Earliest Quranic Exegetic Activity in the Malay Speaking States
Peter Riddell
Study of the earliest Malay Quranic exegetical activity has long been hampered by a dearth of historical records. Some attempts have been made to fill this crucial gap in our knowledge of early Malay Islam (1), but much work remains to be done before we will be in a position to assess the precise nature of Quranic exegetical activity in the early Malay-speaking states. In order to go some way to clarifying this question, it is necessary to first turn our attention to the arrival of Islam in the Malay world.

The Arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia

The fragmentary evidence available indicates that the faith first won adherents on a significant scale in what is now the Indonesian archipelago in the latter part of the 13th century. Chinese court records of 1282 refer to envoys from the north Sumatran port city of Samudra-Pasai who bore Muslim names (2). Marco Polo touched on north Sumatra in his travels some ten years later and recorded that the city of Perlak had embraced Islam (3). Malay literary traditions, supported by epigraphical date, indicate that the king who established Samudra-Pasai died a Muslim in 1297 (4). It is on the basis of such evidence that scholars now generally agree on a period of late 13th century for the beginnings of Islamization of the Indonesian archipelago, with the port city of Samudra-Pasai being regarded as «the cradle of Islam in Indonesia» (5).

The Islamization of the area appears to have been not so much by conquest but rather by peaceful contact with Muslim traders who married into the local population. These traders most likely hailed from the Muslim areas
of southern India, with the Coromandal coast in southeast India being the place of origin for most (6).

It must be stressed that the process of Islamization was gradual, as would be expected of peaceful change through trade. A Portuguese report from the early part of the 16th century indicates that although the port cities of north Sumatra such as Pasai were Muslim, the countryside was still largely unconverted (7).

The sixteenth century witnessed the rise of the port city of Aceh, located to the west of Samudra-Pasai. During the early years of that century, Aceh was only one of many minor coastal settlements of North Sumatra. Its emergence to become the major power in the region was due to several factors, chief among them being the political and trade upheaval caused by the Portuguese capture of Malacca in 1511 (8). Prior to this, Malacca had been the chief staging post for Muslim merchants from Arabia and India in search of pepper and other spices. Its loss to non-Muslims was to cause these traders to look elsewhere. Aceh became the dominant native state in the region for the greater part of the 16th and 17th centuries. The rule of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607-36) is generally regarded as the «Golden Age», a period marked by great external military expansion and a domestic blossoming of economic, literary and religious activity. It is on this Kingdom that our discussion will be centred, as the first Quranic exegetical activity in Malay for which evidence can be found came from the pens of early Acehnese Islamic scholars.

**Early Exegetical Activity in Malay: Tarjumân al-Mustafid**

The first Malay commentary on the whole Qur’ân was Tarjumân al-Mustafid by ‘Abd al-Ra’uf b. ‘Alî al-Jâwî al-Faňšûrî al-Singkîlî. Although the compilation of this work cannot be dated precisely, sufficient is known about the life of the author to enable us to establish the time limits within which it must have been composed. ‘Abd al-Ra’uf was born around 1615, and his name indicates that his family lived in Singkîl, a small town on the west coast of the island of Sumatra in what is now the Indonesian province of Aceh. He spent approximately nineteen years studying exegesis, jurisprudence and other Islamic sciences in Arabia during the 1640’s and 1650’s, before returning to Aceh in approximately 1661. The remaining thirty-two years of his life were devoted to continuing the writing of various works on Islamic subjects such as jurisprudence and mysticism, including the spiritual exercise of dhikr. Among the literary works to be produced by ‘Abd al-Ra’uf during this period was Tarjumân al-Mustafid. The oldest extant manuscript copy of this work contains information which suggests that it was composed nearer his return from Arabia than his death around 1693.
Thus we may tentatively ascribe a date of composition of 1675 to this commentary.

We shall return to a discussion of the character of this work later. Beforehand we need to address what appears to be something of a puzzle. If we accept a date of late 13th century for the arrival of Islam in the Malay-speaking areas, there is a 400 year time-lapse before the Malay world provides us with the first evidence of significant Quranic exegetical activity. Considering that Quranic exegesis represents a major branch of Islamic learning and is an essential tool of religious education, this time-lapse is at first sight somewhat surprising. We should not accept it at face value, but should rather undertake a search to determine whether such a lapse in time is unusual and, if so, what evidence can be found for exegetical activity predating Tarjumān al-Mustafid.

