

## Book Review

**WILLIAM R. ROFF (1967), *THE ORIGINS OF MALAY NATIONALISM*, KUALA LUMPUR: UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA PRESS. 297 PAGES.**

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### Abstract

This book review attempts to describe and analyze the concepts of Islamic schools of thought dedicated to the traditional group and reformer group as discussed by William R. Roff through the conception of 'Kaum Tua' and 'Kaum Muda' that is included as one of the chapter of his PhD thesis entitled 'The Origins of Malay Nationalism' which later was published as a book up to several editions. William R. Roff books and thesis has become one of the main references for the local and foreign researchers in discussing the aspect of Malay intellectuals of Malay people in Malaysia. This study uses a qualitative method. This study uses library research as the method of data collection, largely depends on primary sources and some secondary sources. In the data analysis methodology, generally, this study utilises the methods of historical and critical analysis respectively to analyze data on William Roff's views on the evolution of Islamic schools of thought mainly through the group of 'Kaum Tua' and 'Kaum Muda'. Furthermore, the methodology of content analysis is generally used in almost on collected data. Findings of this study conclude that the theory of William R. Roff on the Islamic thought remains relevant until today. William Roff's concepts of 'Kaum Muda' and 'Kaum Tua' is still relevant to the present world and is an authoritative study to serve as reference material in discussing the development trends of Islamic thought in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Islamic thought, *kaum muda*, *kaum tua*, Malay societies

### Introduction

William R. Roff is an author who discussed much about Malaya Malay society around the 19th and 20th centuries. William Roff's discussion mostly focused on the experience of the Malay community in Malaya in the transition of the British colonial Malay community to the post-colonial era. Discussion of the Malay community would certainly be related to Islam. The majority of Malay community in Malaya is Muslims. One of the most dominant works of William Roff is the book '*The Origins of Malay Nationalism*', which is a major reference for authors and researchers today. Prior to his review of his book, the writer feels the need to briefly discuss about William R. Roff's background.

William R. Roff was born in 1929 in Scotland. Before being involved in the academic field, William Roff was once a journalist and published a radio documentary during his stay in New Zealand. Later, he pursued his PhD in *Australia National University*. Previously, William Roff had a bachelor's degree in University of Victoria, Wellington. He has long been interested in studying communities in Southeast Asia. However, in its early stages, Roff was more interested in studying Buddhism in Burma. However, for his PhD level, Roff choose Malay Muslims in Malaya as his research focus. William Roff's interest in History and Anthropology led him to travel a lot especially in Southeast Asia to conduct his studies. Roff has contributed much to the academic field either in the form of writing and as a lecturer.

During his academic career, William Roff had taught at the University of Malaya from 1965 to 1969 before moving to Columbia University. Roff earned Professor's title in 1973. After his retirement in 1991, Roff still contributed his academic skills when he became an honorary Fellowship in Islamic Studies and the Middle East of Edinburgh University. William Roff has also been a supervisor for his Master's and PhD students throughout his academic career. Roff also contributes significantly in academic writings.

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As an author, of course the work of *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* contributed greatly in discussing the modern Malay society in the beginning of the nationalist spirit of Malay Muslims in Malaya. According to Harry J. Benda, mentor to William Roff, Roff's work is a pioneering work on the Malays in modern times. Prior to Roff, some Orientalist from the British had written about the Malay community such as Stamford Raffles, RJ Wilkinson, and RO Windstedt where the three of them had been British officers in Malaya. William Roff's book was published in 1967 and has been reprinted and translated into Malay language. This book is based on his Phd study on the Malay community. William Roff conducted an ethnographic study and lived with a Malay family in Klang. Roff's work has also been a major reference by academics when discussing the beginning of the spirit of Malay nationalism and intellectual awakening among the Malays.

