Japanese Policy Towards Islam in Malaya During the Occupation: A Reassessment

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Based on surviving local records, this essay argues that after 1943 Japanese policy towards Islam underwent far-reaching changes when the faith, religious elites and religious edifices were incorporated into the Japanese propaganda machinery for the purpose of winning a war in which neither Islam nor Malay-Muslims had any vested interest.

Japanese policy towards Islam

At the start of the Japanese Occupation of Malaya between 1942 and 1945, the Military Administration adopted a policy of non-interference in local cultural practices, giving due respect to Islamic and Malay customs. The sultans were recognised in their respective states as the heads of the Islamic religion and Malay custom, and those sultans who did not obstruct the Japanese were allowed to retain their posts under the supervision of Japanese governors who acted as advisors; their police powers were exercised in conjunction with Japanese law enforcement, but they lost their pre-war political functions. In line with this approach the Japanese Military Administration

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The discussion is based almost entirely on records of the Johor Religious and Education Department (Pejabat Agama Johor, henceforth PAJ) held at the Johor Bharu branch of the National Archives of Malaysia. Some documents are dated according to a Japanese system in use at the time whereby 2602 = 1942, 2603 = 1943, etc.

provided the sultans with honours, titles and stipends. This arrangement was formalised during a sultans’ conference held in Singapore in January 1943. The Japanese policy reflected their conviction that traditional rulers could play an important role in the pacification and the restoration of public order in Malaya, and Japanese reliance on the sultans to perform this function became more pronounced after mid-1943.

The second year of the Occupation brought a change of policy, with the Malayan Military Administration (MMA) paying much more attention to local concerns. Japanese officials now implemented various actions including: (a) giving respect to the fasting month of Ramadhan by allowing Malay-Muslims in government service to end their working day two hours earlier and granting holidays to celebrate Aidilfitri and Aidiladha as well as the payment of one month’s salary in advance to enable them to prepare for Aidilfitri; (b) attendance of Japanese officials at mosques during certain religious celebrations; (c) allowing sultans to appoint religious officials such as kathis, and the resumption of Quranic classes in religious schools; (d) the establishment of state religious councils; and (e) the holding of two Islamic conferences, the first in April 1943 in Singapore and the second in December 1944 at Kuala Kangsar.

Akashi Yoji, the most prolific and influential researcher working on this period, offers various explanations for these changes, including the deteriorating war situation, the problems of pacification and the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA) resistance movement, and a worsening economic situation characterised by galloping inflation and an acute scarcity of basic daily necessities. The measures were also a response to the sultans’ dissatisfaction with what they perceived as Japanese interference and lack of interest in Islamic matters.1 Itagaki Yoichi, a member of the MMA’s Research Section, considered that the negative features of official policy vis-à-vis Islam and the Malay-Muslim community contributed to the MMA’s failure to secure the cooperation of believers in Malaya and Sumatra, a judgement that is certainly correct.

The policy shift towards Islam and the Malay-Muslims occurred after Japanese premier Tojo Hideki addressed a conference of executive military government administrators held on 14 July 1942 in Tokyo, and reiterated the principle of non-intervention in matters relating to religion and native customs. Tojo also warned officials against imposing Buddhism or Japanese morality and customs, compulsorily changing local names to Japanese, or instituting public holidays on a whim.2 However, following

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2 The sultans of Selangor and Pahang were both unhappy about the MMA’s lack of interest in religious schools, while the Perak ruler disliked its usurpation of his prerogative to appoint kathis in the state. The sultans insisted on the reintroduction of state religious councils in 1944, and this was done with much fanfare; see documentation in PAJ 1/2604.

3 Akashi’s discussion of these issues in his *Japanese Military Administration* is based on Itagaki Yoichi’s wartime writings on the issue; Itagaki himself only touches briefly on these points in his 1962 article, ‘Some Aspects of the Japanese Policy’.

4 Tojo’s statement amounted to an attack on Colonel Watanabe Watara, the first effective head of the MMA until early 1943, who favoured a punitive stance towards the sultans. Watanabe’s published memoirs say little on matters relating to Islam, the sultans or the Malay-Muslims. Any disagreements he may have had with the policy of the military administration have been glossed over. See Watanabe Watara, ‘Daito Senso ni Okeru Nampo Gunsei no Kaisoroku’ [My personal recollections of the Japanese Military Administration in British Malaya during the early stages of the Greater East Asia War], with an Introduction by Takahashi Hisashi, *Gunji Shigaku* [Military History], 28, 3 (Dec. 1992): 53.
Tojo’s address there were only superficial changes in Japanese dealings with Islam and the religious elites. Officials paid little attention to official policy and tried to manipulate Islam to serve Japan’s wartime needs, a practice that continued to the time of the surrender, regardless of changes of senior personnel within the MMA. This article examines various aspects of Islam and Malay-Muslims under Japanese rule, paying particular attention to the Islamic conferences held in 1943 and in 1944, and the practice of using religious occasions, and buildings such as mosques and prayer houses (surau), for propaganda purposes.