A start can be made by considering the process of Islamization of India in order to establish the time-lapse there between the arrival of Islam and the earliest evidence of Quranic exegetical activity. This will provide us with a useful point of comparison with the situation in the Malay world described above.

The Islamization of India

Although Arab Muslim invaders succeeded in temporarily conquering the area of Sind in northwest India in the eighth century, Islam did not succeed in establishing itself securely in the subcontinent until some considerable time later. The irresistible march of Islam in the first centuries after the death of the Prophet foundered somewhat when confronted by the Makrān desert separating the Islamic heartland from India; this desert made a sea crossing to India necessary, and this factor was the main cause of Islam being largely held at bay until some 460 years after Muhammad's death (9). Delhi fell to a Muslim army in 1192 and Islamic rule was consolidated in northern India during the thirteenth century with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate (10). Majumdar has the following to say:

«The popular notion that after the conquest of Muhammad Ghûrî, India formed a Muslim Empire under various dynasties, is hardly borne out by facts... the major part of India remained free from Muslim domination till almost the very end of the thirteenth century A.D. (11).»

The succeeding centuries were characterised by dynastic struggles, the rise and fall of other Muslim kingdoms, and ongoing rivalry and warfare with neighbouring Hindu states. This need not concern us here. The important fact for our purposes is that Islam had established itself in India and was there to stay.
Early Exegetical Activity in India

Fragmentary evidence is available from the earliest period indicating that Arabic exegetical classics such as the Kashshāf of Zamakhshari and Imām Nāsirī’s Tafsīr were in use in scholarly circles during the 12th and 13th centuries. The monistic doctrines of Ibn al-‘Arabī (560-638/1165-1240) brought about a flourishing in religious thought in the 13th century and one of the earliest locally-written exegetical works, Tafsīr al-Raḥmān wa Taysīr al-Mannān by Shaykh ‘Alī al-Mahā’īmī (d. 853/1431), represented an attempt to find Quranic textual support for the doctrines of Ibn al-‘Arabī. However, it was written in Arabic and it, like other early exegetical works written in India, had limited popular appeal.

As time went on, Indian Muslims came to show a greater interest in Muslim works in Persian rather than in Arabic. The content of the Qur’ān was not made directly accessible to the population at large until Shāh Wali Allāh Dihlawī (d. 1176/1762) undertook a Persian rendering of the Qur’ān, and a popular rendering into Urdu was undertaken by his two sons, Shāh Rafī’ al-Dīn and Shāh ‘Abd al-Qādir (d. 1228/1813). The Indian case with respect to time-lapse between Islamization and emergence of Quranic exegetical activity provides us with an interesting parallel when held against the corresponding situation in the Malay states. In both areas, several hundred years elapsed before we find attempts at rendering the content of the Qur’ān into local languages. The big difference, of course, lies in the fact that we have evidence of exegetical works in Arabic being used in certain circles in Muslim India from the time of the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the 13th century, whereas the Malay-speaking areas provide no evidence of significant exegetical activity in any language until the latter part of the 17th century, some 400 years after the first adoption of Islam by a Malay state.

The Indian evidence can clearly not be viewed as representing a standard. Nevertheless, it does contribute to our suspicion that the surviving records of exegetical activity in the early Malay states do not tell the whole story.

The Political and Religious Life of Aceh in the 17th C.

We should next examine the earliest records of the political and religious life of the Malay states in an attempt to isolate clues suggesting exegetical activity predating ‘Abd al-Ra‘ūf’s Tarjumān. We must, by necessity, return to the Kingdom of Aceh, as the first substantial evidence of the nature and direction of Islamic doctrine in the Malay world is to be traced to late 16th century Aceh. There is evidence indicating that it was becoming increasingly common in this period for Acehnese scholars of Islam
to spend some time studying at various centres of Islamic learning in the Arabian peninsula. Hamzah Fanṣūrī, the great Sumatran mystic of the late 16th century, is the first religious scholar from the Malay world about whom detailed information is available. Copies of some of his works survive, and these works give us a glimpse into the religious life of the Acehnese Kingdom in the late 16th century. They also provide us with valuable information about Hamzah himself, and it is from his surviving poetry that we learn that he was initiated into the Qâdiriyah mystical Order in Arabia (16). In doing so, he at least joined, and may have established, a tradition which ‘Abd al-Ra’uf himself was to follow some decades later.