In addition to the work of *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, William Roff has also written several other books relating to the Malay community and Muslim communities especially Muslim Malays in Southeast Asia. Among the other books of William Roff is the compiling book *Kelantan: Religion and Society and Politics in a Malay State* (1974), *Bibliography of Malay and Arabic periodicals published in the Straits settlements and peninsular Malay states 1876-1941* (1972), *Social sciences approaches to understanding rituals: the special case of the haji?* (2001), *Pondoks, madrasas and the production of 'ulama in Indonesia* (2004) and *Studies on Islam and Society in Southeast Asia* (2009). Apart from writing books, William Roff also wrote numerous articles in journals, articles, seminars, newspapers, and papers. Roff's contribution in academia has gained some recognition from individual and institutions.

## **Literature Review**

The clash of '*Kaum Muda*' and '*Kaum Tua*' is an important aspect in the history of the rise of the Malay Muslim community in Malaya. In fact, William Roff has focused on a special chapter on the conflict between young fraction and old fraction in his recorded study titled *The Origin of Malay Nationalism* in 1967. '*Kaum Muda*' and '*Kaum Tua*' or young and old fraction are referred as the two different Islamic thought which is reformist and traditionalist which influence the Malay societies.

To discuss the history of reformist groups or religious reformers, the author refers to the writings by Abdul Rahman Abdullah who wrote much about the history of Islamic thought and intellectual flows. Abdul Rahman Abdullah has divided the reformist development or referred to it as the two to the classical and modern times.<sup>1</sup> The classical basis of '*tajdid*' began since the time of Khulafa al-Rasyidin in opposition to ignorance and *asabiyyah* spirit at that time. Later, it expanded during the reign of Umar Abdul Aziz as a leading figure in politics. '*Tajdid*' or renewal is continued with Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, Imam al-Asya'ari, Imam Ghazali, and Ibn Tamiyyah. These reformers later developed in modern times with modern '*tajdid*' figures such as Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, Syed Waliullah al-Dihlawi, Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab, Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh. Reformist is different from the nature of modernism.

However, there is still confusion between reformist terms and modernism as both are not a term originating from Arabic. According to Kamarudin Salleh, Islamic reformist groups are the early Muslim consciousness of socio-cultural collapse while modernism is directly related to the West.<sup>2</sup> As such, these reform groups prefer to use Arabic terms such as '*Islah*', '*Tajdid*', '*Sahwah Islamiyyah*' and '*Ihya Islam*'. Consequently, the use of terms has a different meaning, although there are similarities in certain aspects. For the reformist, they did not oppose Western education, but education had to be adapted to religious knowledge. In Malaysia, religious movements by '*Kaum Muda*' not only specifically focusing on religions matter only, but they also include others aspects such as social, economic, and political aspects.

The development of '*Kaum Muda*' began in Singapore and expanded to the other Straits Settlements, which is the State of Melaka Tengah and Penang. Afterwards, the '*Kaum Muda*' continued to flourish in the Federated Malay States, namely Perak, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan. The development of the young fraction in Perak has established Madrasah Idrisiyah in Perak. The existence of the madrasah

<sup>1</sup> Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1987), *Pemikiran Islam Masa Kini: Sejarah dan Aliran*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

<sup>2</sup> Kamarudin Salleh (2012), "Tranformasi pembaharuan dan modenisme di Malaysia: Satu penelitian awal," *International Journal of Islamic Thought*, Vol. 2, pp. 23-37.