**The April 1943 Islamic Conference**

In April 1943 the Japanese sponsored an Islamic conference in Singapore that was attended by ninety-one religious leaders from Malaya, Singapore and Sumatra. Each state and settlement sent four to six delegates, including both religious and secular leaders, and there were thirty-two non-Malays in attendance, including representatives from the MMA. Johor was represented by Dato’ Haji Abdullah Abdul Rahman, president of the Religious Department since 1933; Haji Hasan Haji Yunos, the deputy mufti; and the kathis of Muar and Batu Pahat, Haji Ismail Haji Yusof and Haji Othman Haji Abdullah respectively.6

The conference, which was held at the former Singapore municipal building (renamed Kokaido by the Japanese), opened on Monday, 5 April, with speeches given by Japanese imperial functionaries. That evening the delegates attended a dinner at the Shonan Club hosted by the Marquis Tokugawa. The next day the delegates assembled at the Kokaido to listen to a two-hour briefing by Colonel Kuichi Okubo on the war situation in various parts of the Japanese empire, while the afternoon was taken up by a show. That night the mayor of Shonan hosted an official dinner reception at the Nanto Hotel, which provided a special area where delegates could pray together before eating. The conference ended on 7 April, when the delegates watched a film about the war before returning to their respective states.

The speeches given by senior MMA officials provide useful pointers on the Japanese approaches towards Islam. These were meant to impress the Malay-Muslim elites that Tokyo was indeed the protector of Islam and the ummah (community of believers), and that the future of the religion very much depended on Japan’s ultimate victory in the war. Nishioeda Yutaka, the MMA representative, exhorted Muslim leaders ‘to understand the

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6 Pahang sent four representatives, two from the religious bureaucracy (Haji Abas Mohamed Taha and Lamin bin Kassim) and the district officers for Bentong (Dato’ Hussein bin Mohamad Taib) and Kuantan (Mahmud bin Mat). From Terengganu, the group attending included the state mufti Sheikh Hassan Yamani, Haji Alwi Fuad, Haji Wan Abdul Rahman Wan Daud and Ibrahim Fikri. Japanese documents, in particular the *Tokugawa Shiryo* [Tokugawa Materials] No. 38, provide a complete list of delegates but do not include biographical details; Boei Kensuyu Sensyti Shitsu, *Tokugawa Shiryo* No. 38 (Showa 32/1957). Some delegates, such as Ibrahim Fikri, a pre-war leader of the nationalist Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), and the Middle Eastern-trained Haji Hasan Haji Yunos, later became important state-level political leaders. Mahmud Mat, who was educated at the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar, had been in government service since 1915, and was a senior district officer in Pahang at the time of the Occupation. See Dato’ Sir Mahmud bin Mat, *Tinggal Kenangan: The Memoirs of Dato Sir Mahmud bin Mat*, ed. Mustapha Dato’ Mahmud (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1997).

7 PAJ 102/03, ‘Berkenaan dengan Perjumpaan Pegawai2 Agama Islam di seluruh Malai dan Sumatra di Shonan-to’ [Matters relating to the Conference of Religious Officers from Malaya and Sumatra held in Singapore].
sincere and holy intentions of Japan, and to work harder to make other Muslims to abide by Islamic laws. He delivered his original speech in English but it was probably translated into Malay for the benefit of the attending religious elites. After explaining at length the professed aims of the East Asian war, Nishioeda said:

As Muslim delegates, you ought to be aware of how the English and Dutch had hindered the local people from making daily necessities by importing goods from other countries. They took this action simply because they have been greedy and selfish and want to enslave the Asiatics. Though the war is still going on and local people must face much difficulties and a shortage of daily necessities, the Gunseikambu [MMA Secretariat] is taking steps to make this country self-sufficient and encouraging local industries so that the people of this region can live in peace and happiness. Thus we shall achieve our great ambition to construct 'New Malai-Sumatra' and turn it into the most prosperous region of the Greater East Asiatic Co-Prosperity Sphere [Dai Toa Kyoei Ken].

I am firmly resolved to look after the cultural developments which you have inherited from your forefathers as leaders of your religion. There is not the slightest interest on the part of Nippon to interfere with your custom and religion, on the contrary, Nippon will endeavour to encourage all the people to be true to their religion for it is in this way that they can co-operate in the re-construction of Dai Toa [Greater East Asia].

