur with a talk about “Islamization of Knowledge and the Future of the Ummah”. He stressed the importance of an “Islamic future”, and planning for the future where Muslim academics should master all modern disciplines.(22) This might appear as mere ideological rhetoric, which could be understood as part of state sponsored Islam. But we might also add that Malaysia has as its mirror the neighbouring island of Singapore with its complicated and latent conflictual relationship symbolising an unspoken competition between the Chinese Majority (in Singapore) versus the Malay Muslim majority in Malaysia. Not only that, but former Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew has previously promoted Confucianism and Asian values as a state ideology. Confucian values were encouraged as an important factor for promoting capitalism. Here, the discourse of Islamization and the promotion of Islamic values as a state ideology could be seen as the other side of the same coin. The paring of success with religious values seems thus to be promoted by both Singapore and Malaysia. However, viewed from a different angle, Singapore is often compared to Israel. In Southeast Asia, it is seen as playing the role of the watchdog that possesses a sophisticated army and a leading financial centre. The Malays, who form a minority in Singapore (although enjoying far greater privileges as “citizens” – which the Palestinians outside of Israel do not, and much less discrimination than the Palestinians), are quite often compared to the Arabs of Israel. The smallness of the Chinese majority dominated island of Singapore, surrounded by one of the largest communities of Muslims in the entire world, brings systematically the analogy with Israel and the Arab World.(23)

23. In 1988, the population of Singapore numbered 2,647,100. The Chinese constituted 76% of the population, the Malays 15.1%, the Indians 6.5 % and persons of other ethnic groups figure 2.4 %. Singapore, Facts and Pictures (Singapore: Published by The Information Division Ministry of Communication and Information, 1989). Islam is the religion of the majority of the Malays; there are also Indian Muslims.
Islamization and de-Westernization

In Malaysia the debate about the “Islamization of Knowledge” was mainly concretised by a former militant Muslim student, Anwar Ibrahim, who was the Minister of Finance and later deputy Prime Minister. Anwar Ibrahim was a charismatic student leader at the department of Malay Studies, University of Malaya. During the late sixties, he became president of the National Union of Malaysian Muslim Students. (24) In 1971, he established the Muslim Youth Movement. Today it is known by its Malay name, the Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM). His charismatic appeal was enhanced by his arrest in 1974, after demonstrating against poverty. He was detained for two years and was released in 1976 without having been charged. (25) Anwar’s personal biography reveals Mahathir’s mechanism in co-opting oppositional Islam within the state apparatus. It reveals a lot about the inclusion of radical Islam. To read Anwar Ibrahim’s The Asian Renaissance from the perspective of mirrors towards both the West and Singapore might give us a hint why there is a strong emphasis upon “the right to difference” in comparing Asian with European renaissance. According to Ibrahim the fundamental difference lies in that the Asian renaissance “has its foundations in religion and tradition – Islam, Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity being the major ones”. (26) He furthermore stresses that the Asian man at heart is persona religiosa. (27) Anwar scores a point over Lee Kwan Yew by thus being aware of the Western critiques of Asian regimes and the cultural specificity of Asian values. I quote him:

...Asians must be prepared to champion ideals which are universal. It is altogether shameful, if ingenious, to cite Asian values as an excuse for autocratic practices and denial of basic rights and civil liberties. To say that freedom is Western or un-Asian is to offend our own traditions as well as our forefathers who gave their lives in the struggle against tyranny and injustice. (28)

The discourse is promoted and encouraged from above, which led to the creation of “Islamic institutions” from the top with a large bureaucratic apparatus. The debate is advertised as a state ideology (to counteract the

25. Ibid., p. 5.
27. Ibid., p. 19.
28. Ibid., p. 28.
religion opposition in Kelantan in the North of Malaysia). It also seems to carry an institutional importance, exemplified in the creation of the International Islamic University (in contrast to the old Egyptian Azhar University in Cairo) as the political ticket to Anwar Ibrahim’s credibility. (29)

The term “Islamization of knowledge” was first devised in Saudi Arabia, where the First World Conference on Muslim Education was held at Mecca from March 31 to April 8 in 1977. There are three important figures related to this conference: the Palestinian American Isma’il Raji al-Faruqi, S. N. al-Attas, (30) and S. H. Nasr. (31) Each of them later developed a different understanding of what the Islamization of knowledge meant. S. N. al-Attas presented a paper with the title “Preliminary Thoughts on the Nature of Knowledge and the Definition and Aims of Education”. (32)

In one of his latest writings, Bassam Tibi defined the advocates of the Islamization of knowledge as “purist fundamentalists”, and S.N. al-Attas as another kind of fundamentalist. (33) What Tibi misses in his analysis is the crucial difference in the way local politics affect the discourse of Islamization. Merely restating S.N. al-Attas’s slogan of “de-Westernization of knowledge” as an expression of fundamentalism lends itself to a generalization that clouds the difference between oppositional and institutional Islam. Western observers have often tended to associate the term fundamentalism with angry, protesting anti-Western movements. Is this the case with S.N. al-Attas?

The concept of “de-Westernization of knowledge” could be associated with the general mood of Islamic revivalism which affected universities in


30. There are nevertheless basic differences in orientation between al-Attas and al-Faruqi’s views of Islamization of knowledge. Al-Attas stresses strong Sufi inclinations with intuition as a form of knowledge, while al-Faruqi expressed strong sympathy towards Fiqh. In addition that there were very strong personal antipathies between al-Attas and al-Faruqi.