prompted this movement to create the first Islamic political party in Tanah Melayu, Hizbul Muslimin (HM).<sup>3</sup> Finally, '*Kaum Muda*' is growing in the 'Negeri-negeri Melayu Tidak Bersekutu' which are Johor, Perlis, and Kelantan. In fact, this movement reached its peak in Perlis. In contrast, in the State of Kelantan, where the reform movement are more influenced by Syah Waliullah than the movement of '*Kaum Muda*' in other states which have much influences from Syeikh Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. In fact, according to Abdul Rahman, the '*Kaum Muda*' publication magazine, '*Al-Imam*' was used in conjunction with the name of Sheikh Muhammad Abduh.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to the emergence of a reformist religious movement or better known as the '*Kaum Muda*' in Malaya, there has emerged a traditional stream which '*taqlid*' to Shafi'iyah scholars in *fiqh* and *aqidah*. In *tasawuf*, *taqlid* was to Ash'ariyah-Maturidi and various Sufi Shaykhs according to Abdul Rahman. This old faction group was mentioned in William Roff books as '*Kaum Tua*'. In discussing the traditional group of streams, the centre for the '*Kaum Tua*' group, grew in traditional schools called '*pondok*' that emphasized Islamic education and made the role of Ulama' very important. Scholars at that time came from Pattani and Java according to Mohamad Kamil.<sup>5</sup> Mohamad Kamil add that most Nusantara Ulama' at that time cannot escape the influence of '*tasawwuf*'. Furthermore, the intellectual and thought of Nusantara Malay Ulama' during that period only focused on the field of religion and considered that worldly and modern knowledge as unimportant. Such thoughts cause many worldly affairs to be neglected. This opinion was also agreed by Jaffary Awang and Kamarudin Salleh. According to them, this traditional flow group considers that Western powers are not a threat to the Muslim community. This is because the traditionalist community believes in the height of the status of Muslims rather than non-Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

### Analysis and Discussion

It can be understood that some of the foundations that make up the two groups discussed by William Roff are the movement of the '*Kaum Muda*' and '*Kaum Tua*'. '*Kaum Tua*' people are also called by traditionalist stream titles. These terms lead to misunderstanding when comparisons of '*Kaum Tua*' and '*Kaum Muda*' as traditionalists vs. modernists. Such comparison is less accurate according to some researchers and academician. This is due to modernist terms often associated with western societies. This group of '*Kaum Muda*' is also called reformers. Terms selection may result in different views of different societies. In fact, since the movement started from the Arab States, this religious movement preferred using Arabic terms like '*Islah*' and '*Tajdid*'. In this paper, author prefers to call the group of '*Kaum Muda*' movement by the terms of '*Islah*' or Reformist. Author feels this term is more appropriate in this writing to avoid misunderstandings on the terms used to refer to the ideology of '*Kaum Muda*'.

In his work, William Roff discusses how the nationalism of the Malay community sparked primarily at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. William Roff divides the Malay into three groups. One of is the group Malay societies fighting for Islam. This group according to William Roff varies according to their different social environments, different educational orientations, cultures, and political styles.<sup>7</sup> These three groups are discussed in detail by Roff in his book. To comment on this book, author will conclude what William Roff has focused on the flow of old fractions and young fractions based on William Roff's study of the book *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*.

Before further discussion, it is necessary for the author to relate the development of Islamic thought in Malaya and later Malaysia with the history and the effect of the British administration in Malaya around the nineteenth century. This discussion is important to know the origin and the pattern of the British government that made the Malays began to rise with a spirit of its own nationalism. In the book of William Roff, author finds Roff emphasizing social networking between the Malays in Malaya and Singapore with the Arabs especially in Mecca. This is because the Malay Muslim community at that time had begun to go to Mecca to perform Hajj rituals. Roff has also made a special study of the rituals of Hajj. Although the British allowed the Malay community during that period to go on Hajj, there was

<sup>3</sup> Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1987), *Pemikiran Islam Masa Kini*, p. 211.

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Rahman Abdullah (1989), *Gerakan Islah di Perlis: sejarah dan pemikiran*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Pena, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamad Kamil Ab. Majid (1996), "Skop, sejarah, dan aliran pemikiran Islam," *Jurnal Usuluddin*, Vol. 5, no. 9, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jaffary Awang & Kamarudin Salleh (2007), *Pemikiran Islam & isu-isu semasa*, Bangi: Fakulti Pengajian Islam UKM.