With sincere feelings I wish to pay tribute to the Muslims who have died in the Dai Toa Sense [Greater East Asian War], at the time the Nippon forces were busy hammering and smashing the English and Dutch defense lines. The Gunseikambu is trying to find means and ways of resuming communications to Mecca so that Muslims in Toa [East Asia] can fulfil their religious duty of making a pilgrimage to this Holy Land as is ordained by God in the Quran 'Waliillaahi anmussi hijjulbaiti manistata'a ilahi sabila'.

The meaning of this is that 'it is the bounden duty on the part of every thinking and matured Muslims to go on a haj pilgrimage to the Ka'bah [House of God] should he or she have the means to do so.' This worthy effort and good intention of Nippon can be realised with the co-operation of all Muslims in the reconstruction of Toa, Nippon on her part shall always endeavour to foster and respect this religion.

Other speakers, at this conference and on other public occasions, routinely expressed similar sentiments.

The speech of the Marquis Tokugawa, the MMA advisor, emphasised Tokyo’s policy of non-interference in religious matters. He too sought to convince the delegates that the future of Islam and of the Malay-Muslim community depended on the ultimate victory of Japan in the ongoing war. He noted that ‘the Military Administration had realised that its policy towards Muslims is fully understood by all those present for according to the Nippon government constitution, freedom of belief in the Islamic religion shall be guaranteed and protected. Nippon has not only given this guarantee but also has been endeavoring to foster it.’ The marquis continued:

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8 From Al-Imran, verse 97, although the phrase quoted here is only the first part of the verse.
9 PMI 102/03. 'An address by the Gunseik (Yusaka Nishioeda) on behalf of the Malai-Sumatra Gunseikambu [Military Administration] to the Muslim delegates of Malai and Sumatra.'
By the grace and favour of the Almighty, the Government of Dai Nippon has at the present moment, the good intention and great ambition to unite and strengthened the bond of friendship among the people of Toa and to establish the Dai Toa Kyoeiken so that a land of paradise will be built according to New World’s Order and moral justice. The one hundred million and three thousand Muslims [sic] should now in the name of God rise as one solid body to co-operate fully with us. The time has now come for all Muslims to accomplish their long-cherished desire to live and die together in their effort to crush their common enemy (British, American and Dutch). Thus, with a bright future and good hope in sight, I resign unto God, the Most Powerful and Great who will direct the one hundred million and three thousand followers of Islam to the right path and favour them with the true spiritual guidance so that they will unite into one solid body and soul to work and co-operate fully with Nippon – to live and die together. It is only in this way that a New Asia that will cast brightness on Islam can be built. Our glorious victory lies in the powerful and true Nippon spirit.10

In their formal response, the participants strongly criticised the Western colonial powers for their failure to ensure the progress of Muslims, and acknowledged that the situation had changed for the better due to the ‘august actions of the Japanese Emperor’. They also expressed their happiness at the Japanese guarantee of religious freedom and the professed intention of the Japanese government to provide protection for Islam. The speech of the representative of the cooperating elites closed on the following note:

All Muslims in Malaya and Sumatra should co-operate and sincerely understand the aim of the holy East Asian war and should unite to achieve this aim. We have been waiting for this opportunity to renew our ambition, which is made possible by the august assistance from the Malayan Military Administration. In this matter we are most thankful and grateful. We are also convinced that the 130 million Muslims in East Asia plus another 350 million in other parts of the world should be in happiness like us and be united to achieve a common aim. On this auspicious occasion it is our obligation to express our repressed ambition and to reinforce this ambition to other Muslims in all the districts in Malaya and Sumatra. We also sincerely hope that this war would achieve continuous victory so that the inhabitants of East Asia could live in prosperity. So be it.11

At the end of the conference the delegates issued a communiqué reaffirming their support for Japan and pledging closer cooperation with the Japanese war effort:

We believe wholly that the present East Asian war is a holy war for the independence of various races oppressed by Britain, Holland and America and to reconstruct a new Asian order…We speak with the confidence that this conference of Muslims was made possible by the support of Imperial Japan towards Islam. We now pledge that all Muslims will unite to serve Dai Nippon so that the aim of this holy war will be realised.12

10 PAJ 102/03, ‘An address by the Rt Hon. Marquis Y. Tokugawa to the Muslim Delegates of Malai and Sumatra at the Muslim Conference held at the Syonan Kokkaido on 5th April 2603’.
11 PAJ 102/03, ‘Ucapan Ketua Perjumpaan Agong Wakil2 Islam Malai dan Sumatra’; my translation.
Outside the formal programme, the heads of the various delegations had a number of informal meetings with Japanese officials, notably Colonel Watanabe Wataru, and these sessions, which took place at the former Seaview Hotel where all the delegates were housed, threw light on the way Japan hoped to use Islam and the religious establishment to promote the war effort. On 2 April and again on 4 April substantive deliberations took place focusing on suggestions from delegates relating to religious matters. At one of these meetings, the Japanese authorities told delegates that the aim of the conference was to ‘fix and carry out certain duties regarding the building and establishment of the Dai Toa Kyoeiken and uniting all the races and nations in East Asia. The loyalty, obedience and diligence of the Japanese ‘very nearly resembled all that which is found in the principles and teachings of Islam’, and ‘no human being would become more loyal and obedient to their Kings and Rulers unless they are first loyal and obedient to God’. The participants were to encourage their Muslim brethren to observe the precepts and teachings of Islam, take part in various economic initiatives, behave in a suitable manner and respect each other. They were to remind fellow Muslims of the harmful effect of spreading rumours, for ‘this is bound to interfere with the belief and trust of an honest person or it may hinder him in his usual work that may lead to destruction since manual labour depends on a person’s heart and determination’.13