Islamic theosophical doctrines relating to the nature of God and Man’s relationship to the Creator were a major focal point of religious teaching and writing in Aceh during this period. In India and Aceh, as in the rest of the Muslim world, Sufi or mystical schools of thought flourished during the 17th century. The crux of Sufi belief was that the goal central to religion was Man’s community with God (17). According to the teachings of some of the early Sufis, the distinction between the Creator and Man was ultimately rendered non-existent when communion with God was fully realised.

Like the Indian Shaykh ‘Ali al-Mahâ’imi mentioned earlier, Hamzah Fanṣūrī’s approach to theosophy was heavily influenced by the doctrines of Ibn al-‘Arabi. Hamzah’s monistic teachings were enlarged upon and formed the central core of the teaching and writing of Shams al-Dīn al-Samatrâni (d. 1630). Shams al-Dīn received the direct patronage of Aceh’s greatest ruler, Sultan Iskandar Muda, and contemporary European reports testify to the central role which Shams al-Dīn had occupied in the power structure of the Sultanate even before Iskandar Muda’s reign (18). His most important work, the Mir’ât al-Mu’minin, or «The Mirror of the Faithful», contains the core of his monistic teachings. It was composed in 1601 during the rule of Iskandar Muda’s predecessor, Sultan ‘Alâ al-Dīn Ri’ayat Shâh Sayyid al-Mukammil (19), so when Iskandar Muda succeeded to the throne in 1607, the official standing of Islamic theosophy in the Sultanate was well established.

The development of Sufistic doctrines in Aceh was closely tied to the direction of contemporary developments in Muslim India (20). The exact manner of influence of the developments in India upon those in Aceh is difficult to determine. What is clear is that in both places there developed a religious controversy in the early 17th century concerning what was considered authentic and non-authentic Islamic teaching.

Iskandar Muda died in 1636. He was succeeded by his adopted son, Iskandar Thânî. This change set the seal on an about-face in the religious doctrinal orientation of the Sultanate. Shortly after Iskandar Thânî’s succession
to power, Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, an Islamic scholar originating from Guje-rat in India, arrived in Aceh. He rose to prominence under the patronage of the new Sultan, and during the next seven years, he devoted his energies to writing works aimed at refuting what he considered to be the heretical teachings of Ḥamzah and Shams al-Dīn. The core of his criticism revolved around his accusation that the teachings of these two scholars were pantheistic and heretical. Al-Rānīrī encouraged a period of widescale persecution of the followers of Ḥamzah and Shams al-Dīn. During this period, many followers of the two Sufis were murdered and books written by both Ḥamzah and Shams al-Dīn were burned (21).

Thus, when ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf left for Arabia around 1642, he left behind a society scandalized by the viciousness of religious quarrels. al-Rānīrī was to leave Aceh in disgrace in 1644 (22), but the effects of this turmoil were still in evidence when ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf returned some seventeen years later.

**Quranic Exegesis in Malay predating Tarjumān al-Mustafīd?**

Let us now return to our search for exegetical activity predating Tarjumān al-Mustafīd. We have been provided with important information, i.e. that many records of the religious literary activity of Ḥamzah and Shams al-Dīn were destroyed by the followers of al-Rānīrī. It may well be that if either of the former scholars had undertaken a major work of quranic exegesis, copies of this work would have ended up in the fires encouraged by al-Rānīrī.

Can any traces of exegetical literature be found amongst the ashes of these fires? There are renderings and translations into Malay of individual Quranic verses included within the surviving copies of the works of Ḥamzah and Shams al-Dīn to illustrate a particular point. But these works themselves are not of an exegetical nature, but rather deal with the authors’ own understanding of important issues such as the nature of God, the World, Man and the relationship between all three. Other than these isolated Quranic verse renderings, no more substantial rendering of or commentary upon the Qur’ān bearing the name of Ḥamzah or Shams al-Dīn is to be found in the Malay world.