<sup>7</sup> William R. Roff (1967), *The origins of Malay nationalism*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

concern by the British government at that time. They are worried that the pilgrims will be influenced by the Islamic ideologies such as in Arab, Ottoman ideology which was a great Muslim power during the period and communist influences primarily from Russia.<sup>8</sup>

The result of the gathering of Muslim community around the world and this ideology is worrying the British government. However, the British did not stop the Malay Muslim community in Malaya at that time to perform Hajj rituals to avoid conflict arising between the British government and the Malay community in Malaya. The British wanted to keep in touch with the Malay community so there was no such uprising as it did in Indonesia at that time that the Muslim community was forbidden by the invaders to perform fasting haj in Mecca. Nevertheless, the rise of nationalism is something that cannot be avoided especially if the community. This has influenced the intellectuals of the Malay societies gain education. The first group discussed by William Roff in his book was the Malay intellectuals who received education from the Middle East.

The nationalist groups among the first Malay community called by Roff were those who were oriented to the spirit of nationalism from the Middle East. This group had a great influence on ideology from Egypt at that time. This is evident when this group created an Islamic magazine named *Al-Imam* in 1906. *Al-Imam* magazine is a Jawi magazine that is widely influenced and closely related to *Al-Manar* magazine in Egypt. *Al-Manar* magazine is a magazine published by Rashid Rida who was a reformer of Islam in Cairo at the time. Rashid Rida's thinking was influenced by Shekyh Mohd Abduh, a Sheikh Azhar in Egypt. In fact, many articles from *Al-Manar* magazine have been translated into Malay in *Al-Imam* magazine. Those involved in creating *Al-Imam* magazine are Syakh Tahir b. Jalaludin Al-Azhari, Sayyid Shakh b. Ahmad Al-Hadi, Haji Abbas b. Mohd Taha and Shakh Mohd Salim Al-Kalali. According to Ahmad Faisal Hamid and Faizuri Abdul Latif (2013:115-131), the *Al-Imam* magazine is a magazine spreading about the thought of reformist figures especially from Egypt to Malaya. In fact, the *Al-Imam* magazine is also a magazine that first gave the socio-political consciousness of the Malays by calling for social change in Muslim Malay societies in Malaya and Singapore.<sup>9</sup> Roff also insists in his book that this reformist nature is what causes these people to be known as '*Kaum Muda*'. The early emergence of young fraction had a lot of conflict with the old fraction so they are attacking each other. The basis for the '*Kaum Muda*' group is on the 'Worldview' aspect. The '*Kaum Tua*' is seen deal with furu' problems (religious branches) rather than '*Kaum Muda*' who are looking at modernity and social change. '*Kaum Muda*' consider '*Kaum Tua*' as a barrier to community progress and modernization. The clash of thought that exists between the old and the young factions was very vibrant, especially through their writings in newspapers and magazines at that time. This movement is seen as a religious movement that is not only concerned with religious affairs, but also concerns other aspects of the world such as social, administrative, political and economic aspects.

Due to the nature of the religious movement of the '*Kaum Muda*' seen as a reformist movement, which is to try to change the mind and intellectual of the Malay Muslim community in Malaya at that time. This led the '*Kaum Tua*', the traditionalist and religious elites in Malaya at that time, challenged the '*Kaum Muda*' for thinking the young faction were trying to influence the nature and the minds of the Malay community in Malaya at that time. Furthermore, both groups have different views on religious affairs that led the Malay community in some villages to split into two groups. Clashes also take place through the media either '*Kaum Muda*' or '*Kaum Tua*' media.

Early newspapers and magazines appeared among Malays such as *Al-Islam*. As discussed earlier, emerging newspapers were written by young faction based on Islamic reformers. Therefore, the early newspapers had many stories about the affairs of Islam that took place in Egypt and Turkey at that time. Meanwhile, '*Pengasuh*' magazine in Kelantan according to Roff is an effort by the old faction in responding to the emergence of young faction newspapers and magazines. Another newspaper at that time was the *Utusan Melayu* newspaper but this newspaper at the beginning of its appearance only translated the news from the 'Free Press' newspaper, a British newspaper.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Roff (1967), *The origins of Malay nationalism*, pp. 39-43.