33. Bassam Tibi, Islamischer Fundamentalismus, moderne Wissenschaft und Technologie (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 1992), pp. 35, 113.
the early seventies and in particular after the 1969 ethnic riots between the Chinese and Muslims. It was after this incident, together with the policy of Islamization of the government, that Malays became more and more associated with Islam. The movement was launched by Anwar Ibrahim. S.N. al-Attas, who was then Dean of the Arts Faculty, became a crucial figure in stimulating the students to read contemporary revivalist literature. He attracted a circle of students at his house. (34)

With this new awareness came the understanding of the comprehensiveness of Islam as *ad-deen* (way of life), a compelling appeal that had infused the students. (35)

Meanwhile Anwar Ibrahim, was in the centre of politics and decision-making. As a Deputy Prime Minister, he was certainly attempting to give a counter-Islamic image to PAS’s politics. The endeavour of ISTAC could be seen as the result of close teacher/student relationship between al-Attas and Anwar Ibrahim. Ibrahim was one of the main brains in creating and “generously” financing ISTAC. Let us now have a closer look at S.N. al-Attas.

**Al-Attas and Orientalism**

S.N. al-Attas began his career as an officer after studying at Eton and then at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst, England (1952-1955). He was active in fighting Communism in Malaysia and obviously this point is strongly emphasized in his biography. I see him as combining a military *habitus* with science. He then studied at the University of Malaya and later obtained a fellowship to study at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. Al-Attas earned a Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Interesting is the fact that al-Attas’s teachers were eminent Orientalists such as Martin Lings, Hamilton Gibb, Fazlur Rahman, Izutsu Tashihiko, A.J. Arberry, Sir Mortimer Wheeler of the British Academy and Sir Richard Winstedt. (36) No doubt, al-Attas’s works and his training reflect a pattern of traditional Orientalism with strong philological inclinations. He retains a great personal respect for traditional Orientalists

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35. Ibid., p. 12.
36. Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *An Introduction* by Associate Prof. Dr. Wan Moh Nor Wan Daud, International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, no date).
like Bertold Spuler (1911-1990), whom he met in Europe.\(^{(37)}\) I understand the project of ISTAC as an attempt to compete with traditional Orientalism, in the way it boasts the purchase of precious libraries from the West and the nature of publishing and editing Islamic manuscripts.

Today, al-Attas, who is a clear product of Orientalism through his training and emphasis upon the philological school, paradoxically maintains a harsh anti-Orientalist discourse against the West. In short, al-Attas is the prototype of the \emph{anti-Orientalist Orientalist}. Al-Attas privately expressed resentment against some Dutch scholars from the Leiden school like G.W.J. Drewes (1899-1992) who wrote extensively about 19th century Javanese Muslim teachers.\(^{(38)}\) Probably also, one could trace the competitive mechanisms in the field of knowledge production between a “local”, “indigenous” scholar like al-Attas versus the traditional Orientalist Drewes who wrote a critical review of al-Attas’s earlier writings in the reputed Dutch journal \emph{Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde}.\(^{(39)}\) Al-Attas’s philological study of Hamzah Fansuri (Pansuri) (d. c. 1600), was in fact his doctoral thesis. Both scholars wrote about similar topics and published about the same Sufis, Hamzah Fansuri and Nuruddin ar-Raniri. We are told that the last edited monograph of Drewes, which was originally written in collaboration with Lode Brakel was about the poems of Hamzah Fansuri and was published in 1986.\(^{(40)}\) In the preface Drewes and Brakel argue against al-Attas as follows:

Al-Attas’s argument in favour of the authenticity of the anonymous poems and those by Hamzah Fansuri and ‘Abdel al-Jamal had failed to convince Brakel (1979a : 80, 94, note 60), and as for me, many years ago I had already arrived at the conclusion that for various reasons the ascription of these poems to Hamzah was without foundation.\(^{(41)}\)

Drewes, in the introduction of \emph{The Poems of Hamzah Fansuri}, seems to challenge some of al-Attas’s findings, such as the birthplace of Hamzah Fansuri that might have been, according to al-Attas, Shahr-i-Naw

\(^{39}\) \emph{Ibid.}, p. 2.
\(^{41}\) \emph{Ibid.}, Preface, VIII.
(Shahrnawi), which Drewes holds as untenable. (42) Drewes equally questions whether Hamzah spoke and fluently wrote Persian, as al-Attas argued. One gets the impression that the whole introduction of Drewes and Brakel is directed towards deconstructing and contradicting al-Attas’s theses. Ironically, Drewes underwent in his turn equally strong criticism in a book review. (43) Amin Sweeney noted that Drewes’s last edition “...summarily dismiss as ‘an untenable contention’ al-Attas’s view that this refers to Hamzah’s place of birth.” (44) According to Sweeney, it is not a matter of the “correct” reading that comes first, but he pleads rather for the possible multiple readings of the Malay text (among which al-Attas’s important contribution), which Drewes seems to have dismissed. Also we are told that both scholars, al-Attas and Drewes, had different interpretations of al-Raniri who directed a religious purge against the followers of Hamzah Fansuri. Al-Attas interpreted al-Raniri’s action as intentionally distorting al-Fansuri and calling him as a heretic who should be persecuted. Al-Attas seems to portray al-Raniri as a political opportunist. Drewes seems on the other hand to place Raniri within a wider context where Indian influences are to be traced. (45) Nevertheless later, in his Commentary on the Hujjat Al-Siddiq of Nur al-din al-Raniri, al-Attas seems to want to rescue al-Raniri, through arguing that his major effort in the Malay Muslim world was to initiate “The ‘intensification’ and standardization of the process of Islamization.” (46) In another passage al-Attas says again about al-Raniri: “In fact he was the first writer in Malay to present history in universal perspective and to initiate scientific, modern Malay historical writing.” (47) By arguing so, al-Attas elevates him to the level of a moderniser of Malay language, which he rendered scientific.

It is significant that both al-Attas and Drewes wrote on theories of Islamization in the Archipelago. In 1968 Drewes published an article in Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, titled “New Light on the

42. Ibid., p. 5.
43. Ibid., p. 37.
47. Ibid., p. 48.
Coming of Islam to Indonesia?" While al-Attas's booklet, which I refer to later, was published in 1969. My impression is they ought be read as parallel and mirror texts. Al-Attas's text, in a certain way, constitutes an indirect reply to Drewes, who through summarising the previous theories of Islamization provided by Orientalists like Keyzer, Pijnappel, Snouck Hurgronje and Fatimi, seems to give more weight to the Indian element in the process of Islamization. On the other hand, al-Attas refuses to accept this view, to further stress the internal characteristics of Islam as a religion. What Orientalists saw as Indian elements, according to al-Attas, turned out to be Arab or Persian.

