

20/06/2001

Lessons from the past

iewed by Sharifah Al-Attas

"THOSE who forget their history," pronounces the Prime Minister, "are condemned to repeat it."

The George Santayana-quoting premier is officiating at the June 5 launch of *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*, edited and annotated by Dr Alijah Gordon and published by the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute of which she is chairman.

Echoing Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, she reminds the assembly that one "cannot step into the same river twice" - one cannot go back to the beginning. But we can - and must, she and the prime minister agree - learn the lessons of history.

To learn its lessons, of course, we must learn our history. Thus, this book.

Portugal and Spain practised a policy, we are told, of "calculated cruelty" in this part of the world. "The Spanish colonisation of the islands they were to name for their King Philip," writes Gordon in her foreword, "led not only to the devastation of Muslim populations ... but polarised the islands. Christianised indigenous peoples ... were used as foot-soldiers against the Muslims ..."

Describing 1580-1600 Portuguese and Spanish projects for the conquest of this region, C.R. Boxer observes "how often and how closely God and Mammon go hand in hand ... This ideology helps explain why a genuine desire for the salvation of immortal souls was often accompanied by a determination to secure the material wealth of lands beyond the pale of Christendom."

The Propagation of Islam also explores the contribution of Chinese Muslims. "The fundamental text," write Denys Lombard and Claudine Salmon, "is that of the Chinese (Muslim) Ma Huan, who accompanied the famous Admiral Zheng He (Cheng Ho) on his fourth expedition to the South Seas (1413-1415) and reported at the time of their passage through East Java that the population was made up of natives, Muslims (Huihui) as well as Chinese (Tangren), many of whom were Muslims." And Tome Pires, they tell us, asserts that "the religion of Muhammad was widespread among the cosmopolitan population of the coast (of Java), made up of Arabs, Chinese, Gujaratis, Bengalis and other nationalities."

The authors will, they write, be satisfied if their readers "renounce the basic over-simplification which dismisses all that is 'Chinese' as foreign and insignificant."

The book, in fact, owes its existence partly to the support of Malaysia's Chinese community - which is scrupulously acknowledged. The Lee Foundation, States of Malaya, and a host of other donors is faithfully listed, and representatives at the launch were presented with inscribed copies.

Such attention to detail - likewise evident in endnotes, glossary and index - makes all the more incomprehensible a serious omission; an entire chapter of the book's first part is devoted to the Terengganu Inscription - that tablet which has provided us with proof of the early Muslims of the Malay Archipelago. And yet no mention is made of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the scholar who in 1972 definitively deciphered the date of this stone. Instead, the book contains the 1938 work of R.A. Kern. The editor's note that "some of Kern's information and value judgments were superseded by subsequent scholarship" does not remedy this lack, all the more astonishing in light of the fact that Syed Muhammad Naquib's 1958 work,

Sufism as Practised by the Malays, was the first book ever published by MSRI.

The Prime Minister and Alijah, too, share a history.

Dr Mahathir and his wife, she says, have been MSRI members since the '50s. In the '60s, both contributed by banker's order to keep the impoverished office in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur open. And Alijah - then married to a prominent person who afforded her the use of car and driver - recalls that her former husband "bitterly complained that I was wasting his petrol visiting 'that no-account Umno politician'!"

The "no-account politician", confessing himself surprised at her memory, declares wryly that some things should remain forgotten.

But not history. And not ours.

We must know our past, he urges his audience, that we may be more comfortable in our present. More must document our history - the lack of this is one of our problems.

As is the misconception that Islam and science are opposed.

"It is one of history's bitter ironies," we read in the foreword, "that 'without the improved Arab/Moorish astrolabe, the lateen sail, and the advances made by the Arabs in navigation, astronomy and the nautical sciences in general, the idea of sailing west to the 'Indies' would never have crystallised in minds trapped in the thralldom of medieval superstition ..."

"... Islam accommodated new ideas," continues Alijah, quoting Jan Carew in *The Curse of Columbus*, "with grace and a civilised tolerance. Moorish scholars believed there were fundamental links between mathematics and religion ... They saw science not as a denial, but as an affirmation, of faith."