It is only by undertaking a search among the MSS collected by European seafarers and kept in Europe that we find the final, and most important key to solving this puzzle. This key is provided by a little known manuscript in the Cambridge University Library collection catalogued as MS II.6.45. This MS contains commentary in Malay upon the 18th chapter of the Qur’ān, and originally belonged to the private collection of the Dutch Arabist Erpenius (d. 1624). It was brought back to Europe from Aceh at the beginning of the 17th century (23), hence it must have been composed around 1600.
عقول در عرب، ایتامی بکر خشک‌کن کردن نمی‌کند، اگر هم به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند.

برخی از این‌ها در عرب، ایتامی بکر خشک‌کن کردن نمی‌کند، اگر هم به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند، اگر به‌دیدار گسترش‌کنند.

Cambridge MS II.6.45 Folio 17: Part of commentary on Q18:9
The importance of this MS lies in the fact that its date of composition can be conclusively fixed to the period in which Shams al-Din, and probably Hamzah Fansüri, lived. The fact that no other copies of this work are extant suggests that its own survival may well have been due to its being transported away from Aceh prior to the fires of al-Rànïri some four decades later which probably destroyed other copies of the same work and other similar exegetical works. This also suggests that works of Quranic exegesis were on the top of al-Rànïri’s «hit-list», and so thorough was the implementation of their destruction that no survivors are to be found in Aceh. It of course also means that the Cambridge MS is an extremely valuable MS in its own right, as it is the sole remaining key to an understanding of Quranic exegetical activity in Malay prior to ‘Abd al-Ra’ûf’s Tarjumân al-Mustafid.

No substantial works of Quranic exegesis can be attributed to al-Rànïri. As there are no records of a post-Rànïri purge of his writings, we may deduce that he did not undertake such a work. What remains is merely the usual run of Quranic citations and Malay renderings within the larger body of his works.

Excerpts from the Early Commentaries

In order to provide a glimpse into the two commentaries discussed in the preceding pages, the following section presents the text of and commentary upon one Quranic verse, namely Surah 18 Verse 9, taken from Cambridge MS II.6.45 and Tarjumân al-Mustafid respectively. The excerpts offered here are sufficient to give the reader an insight into the language, style of commentary, and sources used.

CAMBRIDGE MS II.6.45 : Surat al-Kahf


Kata setengah mufassir (26) bahwa âsîhû al-raqîm itu ada tiga orang laki-laki, berjalan-jalan mereka itu kepada suatu dusun, maka dituruni hujan, maka masuk mereka itu ke dalam guha, maka terban batu pada pintu guha itu, kalakian maka tertutuplah pintu guha itu, maka tiadalah dapat mereka itu keluar dari sana.
Maka berkata seorang dari tiga itu, demikian ujarnya: "Siapa dari antara kita tiga ini, siapa ada berbuat amal yang baik, katakanlah oleh kamu. Mudah-mudahan dikasihani Allah kita dengan berkatNya".


Maka terbanlah batu yang menutupi pintu guha ini, maka ada berbayang-bayang cahaya matahari bagi mereka itu.

hendaknya itu. Inilah kebajikanku». Maka ujarnya : «Ya Tuhanku! Jika ada pekerjaanku meninggalkan ma’siat karena takut akan Dikau, maka luaskan kiranya pintu (gua) ini akan kami».

Taqdir Allah Ta’ala, maka adalah sedikit terbuka pintu guha itu. Mereka itu pun berkenalanlah.


Taqdir Allah pintu guha itu pun terbukalah, maka keluarlah mereka itu.

Adapun ashab al-kahf, ada berapa orang mereka itu orang besar di benua Rum, yaitu menteri raja Daqyânus, lari daripada rajanya. Kata setengah mufassir, mereka itu tiga orang, empat dengan anjingnya; kata setengah, lima orang mereka itu, enam dengan anjingnya; kata setengah, tujuh mereka itu, dulapan dengan anjingnya.