Al-Attas and Education

ISTAC, The Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, was founded in 1987 as a post graduate institute by S.N. al-Attas, the former Dean of the Arts Faculty at the University of Malaya. He was also one of the founding members of the National University (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia).

ISTAC was originally established as a part of the International Islamic University. Nevertheless, once in Kuala Lumpur, the visitor is very quickly informed that al-Attas insists that he has nothing to do with the International Islamic University (IIU) and its Islamization of knowledge project. Nevertheless from the technical point of view the degrees of ISTAC have to be acknowledged by the IIU and must be sealed by both IIU and ISTAC. The Director's elitist, authoritarian and "hierarchical" understanding of Islamic education and the way the Institute receives limited numbers of students; the exclusivity (only for the khasah, the few) and difficult access to the library, and the basically foreign teaching staff (Iranian, Sudanese, Turkish, American and a few Malays) make it very clear that the two institutions (the International Islamic University, and ISTAC) do function separately, if they do not distance themselves from each other. In 1996, ISTAC comprised 19 members of the Academic Staff, Iranian and Turkish

48. It was reprinted in Reading on Islam in Southeast Asia, eds. Ahmed Ibrahim, Sharon Siddique, Yasmine Hussain (Singapore : Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1971), pp. 7-19.
50. The International Islamic University includes a faculty of revealed knowledge. Al-Attas clearly distances himself from the activities of the IIIT and IIU.
national academics who studied at McGill and Chicago Universities under the supervision of the late scholar Fazlur Rahman. The academic staff comprised Sudanese academics, Ph.D. holders from Madison, Leicester, Istanbul, and Temple universities. The students numbered 60. Al-Attas vehemently insists that he has little to do with any of the IIIT activities or conferences in Kuala Lumpur. Likewise, the visitor is also reminded that although al-Attas attended the Mecca Conference in 1977 with al-Faruqi, al-Attas expressed strong antipathies towards al-Faruqi’s writings and ideas.

The emphasis upon the elitist background of al-Attas as a Syed\(^{52}\) of Arab, Hadrami origin, whose ancestors were saints and scholars, his writings on Sufism and his military training are all colourful ingredients of the recreation of “elitism”, “chivalry” and hierarchy.\(^{53}\) It is an elitism of a closed circle. It is an invented hierarchy, coupled with a particular understanding of an Islamic sense of order that al-Attas personally cultivates. Al-Attas also stresses an “Arab” physical appearance,\(^{54}\) although he is a Peranakan Arab i.e. he is a descendent of mixed marriages. He maintains a differentiated habitus, as a form of elevation and distance that commands our attention here:

There is no doubt, however, that his military training – particularly the Islamic elements of respecting order, discipline and loyalty – continues to influence some of his views and ways as an Islamic scholar and administrator.\(^{55}\)

A small detail to be noticed in relation to the invention of tradition of Arabness is that al-Attas signed his earlier works, like Some Aspects of Sufism and The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, as Syed Naguib al-Attas, while he later changed his name to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas for his Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future. There are two possible explanations for such a move; it might be that the Arabic letter Qaf sounds deeper (in contrast to Malay) than the Jim, but probably also because naquib means head in Arabic.\(^{56}\) In contrast, his brother the founder of sociological investigation in Southeast Asia and head of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore signs under the Latinized name of S.

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52. The sharif (plur. ashraf), saiyid (sadah) are titles for the Hasani branch of the Prophet’s offspring see, Robert Bertram Serjeant, The Saiyids of Hadramawt (London : Luzac, 1957).
53. One is often reminded at ISTAC of the importance of hierarchy and ritual.
54. Al-Attas dresses most of the time Western clothes. In some public lectures he wear Malay sarongs.
55. Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, An Introduction, p. 3.
56. Naquib al-ashraf is the head of the descendants of the Prophet. This is probably why al-Attas opted for the name Naquib.
Hussein Alatas. Here one could perhaps interpret Alatas’s way of signing as a form of concealing his Arabness.

Al-Attas was awarded the al-Ghazali Chair by the government of Malaysia and an honorary Doctorate from the Islamic government of Sudan in 1995, which gives us some hints about the Islamic networks he maintains. Important is the aura created by the sainthood of the Syeds and Arab origin which reveals a significant symbolic capital in Malay culture. The Arabs in Southeast Asia have long enjoyed the privilege of being the cultural carriers of imported Middle Eastern ideas and religious traits. Yet their image among the Malays is ambivalent and it carries a love/hate relationship which could be generalised vis-à-vis the Middle East.\(^\text{57}\) It is interesting for our purpose to analyse how al-Attas traces his past and how he presents his family history:

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas bin Syed Ali al-Attas was born on September 5th, 1931 in Bogor, Indonesia. His genealogical tree can be authentically traced over a thousand years to the Ba‘Alawi Sayyids of Hadramaut and all the way back to the Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). His later illustrious ancestors include saints, scholars and savants, one of whom from his maternal side was Syed Muhammad al-Aydarus, the teacher and spiritual guide of Syed Abu Hafs ‘Umar Ba Syaiban of Hadramaut, who initiated one of the most prominent scholars in the Malay world, Nur al-Din al-Raniri into the Rifa‘iyyah Order. Syed Muhammad Naquib’s mother Sharifah Raquan al-Aydarus, from her maternal side, came from Bogor, Indonesia and was a descendant of the Sundanese royal family of Sukapura. His paternal grandfather, Syed Abdullah bin Muhsin al-Attas was a saint (wali) from Java whose influence was not confined only to Indonesia but also to Arabia. His paternal grandmother Ruqayah Hanum, a Turkish lady of aristocratic lineage, was married to Ungku Abdul Majid, the younger brother of Sultan Abu Bakar of Johore (d. 1895) while her sister Khadijah was married to the Sultan himself, and became the queen of Johore. When Ungku Abdul Majid passed away, leaving two sons. Ruqayah married Syed Abdullah al-Attas and later gave birth to their only child, Syed Ali al-Attas, the father of Syed Muhammad Naquib.\(^\text{58}\)