<sup>9</sup> See Ahmad Faisal Hamid & Faizuri Abdul Latif (2013), "Pemikiran Islah dalam Majalah Pengasuh tahun 1918," *Jurnal Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 115-131.

<sup>10</sup> Roff (1967), *The origins of Malay nationalism*, pp. 157-162.

In the mid-1920s, the young faction did not miss out on publishing their own newspaper. Among the young fraction newspapers is the 'Idaran Zaman' newspaper (1925-1930) and 'Al-Ikhwan' (1926-1931) which is much in common with 'Al-Imam' magazine. William Roff thinks that Syed Syekh is only fighting for the past and the old ideals as early as the appearance of 'Kaum Muda'. Roff noted that the term 'Kaum Muda' has changed over time as 'Kaum Muda' in the 1920s differed from the previous 'Kaum Muda'. According to Roff, 'Kaum Muda' had turned to Malay Muslims who are concerned about political, economic and social progress compared to young fraction who talk about religious disputes.

In fact, Syed Syekh himself after publishing the *Al-Ikhwan* newspaper, he published the 'Saudara' newspaper. 'Saudara' press is different from a newspaper published by Syed Syekh al Hadi before this which newspaper has more news about general reviews than focus on religion alone. This has made the newspaper one of the most influential newspapers in Malaya. 'Saudara' press is also a life-threatening critic of the non-tolerant Malays. In the 1930s also saw the development of Malay associations and newspapers. Its development is not only from the press, but also for magazines and books. These books are for youth, Women and children.<sup>11</sup> These developments made the field of journalism a full and part-time by the Malay intellectuals. In the 1930s, more and more daily newspapers appeared in Malaya.

The popular journalist at that time was Abdul Rahim Kajai. He has written for various local newspapers including the 'Utusan Melayu' newspaper, the 'Lembaga Melayu' and special writers for the 'Kaum Muda' newspaper 'Idaran Zaman' press. Early in his journalism career, Rahim Kajai showed his sympathy to the 'Kaum Muda'. He also focuses on the elements of knowledge and religious disputes. When he entered the 'Majlis', Rahim Kajai began to be enthusiastic and earnest in raising the spirit of the Malays.

This effort began to arise as the urban community expanded and the social transformation among Muslim Malays in Malaysia. At this point, Malaysians want a unification. 'Kaum Muda' was actively involved in social integration among the Malay community, especially with their calls in the balance sheet. However, the call for the reform of this religion according to Roff did not receive the response of the peasants primarily because of this group was attacking the upper class. This has led the peasant community as they regard the Sultan as their saviours. Therefore, they do not fully support the religious group of reformers.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, the clashes and differences in the thought and views of the 'Kaum Muda' and 'Kaum Tua' groups had a profound effect on Malay society in Malaya at that time and Malaysia at present. The ideological and intellectual foundation of these two religious groups, 'Kaum Muda' and 'Kaum Tua', did not stop at that period. Although the terms of the 'Kaum Muda' and 'Kaum Tua' are no longer used in the post-independence period, the ideological basis of these two groups is still arising in the post-independence era. The effect of religious the reformist movement and groups of traditionalists to one factor the emergence of various new religious movements, especially around 1970s up to the 1990s. The emergence of the religious movement after independence was among the effects of the influence of the reformist and traditionalist group represented by the 'Kaum Muda' and the 'Kaum Tua' that occurred during the pre-independence period.

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<sup>11</sup> Roff (1967), *The origins of Malay nationalism*, pp. 163-166.

<sup>12</sup> Roff (1967), *The origins of Malay nationalism*, pp. 189-192.

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