Sebab dilihat mereka itu dalam kufur dan dalam syirk yang besar adanya. Kata Muhammad anak Ishak (28) : tatkala bersalahakan pekerjaan segala ahl al-injil dan amat besarlah kalimat al-kufr zahirlah pada mulut mereka itu, dan jadi kufur-lah raja mereka itu hingga disembah raja itu berhala, disembelihnya segala yang dimakan itu pun dengan nama berhala, tiadalah dengan nama Allah, dan setengeh mereka itu ada tetap jua atas agama ‘Isa ‘alayhi al-salam dengan sempurna tauhid mereka itu dengan ‘ibadatnya akan Allah, maka tatkala didengar raja itu, setengah mau mengikut dia setengah tiada mau mengikut dia, maka didatanginya segala yang tiada mau mengikut agama itu maka dibunuhnya segala yang menyalah agamanya.

Dan didatanginya segala negeri yang sisi negeri Rum itu, maka mereka itu disuruhnya menyembah berhala dan menyembelih dengan nama berhala, hingga lalu ke negeri tempat ashab al-kahf itu, nama negeri itu Afsús. Tatkala datang Daqyânus ke negeri Afsús itu, dukacitalah segala kaumnya mu’min dalam negeri itu, maka mereka itu masing-masing berbunyilah lari daripada Daqyânus. Maka tatkala didengar raja itu mereka itu mu’min lari daripada negeri, maka disuruhnya ikut barangnya ke mana, maka disuruhnya bawa kepadanya sekaliannya.

Maka ujarnya akan segala hulubalangnya yang mengikut segala mu’min itu . «Jika mau mereka itu menyembah berhala dan menyembelih dengan nama berhala, kamu lepaskan mereka itu. Jika tiada mau mereka itu menurut kataku ini, buniuh oleh kamu». Maka barang siapa mengendaki hidup dalam dunia, maka dikerjakan mereka itu hala seperti kehindak Daqyânus itu. Dan setengah mereka itu takut iman, tiada mau mereka itu menyembah lain daripada Allah, maka
... dibunuhnya mereka itu dan dipenggal-penggalnya, maka digantungkannya segala anggota mu’min yang dipenggalannya itu pada segala kota negeri itu dan pada jalan raya dari pihak negeri itu. Dan pada katanya, hingga besarlah fitnah daripada Daqyânûs itu akan segala ahlu al-imân.

Maka tatkala dilihat orang muda-muda menteri Daqyânûs berapa orang itu pekerjaan Daqyânûs demikian, maka bercipta mereka itu terlalu sangat percintaannya, maka mereka itu netiasa sembahyang dan puasa dan mengucap tasbih akan Allah dan memeri sedekah dan berkashan dirinya kepada Allah, maka mereka itu berseru-seru kepada Allah: «Hai Tuhan kami yang menjadikan tujuh langit dan tujuh bumi. Tiada mau kami sembah tuhan lain daripadaMu. Jika kami sembah lain daripadaMu, seniscaya jauhlah daripadaMu, palingkan kirinya, hai Tuhan kami, fitnah ini daripada segala hambaMu mu’min, dan sesungguhnya beri ini daripadaMu supaya kami zahirkan 'ibadat kami akan Dikau».

Maka antara ada mereka itu minta doa demikian, maka datang segala kafir hulubalang Daqyânûs yang disuruhkannya mencahari segala mu’min menyuruhkan mereka itu menyembah berhala dan menyembelih dengan nama berhala. Didapat mereka itu segala mu’min dalam sujud dengan tangisnya merendahkan dirinya kepada Allah dengan minta doa. Maka ujar segala kafir itu: «Hai orang muda-muda, kamu salah titah raja. Telah kamu sembah Tuhan lain daripada raja».

Kalakian maka pergi mereka itu mengadukan hai mereka itu kepada raja Daqyânûs, maka mereka itu berdatang sembah kepada Daqyânûs, maka sembah mereka itu: «Telah disuruhkan tuanmu tuhan menyebut berhala dan menyembelih dengan nama berhala. Bahwa orang muda-muda daripada keluarga tuanmu bersenda-senda segala kebajakan tuanmu dan tiada mau nurut kata tuanmu».