Hierarchy extends to the idea of hierarchy of knowledge, an existent component in Sufi tradition. It is a recurrent theme in al-Attas’s understanding of Islamic education. It finds parallels with Malay feudalism and goes hand in hand with the increasing invention of ritual. This is not without problems, because not all Malays accept such hierarchical ritualism. Similarly, many think that such traits of Arabness are a display of superiority vis-à-vis Malay culture. It often occurred to me, while discussing with academics from the University of Malaya, the National University of Kebangsaan and even the International Islamic University, that they were

\(^{57}\) Concerning this point, see my “Perceptions of Middle Eastern Islam in Southeast Asia and Islamic Revivalism”, pp. 107-124.

\(^{58}\) Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, An Introduction, pp. 1-2.
reluctant to approach ISTAC, because of the hard temper of al-Attas.\(^{(59)}\)
Many Malay intellectuals perceive ISTAC in Kuala Lumpur as a closed and unapproachable fortress, an ivory tower with a particular understanding of how knowledge should be undertaken:

The notion of right or proper places involves the necessity for things to be in that condition, to be deployed in a certain order, arranged according to various “levels” maratib and “degrees” darajat. Ontologically, things are already so arranged, but man, out of ignorance of the just order pervading all creation, makes alterations and confuses the places of things such that injustice occurs.\(^{(60)}\)

One of al-Attas’s main arguments is that knowledge is transcendental, ordered and hierarchical. The feeling of hierarchy pervades the atmosphere of ISTAC:

What we are saying is that knowledge, as referring to meaning, consists of the recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence.\(^{(61)}\)

And here again:

In contrast to modern philosophy and science with regard to the sources and methods of knowledge, we maintain that knowledge comes from God and is acquired through the channels of the sound senses, true report based on authority, sound reason, and intuition.\(^{(62)}\)

Al-Attas personally designed ISTAC in a Moorish style with mashrabiyyahs and an invented Islamic architecture that reminds the visitor of an Italian or Castilian monastery. Al-Attas’s lectures are highly ceremonial, indeed, ritualistic. He often gives his lectures on Saturday night\(^{(63)}\) in the major auditorium which deliberately resembles a cathedral. On the podium, he occupies the highest chair which he designed himself in a Baroque style. A large oriental carpet is displayed on the table where he places the reading material. Questions following the lecture take a rather formal and ritualistic aspect.

Al-Attas is a delicate calligrapher with a highly developed aesthetic sense. He often designs the covers of his books and he also designed the logo of ABIM (The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia). ISTAC has imported

\(^{59}\) I often heard in Kuala Lumpur the joke that Anwar created the ivory tower of ISTAC to isolate al-Attas who was creating trouble for the Muslim scene.
\(^{60}\) S.N. al-Attas, The Concept of Education in Islam, p. 21.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 19.
\(^{63}\) Which is quite unpractical because it is during the week end when Malaysians like to dine out.
Italian pottery, expensive carpets and decorations. It also has a large Andalusian-style court. Construction of a madrassah is planned in the following years. In the last three years, the library has acquired over 110,000 volumes, encyclopaedias of religion, a large collection of journals, precious old Islamic books, general works, and collections in the Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Malay and Urdu languages. This in addition to the Fazlur Rahman Urdu collection, the Max Weisweiler, the Bertold Spuler, the Robert Brunschvig and the Oleg Grabar collections. ISTAC publishes works on Islamic sciences and manuscripts. The German Orientalist Annemarie Schimmel attended and spoke at the opening of ISTAC.

One could view ISTAC as a symbol of the Malaysian government’s vision of 2020, with its intentions to promote economic prosperity as one of the leading Asian tigers and to cultivate an Islam with money, status and the means to acquire rich collections of books from Europe and various parts of the Western world, an Islam of power and wealth and lavish institutions. It is no coincidence that ISTAC is located near the Seri Perdana, the Prime Minister’s official residence, the Ministry of Education and other Ministries at Pusat Bandar Damansara. Visitors to ISTAC enjoy a view of a hill where the nouveau riche financial class and the foreign embassies are located and where the condominiums and villas are blooming. The Beacon on the Crest of a Hill, the title of one of the publications of ISTAC, is none other than S. N. al-Attas himself. Tibi may indeed be missing the point when he classifies al-Attas as a fundamentalist without revealing the social context and nuances of difference between the biography of al-Attas and Nik Aziz of the PAS in Kelantan, Northern Malaysia, who opposes the Mahathir government and is constantly questioning the government’s religious credibility. (64)


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64. Nik Aziz’s PAS, (Parti Islam SeMalaysia), Haji Nik Aziz Nik Mat, the Head of Parti Islam in Malaysia, who was born in 1931 in Pulau Melaka, Kelantan. In 1952-1962, he studied at Deoband University (India) and Al-Azhar University in Cairo, obtaining B.A. and M.A. degrees. In 1967, he became MP of Parti Islam by election in Kelantan. In 1968, he was elected head of the Ulamak (‘Ulama) or religious scholars wing of the PAS National Party, Parti Islam SeMalaysia. In 1990 he was appointed Mentri Besar.
Certainly, al-Attas’s early philological works on Fansuri and Raniri became crucial landmarks for Malay Sufism and Islam. His writings about *Sufism as Practised and Understood among the Malays* have gained importance in that al-Attas is an “indigenous” researcher who followed and added to C. Snouck Hurgronje’s work on Islam and Sufism. Just as certainly, al-Attas became an important figure during the post-colonial period; for he was among the first to challenge Dutch Orientalist biased views of the theories of Islamization in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago.