Maka tatkala hampirlah kembali raja Daqyânûs daripada negeri itu, maka bersenggerah orang muda-muda tujuh orang, serta ia memeri sedekah agar supaya tiadalah tersadar Daqyânûs akan mereka itu dengan berkat sedekahnya. Dan dihadirkan mereka itu bekalnya akan pergi ke dalam guha itu. Maka tatkala hampirlah akan datang raja Daqyânûs, maka mereka itu pergilah ke dalam guha pada bukit Banjalûs, hampir negeri itu jua. Diamlah mereka itu sana, sentiasa menyembah Allah.


Kata Ibn ‘Abbás: ada mereka itu tatkala keluar daripada raja Daqyânûs pada malam, bertemu mereka itu dengan orang negeri [?](29) anjingnya ikut serta-tanya, Ia mengikut mereka itu, serta dengan anjingnya.»

**TARJUMAN AL-MUSTAFID : Sûrat al-Kahf (30)**

9. (Tetapi kausangkakah), ya Muhammad, (segala orang) yang mempunyai (loh) yang tersurat di dalamnya segala nama dan ya’ni mereka itu adalah pada cerita lama (hidup mereka itu) setengah (daripada) jumlah (segala tanda Kami yang ajaib) ya’ni ada lagi terlebih dari itu.

Maka tersebut di dalam tafsir Khàzin ya’ni bahwasanya mereka itu tiada ter-lebih ‘ajaib daripada segala tanda Kami, maka bahwasanya barang yang dijadi-kan daripada segala langit dan bumi, dan barang yang di dalam seka-lian itu dar-i-pada segala ‘ajaib, terlebih ‘ajaib daripada mereka itu.»
The Sources and Style of the Early Malay Commentaries

Let us examine the sources and style of the commentary contained in our two Malay exegetical works. We should begin with Tarjumān al-Mustafīd, as for almost 300 years it was the only commentary on the Qurān available in Malay, and as such came to represent something of a standard against which other exegetical works in Malay have been compared.

Tarjumān al-Mustafīd has been traditionally regarded as a translation of the authoritative Arabic commentary Anwār al-Tanzil wa Asrār al-Ta‘wil of al-Baydāwī (died 685/1286). However, an examination of the Malay text shows that it is clearly not a translation of the Anwār. A reference to other classical commentaries reveals that those by al-Jalālayn (31), al-Baydāwī (32) and al-Khāzin (33) were all used in compiling this Malay work. However, by far the greater part of the exegetical information in Tarjumān al-Mustafīd is taken from the Jalālayn commentary. In fact, the evidence points to ‘Abd al-Ra’uf’s original intention having been to render the Tafsīr al-Jalālayn, with one of his students later adding exegetical sections taken from the other two Arabic commentaries (34).

Why did ‘Abd al-Ra’uf decide to render the Tafsīr al-Jalālayn into Malay? He was a devoted teacher, and this particular commentary is an ideal pedagogic work. Compiled in the 15th century, it uses a word-for-word technique of interpretation. A perusal of various catalogues of Arabic manuscripts suggests that it came to be a very popular basic source of exegetical study in the Islamic centres of learning in Arabia and later in the Indonesian archipelago (35). Its popularity lies in part in its relatively uncluttered, concise approach to exegesis. Its own sources are composite and while it contains discussion of such varied issues as variant readings and traditions, these discussions are pitched at a level which is attainable for most literate Arabophones. By contrast, many of the other classical commentaries, such as those by al-Zamakhsharī and al-Baydāwī, belong more to the domain of the specialist in exegesis.

There is no doubt that by rendering the Tafsīr al-Jalālayn into Malay, ‘Abd al-Ra’uf hoped to produce a work which would be comprehensible to most Malays and would become a tool for religious education on a wide scale. In this he succeeded. While his other works on subjects such as jurisprudence and issues related to mysticism are now kept in Museum collections in various parts of the Malay world and are only referred to by specialists, Tarjumān al-Mustafīd continues to be printed widely and used for basic Quranic instruction in religious schools up to this day, particularly in Malaysia.

When we examine Cambridge MS Iii.6.45 with a view to identifying sources, we are confronted by two striking and important points of contrast.
1. No single source seems to have been favoured more than any other in compiling the exegetical information contained within the verses themselves. This running intra-verse commentary appears rather to be eclectic in character, with the decision as to which interpretation to favour having evidently been the responsibility of the Malay author himself. This allowed him considerably more freedom than was the case with 'Abd al-Ra'uf, who limited himself largely to the text of the Jalâlayn in providing running commentary on the Quranic verses.

2. The commentary by al-Khâzin is drawn upon heavily for exegetical interpolations between the Qur'anic verses, and that by al-Baydâwî to a lesser extent. These interpolations are very lengthy and in fact occupy much more space than the verses and the intra-verses running commentary. This contrasts with Tarjumân al-Mustafîd, where the inter-verse exegetical passages are relatively infrequent and short, and appear to have been afterthoughts, added by 'Abd al-Ra'uf's student Dâ'ûd Rûmî.

The use of sources in the two Malay commentaries could be contrastively represented as follows:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tarjumân al-Mustafîd</th>
<th>Cambridge MS II.6.45</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Rendering of Quranic verses interwoven with Jalâlayn commentary</td>
<td>Rendering of Quranic verses interwoven with Malay commentator's own commentary</td>
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<td>[intra-verse]</td>
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<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Occasional inter-verse exegetical additions taken from al-Baydawi and al-Khâzin</td>
<td>Copious inter-verse exegetical additions, largely drawn from al-Khâzin, but occasion-</td>
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<td>[inter-verse]</td>
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<td>ally from al-Baydawi</td>
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What is the significance of these two points of contrast? We should not underestimate the importance of what appears to have been a degree of freedom of interpretation exercised by the Cambridge MS commentator. An example occurs in the preceding excerpt from this MS; the commentator, in rendering raqîm (Q18 :9), chose to indicate that it referred to a place by using the words «yang masuk... ke dalam raqîm». Moreover, in his presentation of the variant exegetical traditions of the meanings of raqîm, the commentator stressed the locative interpretation by placing it first. Consider the following translation into English of the first part of the Cambridge MS comment on Q18 :9:

9. (But do you consider), O Muhammad, (that) concerning (all those) who entered into (the cave and) into (raqîm, they were one of Our marvellous signs)? Some say that the meaning is that the așhâb al-kahf were not in amazement at Our signs, but rather they were in amazement at the creation of the Seven Heavens and the Seven Earths. As for the kahf, it was a cave in a certain mountain. The raqîm was the name of [the] mountain. Some say that raqîm was the name of their place of origin, others say that raqîm was the name of the dog of the așhâb al-kahf, [while still] others say that it was a lead or stone tablet on which were inscribed the names of the așhâb al-kahf and [an account of] their experiences. Ibn ‘Abbâs says that the raqîm was the name of the ravine in which the așhâb al-kahf were located.

The author of the Cambridge MS clearly based this comment on al-Khâzin. Note, however, that it is al-Khâzin with a difference; the latter work seems to consider the explanation of raqîm meaning an inscribed tablet as being more likely, as can be seen in the following English translation of al-Khâzin on Q18 :9:

9. (am ḥasibta) i.e. you suppose, O Muhammad (anna așhâb al-kahf wa al-raqîm kânû min ayâtinâ ‘ajaban) i.e. they were in astonishment at Our signs. It is said that the meaning is that they were in astonishment not at Our signs, but rather at what We had created in regard to the Heavens and the Earth and what was in them concerning the more wonderful miracles. al-khaf referred to the broad cavern in the mountain, and al-raqîm was a tablet on which was written the names of the așhâb al-kahf and [an account of] their experiences, and it was then attached to the door of the cave. The tablet [ in question] was of lead. [though] it is [also] said it was of stone. From Ibn ‘Abbâs [it is reported that] al-raqiim was the name of the ravine in which the așhâb al-kahf found themselves. Ka'b al-Ahbâr says it was the name of the town which the așhâb al-kahf had left. It is [also] said that it was the name of the mountain in which the așhâb al-kahf were located. So God ‘Izz wa Jall made mention of the story of the așhâb al-kahf.
Such improvisation by Malay scholars when rendering the content of Arabic original texts was by no means unusual in Malay Islamic literature. However, al-Rânírî would probably have objected to the exercise of such freedom when practised by a group to whom he was so rigidly opposed. Such flexibility in interpreting established exegetical works in Arabic may have resulted in other copies of this work being cast into the fires mentioned earlier.