For many in Kuala Lumpur, al-Attas is known to be difficult to deal with. But why should Anwar Ibrahim finance such a lavish institution, in spite of the extravagance of al-Attas’s character. Indeed, his writings on Sufism have gained significance among ABIM circles. One could interpret his endeavour as providing Malay Sufism with a modern reading that has appealed to the generation of angry students of the seventies who searched for a solution in Islam and socialism. Of course the situation has changed today, since Anwar Ibrahim was co-opted by the government and al-Attas granted official recognition. He indeed represents the establishment point of view. The following section will therefore attempt to examine how al-Attas reinterpreted Malay Sufism and how it appeals to proponents of the modern reconstruction of a “State-oriented” Islam.

**Al-Attas’s Reconstruction of Malay Sufism for Modern Purposes**

One could read al-Attas’s major work *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* as a modern attempt to rescue Sufism from its decadent image in Southeast Asia. He rationalised it, and highlighted the local variation of Malay Sufism in presenting the 17th century Sumatran mystic from Barus, Hamzah Fansuri. Another Sufi to whom al Attas refers as privileging intellect over emotions in the pursuit of knowledge of God was Shamsu’l-Din al Sumatrani, known as Shamsu’l-Din from Pasai. Al-Attas rescued Hamzah Fansuri from the harsh comments of the “Orthodox” Nurul al-Raniri and regarded him as an original Sufi mystic; he ranked him with the Malay Muhiddin Ibn `Arabi. Fansuri was portrayed as a mystic well-
travelled in the Middle and Far East. (72) Al-Attas interpreted Hamzah Fansuri’s mysticism as a revolt against the simple-mindedness of the Qadi, an object of Hamzah’s ridicule. Hamzah’s cry was a revolt against the ‘Ulama and those who follow them blindly without thinking (taqlid):

In one of his verses in which, for the benefit of the public (‘awamm), he explains the meaning of mystical “nakedness” (‘uryan) – the stripping off of all sensual passions from the body – he warns them not to extend this meaning to physical nakedness which the Qadi condemns:

“Strip your bodies naked” – if you want to find out [the meaning],
Don’t understand it as the nakedness condemned by the Judge.
This verse is also to be interpreted as showing Hamzah’s contempt for the Qadi, who is seen as incapable of understanding what mystical nakedness means and who only knows and understands physical nakedness. (73)

Hamzah Fansuri rebelled against the rich and powerful, as well as against the aristocracy. Al-Attas elevates him to the level of a spiritual reformer:

...one who exhorts his fellows not to believe merely in the letter, but to have knowledge and understanding also of the spirit; to love God truly; to abandon superstition and to establish reason. His constant appeal is to the use of the intellect, for man is a noble creature and must first know himself in order to know his Creator and his lofty origin, and thence to true faith culminating in Divine love. He combines in his teachings, both asceticism and fervent ardour of the early Sufis and the metaphysics and theosophy that characterise the Sufism of Ibnu’l-'Arabi. (74)

Fansuri was thus seen as the first Malay to lay down the fundamental aspects of Sufi doctrines. Al-Attas’s endeavour was to highlight Fansuri the well-travelled scholar, as the translator and intermediary transmitter of Sufi Arabic culture into the Archipelago. Hamzah spoke Malay fluently and his writings reveal that he also mastered Arabic and Persian:

The fact that Hamzah says he writes the book in Malay so that those (i.e. Malay Muslims and those who know Malay) who do not understand Arabic and Persian may be able to discourse upon the subject seems to me to show clearly that before Hamzah wrote such a book, all known books on the subject were written in Arabic and Persian. (75)

One could see al-Attas’s efforts with Hamzah as a way of giving Malays pride in their own cultural heritage. For many, Hamzah is considered the greatest Malay poet that ever existed. We are told that Hamzah mentions names of Sufis belonging to the school of wahdatu’l-wujud (Oneness of

72. See the Chapter on “Some Prominent Mystics”, in Syed Naguib al-Attas, Some Aspects of Sufism.
73. The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, pp. 21, 22.
74. Ibid., p. 25.
75. Ibid., p. 180.
Being). Hamzah composed a book entitled *Drink of Lovers* (*Sharabu’l-`Ashiqin*) on the doctrine of Oneness of Being.\(^{(76)}\)

When Hamzah says that God's Being and the Being of the universe are one and the same, he means by "being" what all Sufis mean according to their doctrine of Oneness of Being (*wahdatul-l wujud*). Awhadu'l Din Kirmani, a Sufi of the thirteenth century, puts this doctrine in concise form when he says:

*Absolute Being only wise men call
Being, and nought save God exists at all.
That which existent but through God became
Is Not in truth, but only IS in name.\(^{(77)}\)*

Al-Attas thus provides a semantic analysis to understand the key words in Fansuri's mystical world and understanding of Divine will (*iradah*). Al-Attas explained that Fansuri's concepts evolve around three words which are *wujud, ada* and *diri* (which are all translatable as "being") :

*This central concept is that of the absolute being (*Dhat*). From a philosophical point of view *wujud*, denoting as it does an abstract concept of Being, pertains more to ontology; *ada* to cosmology; and *diri* to psychology, although in fact these divisions are never absolute and in the final analysis they overlap and merge as a single concept.\(^{(78)}\)*

He also elaborates on how the Sufi mystics of the 17th and 18th centuries left some Arabic words like *al-Wujud* untranslated.\(^{(79)}\) Thus Hamzah followed Ibn `Arabi's ideas in arguing that things exist as ideas in the Mind of God.

Al-Attas, in contrast to al-Faruqi, emphasized the importance of Sufism in explaining Islam's penetration into the Archipelago. *Tasawwuf* takes a highly rationalistic and intellectual dimension for al-Attas.\(^{(80)}\) It is a form of Sufism that could be harmonized with Anwar Ibrahim's modernist vision of Islam. It is thus no coincidence that al-Attas's works are appreciated by government circles. Al-Attas, at ISTAC, occasionally gives lectures to state officials on Sufism, secularism and Islam as part of their training.\(^{(81)}\)

**Al-Attas's View of Islam and Secularism**

Ibn `Arabi's influence extends to al-Attas's later work on Islam and secularism. Sufi mystical language, which includes the perfect man (*insan...*\(^{(81)}\)

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81. It is common in Malaysia that state officials undertake courses for their formation.
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Kamil) [which is the title of a Sufi work by Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1403)], and the idea of drawing circles about the hierarchy of knowledge and the key concepts owe a lot to the terminology of Ibn 'Arabi. Ibn 'Arabi speaks in his work of wujud, existence and the absolute essence of Allah (dhat Allah). Ibn 'Arabi’s terminology, like universal man, absolute essence, unity (l’Unité) (ahadiyya) and non-duality appear recurrently in al-Attas’s work. In his last work on Raniri, al-Attas endeavours to give an orthodox interpretation of wahdat al-wujud – making a doctrine acceptable that had been condemned by most Malay 'ulama.

Al-Attas revealed to what extent theories of Islamization in the Archipelago were ideological prejudiced in comparison with those of Hinduism and Buddhism, which have been magnified at the expense of Islam. He questioned the theories of Islamization advanced by Schrieke and Van Leur, which seem to have ignored the impact of colonialism and the biases of historians towards Christian missionaries. Schrieke seems to have magnified the role of Christianity and the Portuguese while discussing the rise of Islam in the Archipelago. While Al-Attas argued that Van Leur’s theories of Hinduism could be valid, his final judgement on Islam were nevertheless untenable, since according to Van Leur:

Islam did not bring a higher civilization. Nowhere in his book did Van Leur provide enlightenment as to his criterion for the measuring of high and low culture nor what he meant by civilization.

Rather than speaking of syncretism in pre-Islamic religion, al-Attas advises that we speak of parallelism.

Here al-Attas’s Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago gains a particular significance for the reconstruction of the “new Malay” identity. Islam is here highlighted at the expense of Javanese and Hindu elements. It is an ideological reconstruction that is co-opted within the official ideology of “Malayness”, closely interwoven with a new rising Islamic consciousness. His following statement is important:

82. We are told that in Islamic theories of rule in Southeast Asia the ruler is himself khalifah (caliph) or insan al-kamil. See entry “Islam in Southeast Asia and the Pacific,” Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, p. 287.
85. Al-Attas, Preliminary Statement, p. 5.

Archipel 58, Paris, 1999
From what has been stated above, it may be concluded that Islam, as opposed to Hinduism and Buddhism, is a scientific and literary culture. Added to this is the fact that it was Islam that first brought the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago in contact with “Western” rationalistic thinking in the form of Greek philosophy represented chiefly by the ideas of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.\(^{86}\)

This might explain why, with Anwar’s backing, al-Attas’s programme and ISTAC gain political significance as a way of “making scientific”, “rationalizing” and incorporating a form of a modern Islam in the political jargon. In this context language, and precisely Malay language, becomes an important vehicle for modernity:

The Malay language, it seems to me, developed into a new stream as a result of its being employed as the vehicle for philosophical discourse in the Archipelago. This new stream, probably originating in Barus, had its centre in Pasai (later Aceh), the earliest centre of Islamic learning in the Archipelago, whence its influence spread throughout the Archipelago. The new stream is characterised by its terse, clear style, its Islamic vocabulary; it reveals a language of logical reasoning and scientific analysis very much influenced no doubt by its writers — Sufi, scholars, translators, and such commentators-who were themselves under the sway of the Qur’an which I have already pointed out, extols clarity and intelligence in speech and writing.\(^{87}\)

Similarly, al-Attas was perhaps the first to highlight the idea that Nur al-Din al-Raniri was for the Malay world the equivalent of an Ibn Khaldun. Al-Raniri’s Bustan al-Salatin is considered as the first piece of scientific, modern Malay historical writing.\(^{88}\) Furthermore al-Attas, locates al-Raniri as the first to modernise and Islamize the Malay language and made it a vehicle of scientific knowledge. Again, Hamzah Fansuri is described as highly rationalistic, as “the true father of modern Malay literature”.\(^{89}\)

In relation to this topic, it is important to note that al-Attas was a strong advocate of replacing English with the Malay language. He founded and directed the Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture at the National University of Malaya. Al-Attas became popular with the notion of “de-Westernization of knowledge”. For al-Attas, it seems that one of the problems causing “confusion” of the Muslim mind is the de-Islamization of language.\(^{90}\)

\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 21.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 28.
\(^{89}\) Al-Attas, Preliminary Statement, p. 29.
One could interpret al-Attas’s notion of history as a form of modern “authentication” of the past. Al-Attas’s understanding of Islamization also has an ideological dimension. He constructs his interpretation of the history of the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia essentially on de-paganization, de-secularization and de-Westernization. In *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future*, al-Attas argued that:

The phenomenon of Islam and its impact in the history of world cultures and civilizations did in our view bring about the proper disenchantment of nature, and the proper desacralization of politics, and the proper deconsecration of values, and hence without bringing about with it secularization. Not only is secularization as a whole the expression of an utterly unislamic world view, it is also set against Islam... 

By promoting the concept of the “de-Westernization of knowledge,” according to al-Attas secularization becomes the major danger for knowledge, from which it needs a disintoxication.

I will, however, take a rather critical stand towards his latest writings and in particular the work on *Islam and Secularism*. In fact, Van Nieuwenhuijze’s review was not incorrect in depicting al-Attas’s *Islam and Secularism* as entailing “strong and recurrent overtones of apologetics vis-à-vis the West, which is regarded as both the competitor and the corrupter of Islam” and in maintaining that the author does not differentiate between Christianity and Western civilization. Van Nieuwenhuijze moreover argued that al-Attas is rather a follower of Nasr: “He envisages a revivified knowledge out of illumination. In so doing he assigns the rescuing role in the present quandary to what he calls ‘existentialist’ mysticism rather than to the two hitherto dominant aspects of Islam, namely ‘essentialist’ theology and philosophy (not a word about law).”