In contrast to the apparent flexibility of approach of the Cambridge MS commentator, ‘Abd al-Ra’ûf merely rendered the Jalâlayn comment on this verse and, by so doing, shifted the responsibility of interpreting variant traditions away from himself. This could signal the results of the earlier polemic: exegetical improvisation was out, strict adherence to an original was in.

Regarding the second point of contrast, it may well be that al-Khàzin’s Lubàb suffered a decline in its popularity in Aceh during the seventeenth century. Such a decline is suggested by the fact that while it was the core work referred to in the Cambridge MS indicating that it was in favour with the Acehnese religious hierarchy in the time of Ḥamzah and Shams al-Din, by the time of Tarjumân al-Mustafid’s appearance some 75 years later, the Lubàb was relegated to the role of a comparatively minor source of exegetical reference in drawing up Abd al-Ra’ûf’s commentary. In fact, the seeming addition of it as an afterthought may indicate that ‘Abd al-Ra’ûf was attempting to rehabilitate this Arabic commentary, the good name of which may have been sullied by its widespread use among al-Rânírî’s predecessors (36).

Stylistically, Cambridge MS Ii.6.45 like Tarjumân al-Mustafid, seems to have been designed as a pedagogic tool at a popular level. As can be seen from the excerpt provided, the exegetical passages included in this commentary are coherent for the non-specialist, the language is unpretentious and lucid, and the overall pitch seems to be aimed at the ordinary literate Muslim rather than the scholar. This striking similarity in style of the two Malay commentaries suggests that ‘Abd al-Ra’ûf may have been following an established tradition, namely to write commentaries for as wide a readership as possible.

Any suggestion as to the identity of the author of the Cambridge MS at this stage would be premature. What is clear is that it was composed during the period of ascendancy of the scholars for whom al-Rânírî later felt such antagonism, and this MS is probably representative of their exegetical activity.

Conclusion

Our search has enabled us to reduce the time-lapse between the arrival
of Islam and the earliest evidence of exegetical activity from 400 to around 300 years. A breakdown of the sources used in compiling MS II.6.45 indicates clearly that there was exegetical activity in the Malay world during the 16th century, in the form of study of certain Arabic commentaries, principaly those by al-Khâzin and al-Baydâwi. As we have seen, this parallels the case in India, where certain classical Arabic commentaries were studied before exegetical works in local languages began to appear.

It is unlikely that there are any more as yet unknown manuscripts containing Quranic commentary in Malay from the period prior to 1600. The rigours of the climate meant that most manuscripts had a limited lifespan, and we must depend by and large on later copies for our knowledge of the early period. In this context, the Cambridge manuscript assumes an importance which cannot be overestimated in assisting us to gain an insight into the early Islamic period in the Malay world.

NOTES

3. ibid.
5. Drewes : op.cit.
24. The following eight paragraphs on the ashāb al-raqīm, namely «kata setengah mufassir... maka keluarlah mereka itu», are based on al-Baydawi’s commentary, namely wa qil ashāb al-raqīm qa‘m... fa-kharajū [Ref. al-Ḥalabi edition, vol. II, pp. 2-3].
25. MS form ngarinlah.
26. The narrative concerning the ashāb al-kahf which begins thus is a faithful rendering of the account found in Khāzin III : 186-7 qāla Muḥ. b. Ḥaṣaqq... fa-kharajū min al-balad ilā al-kahf.
27. Form unclear. Used to render Kh. marra bi-rā‘.
28. In contrast to the copious commentary upon verse 9 contained in the Cambridge MS, it will be seen that the commentary on the same verse contained within Tarjumān al-Mustafid below is a very modest offering.
34. This article represents a work-in-progress report on my current research project; in addition to preparing the text of the Cambridge MS, I am also studying in detail al-Khāzin’s Lubāb, with a view to defining its role as a primary source for the early Malay exegetes and to identifying doctrines in either or both works which may have been considered heterodox by al-Rānirī.