On the level of knowledge and science, of course, the reconstruction of “difference” turns out to be one of fundamental inner religious concerns, and the question of de-Westernization, as advocated by S.N. al-Attas, turns out to point in this direction:

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91. A phenomenon which applies to all the Muslim World.
92. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1985, p. 38. There are however, Middle Eastern scholars who argue that the idea that Islam did not bring secularisation is an Orientalist creation of the despotic East. For a critique of such a position see the entire issue of the *Review of the Middle East*, no. 4, (1988).
Knowledge must be scrutinized so that there is nothing that contains the germs of secularization or the germs of tragedy in it, or the germs of the dualistic vision of reality—because all these are spread, are scattered around in the branches of knowledge, in the entire body of knowledge. I think one has to make selections and choice, one has to know what to take, what not to take. (95)

There is, of course, an awareness of the problem of applying Western epistemology in Muslim societies; therefore, these intellectuals confront the question of the possible contradiction between modern science and Islamic moral values.

For Muslim intellectuals like al-Attas, the West seems to be refuted by its own devices. Concerning the theme of secularization and the negation of the existence of this notion in the East, al-Attas uses various arguments already presented by Christian philosophers and Jesuits who were alarmed by the crisis of the decline of Christianity in the Western World. (96) He quotes Max Weber on the disenchantment of the world (97) and Nietzsche’s Death of God. He nevertheless reverses the critiques developed in the West to assure that secularization and the secular is rejected in Islam.

Is it rational to be secular?
Now if we are using the word, reason, in the way a Muslim understands it—if you say a thinking Muslim, an understanding Muslim understands it—if you say is it rational to be secular, I will say no. Because secular does not mean reason in the way we understand or rational in the way we understand. Why? Because to be secular means not simply being this worldly because it is not opposed to Islam. Because this world is composed of the signs of God as the holy Quran says and because of that the Muslims are supposed to look at the signs of God, to study it, to understand it, not to run away from it. So in other words, there is nothing wrong with being this worldly. But what is wrong from my point of view, what is secular is not only to be this worldly but to say that this is the only world there is, there is no other world than this. (98)

Al-Attas, like Nasr, nevertheless seems to interpret Western secularism to mean that the West has denied religious experience and that it lacks spirituality (99), and thus confuses this notion with the separation between “Church” and State. True, this separation was institutionalized in the West,

97. Ibid., p. 16.
99. Concerning the way al-Attas views the West as deprived of spirituality, he writes the following: “... To say that there is no spiritual significance to anything, to deprive from the world of nature all spiritual meaning so that the nature is left natural as a thing, mere thing and ultimately of course, this also implies that in the entire universe there is no God, there is nothing spiritual about it there is nothing spiritual behind it”. Ibid., p. 8.
but it can be argued that this separation was present in the treatises of Muslim thinkers such as Ibn Khaldun. The negation of such a separation has its roots in the Orientalist tradition. Secularization, which is synonymous with de-Islamization, according to al-Attas, has to do with the “infusion of alien concepts into the minds of Muslims”. By debasing Western civilization as materialistic and this-worldly oriented, al-Attas wants to convince the reader of the specificity of Islam:

Religion in the sense we mean, as din, has never really taken root in Western civilization, due to its excessive and misguided love of the world and secular life.

Van Nieuwenhuijze is not wrong in drawing an analogy between Nasr’s position and al-Attas’s concerning their view of the West. Nasr says the following:

Today modern man has lost the sense of wonder, which results from his loss of the sense of the sacred, to such a degree that he is hardly aware how miraculous is the mystery of intelligence, of human subjectivity as well as the power of objectivity and the possibility of knowing objectively.

Obviously what is at stake here is a fight with the West over the sacred. Al-Attas, like, S.H. Nasr, nevertheless remains silent on questions of the sphere of everyday life and popular culture in Muslim countries where the secular component is overwhelming. He also fails to mention that many of the Muslim countries in the Middle East, for instance, witnessed a modernization and secularization in the judicial, parliamentary and educational system well before many European countries. Moreover, this refusal to separate the sacred from the profane quite often is used to justify tyranny, again an old Orientalist vision of the theory of power in Islam. Here one might here add an idea expressed by W.C Smith, whose article indeed appears in al-Faruqi’s anthology that “Faith is man’s most decisive quality, according to various of the World’s cultural traditions”.

100. For this point, see Larou’s comparison of Ibn Khaldoun with Machiavelli in Islam et Modernité (Paris : Édition la Découverte, 1987).
101. See Abaza and Stauth 1988; see also my article “The Discourse over Islamic Fundamentalism Between the Middle East and Southeast Asia”, Sojourn, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, (1991), September.
103. Ibid., p. 129.
insisting on the specificity of the spirituality and the faith of Islam versus the secularism and materialism of the West, the Islamizers seem to remove Islam from the universal field of the sociology of religion.

Al-Attas also provides a theory of the Arabic language where “social change” and the “infusion of alien concepts led to the confusion of the Islamic mind”. “It is a kind of regression towards non-Islamic world-views; it is what I call the deislamization of language”. (106) The “infusion of alien concepts” extends to Greek thought through the writings of the *falasifah* and through the intrusion of social sciences.

Al-Attas promotes similar arguments to those of the Islamists who advocate the purification of history and language. Al-Attas’s aversion extends to the question of the renovation of the Arabic language. He nevertheless remains silent on the subtle levels of the already well-developed modern Arabic language, literature, the novel and poetry in the Middle East, which have since long been undergoing secular influence. Al-Attas seems to express a strong aversion towards sociology, (107) perhaps as to distinguish himself from his older brother, S. Hussein Alatas, the founder of sociological investigation of Southeast Asia.

Al-Attas, like many Islamizers, wants to Islamize epistemology. For al-Attas, perhaps similar to S.H. Nasr, the alternative path he proposes is on a higher level of experience, namely the intuition experienced by Sufis. (108)

The metaphysical vision of the world and the ultimate reality envisaged in Islam is quite different from that projected by the statements and general conclusions of modern philosophy and science. We maintain that all knowledge of reality and of truth, and the projection of a true vision of the ultimate nature of things is originally derived through the medium of intuition. The intuition that we mean cannot simply be reduced to that which operates solely at the physical level of discursive reason based upon sense-experience, for since we affirm in man the possession of physical as well as intellegential or spiritual powers and faculties which refer back to the spiritual entity, sometimes called intellect, or heart, or soul, or self, it follows that man’s rational, imaginal and empirical existence must involve both the physical and spiritual levels. (109)

It is exactly the distinction that al-Attas wants to draw between Islam, Islamic philosophy and the West that makes it so similar to European religious mystical movements. One can trace in al-Attas’s position some

107. Al-Attas expressed several times during personal communications his aversion towards social sciences.
affinity with the works of Titus Burkhart on Sufism. The claim of searching for alternative intuitive ways of thinking is, however, not peculiar to Islam or Sufis; indeed one could trace the same mode of thinking in the Western anti-industrialization movement in Europe, the various modern religious groups which have witnessed revivalism, be they Christian, Jewish or Buddhist, the German intellectual romantics, who, up to the Second World War, advocated similar claims concerning intuitive knowledge and alternative cognitive forms of knowledge. (n°) Elitist theories of knowledge, mystical and restricted intellectual circles as advocated by al-Attas, are in fact not restricted to Islam. They rather bear a certain similarity with Stefan Georg poetical and mystical circles at the beginning of this century in Germany.

Conclusion

My aim was to draw parallelisms between al-Attas’s works and modern Islamic Malaysian political culture. It is no coincidence that Hussin Mutalib from the National University of Singapore, in analysing Malaysian Islam, ethnicity and the theories of Islamization refers extensively to al-Attas’s idea that Islam added a positive value to “Malayness”. He argues that traditionally it is “un-Malay” to rebel but once the Malays Islamized, a new concept of obeying only the just king was added that allowed a novel space for protest. (111) I quote Mutalib:

Hence, Islam not only provided a vehicle of dissent against the Malay feudal system and checked the ruler’s excesses, but also made possible some radical changes to the Malay social stratification system by introducing new Islamic values (and vocabulary) into Malay culture, such as adil (just) and amanah (trustworthiness). (112)

Al-Attas’s reading of Malay mysticism is appealing as a revitalising and rationalising Islamic discourse in the Malaysian context. Al-Attas is certainly different in orientation from the Palestinian American Isma’il al-Faruqi who was shari’a-oriented, more orthodox, dogmatic, and populist in transposing an Arab nationalist language into an Islamic jargon. Al-Faruqi addressed an American audience as well as the Arab American communities, while al-Attas is discoursing within a strictly Malaysian audience. Al-Attas’s “de-Westernization of knowledge” could only be understood if contextualized within contemporary Malaysian politics that could be

112. Ibid., p. 12.
associated with the State. I have attempted here to reveal the local Malaysian nuances as well as the dynamics of al-Attas’s complex relationship with the West and Western Orientalism. Both S.N. al-Attas and his brother S. Hussein Alatas have a peculiar position in Malay society due to the fact that they are of Arab and Peranakan descent and thus they are not typical Malays. They are thus perceived in an ambivalent manner within their own society. They are the Kulturträger of an Arab-Islamic culture and knowledge, while at the same time they belong to the Malay world. In relation to this topic, it is useful to be reminded that during colonial times the Chinese and Arabs in the Dutch East Indies were categorized as “foreign orientals”, a category which has certainly remained in the unconscious.

Al-Attas’s cry against Western materialism is understandable as a form of cultural critique and as a higher intellectual concern for ultimate moral norms. Here ISTAC reveals an inclination that is certainly in competition with the high premises of traditional Western Orientalism. It is no coincidence that al-Attas’s major works are written in English. That ISTAC is run in an authoritarian manner is one issue, but that it is an attempt at building an alternative institution to Western ones is another point that should be taken into serious consideration. Nevertheless, in the Malaysian context, Islamization as a reconstruction of the political culture is instrumentalized, as the case of Anwar Ibrahim and the PAS’s (the fundamentalist) manipulation of the religious symbols show. The outcome is indeed an instrumentalization towards bureaucratisation and the reconstruction of the political culture of the Nation-State.

While al-Attas’s early career is linked to anti-communist activities as an officer, his impact on the Islamist student movement of the seventies is substantial in reviving Islamic culture and rationalising Sufism. If the early al-Attas interpreted Hamzah Fansuri as a reformer and a rebellious Sufi thinker, ISTAC incorporates traits of “refeudalization” and the institutionalisation of an Islam of power. Al-Attas’s individualism allows us to argue that he has little in common with “Islamization of knowledge” project. He exemplifies a particular Malaysian dimension that is quite distinct from the circles of the International Islamic University of Kuala Lumpur.

Al-Attas and his brother S. H. Alatas are fascinating cases for cross-cultural studies. Their biographies can tell us much about how to look at

114. In fact I dedicate a separate chapter in my Habilitationschrift to S. Hussein Alatas.
things from a novel perspective relate to various regions and cultures and re-think the domain of the *aires culturelles* which Denys Lombard so finely developed in a short and incisive article. (115) Al-Attas's posture reminds us that we cannot dissociate his discourse from Orientalism, but that both brothers could be good examples that teach us how to bridge and fuse regions and cultures within the South-South dimension. I mean here the specificity of Arabness in a Malay context. If I define al-Attas as an anti-Orientalist Orientalist (a statement, I am sure, that will distress many distressed), I would like to stand with Denys Lombard and rescue the positive heritage of Orientalism from the growing wave of "Orientalism in reverse" (116) which is threatening scholarship in many Muslim countries, while still agreeing in general with Edward Said's cry against the management of science and the strategies of research in the Western world.

115. Denys Lombard "De la vertu des aires culturelles et de celle des aires culturelles asiatiques en particulier", Lecture delivered as the first annual lecture of the International Institute for Asian Studies at Amsterdam on 27 may, 1994.