Nishioeda told the delegates that it was compulsory for them ‘to explain to other Muslims the feelings and pure intention of Japan’. The delegates were also exhorted ‘to work harder to spread Islamic teaching and culture’. In general the religious elites did not disappoint them.14 For example, the Pahang MMA convened a meeting of all district officers in the state to ‘discuss’ the 1943 Conference. The district officers, sub-district and village heads in turn visited the villages to inform ‘the people of the decisions reached at the meeting of Muslim (Islamic) representatives in Syonan’.15 Unfortunately it is impossible to find out what really transpired at these sessions, or the reactions of the ordinary Malays. In Kelantan one of the state’s senior officers, who had attended the conference, delivered a report on the proceedings to all state dignitaries in the presence of the sultan and senior Japanese officers. As might be expected in this kind of official gathering, the presentation heaped lavish praise on the MMA and its efforts to promote and defend the faith.16 In Penang, one of the four delegates who had attended the Singapore conference, Mohamed Yussuf Izuddin bin Adam, stated that the MMA had shown commendable openness by organising the conference, which provided the opportunity for Muslims across the Melaka Straits to cement brotherly ties with one another.17 Mahmud Mat, the Kuantan district officer who was part of the Pahang delegation, gives an unenthusiastic account of the conference in his memoirs, indicating

13 PAI 102/03, ‘An address by the chairman (President of Johor Religious Department) at the Kathis Meeting held on 10th Shigatsu (April) 2603’.
14 The Terengganu musafir resigned soon after the conference. He was an Arab and might have had strong views regarding Japanese interference in religious matters, but there are other possible explanations for his resignation, notably his difficult relationship with the sultan.
15 ‘Letter from District Officer Bentong to the Penghulu of Sabai and Pelangai dated 10 April 1943’ in District Office (DO) Bentong 47/03, ‘Field Visits to Mukims during 2603, 2604, 2605’.
that there was a one-way flow of information, and that Colonel Okubo said less about Islam in his briefing than about the military situation in the South Pacific.\footnote{18}

The Johor documents provide considerable detail as to what actually transpired behind the façade of Japan’s self-laudatory claim to be the protector of Islam and Malay-Muslims. These materials also reveal the response of the local religious elites to Japanese overtures in the religious sphere. Soon after the conclusion of the Singapore conference a kathis’ meeting was held in Johor Bharu on 10–11 April. The president of the Religious Department began the conference with a lengthy summary of what had transpired in Singapore.\footnote{19} Asked how the information could be disseminated, the kathis prepared a list of possible venues to hold meetings, including mosques and surau along with schools and public fields.\footnote{20} The kathis agreed on the following points:

1. Lectures should be presented at meeting places that were readily accessible to the general public.

2. Village headmen and the imams should have a good understanding of the objects and aims of the speeches, and if necessary should emphasise or repeat the important points.

3. Villagers should be contacted secretly after the presentations to see if they have really understood what has been explained to them.

To achieve greater impact, assistance would be sought from outside the Religious Affairs Department; an agricultural officer could highlight the benefits of certain economic undertakings, and a senior police officer could explain good citizenship and the dangers of becoming ‘unruly’. The meeting again stressed that:

> human beings cannot become good people unless they are loyal and obedient to their God. When they are obedient to God, only then can they be trusted to be loyal and obedient to their King. There shall be no peace and prosperity if men remain idle for idleness or laziness leads to poverty. Out of this, comes all kinds of wickedness which threatens the peace of a country.\footnote{21}

In practice, the kathis showed little enthusiasm for delivering lectures, a fact which caused concern within the religious bureaucracy and among the Japanese. The MMA was very much aware of the potential of these lecture tours for the Japanese propaganda efforts and had detailed information regarding each qariah (the group served by a

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\footnote{Mahmud Mat, *Tinggal Kenangan*, ch. 17. According to Mahmud, Watanabe gave all delegations a commemorative medal made of white metal enamelled in scarlet with a crescent and star embossed in the centre and twelve cherry blossoms embossed around the edge. The words ‘Sehiduplah dengan Nippon’ [Live with Nippon] were inscribed in Jawi script on the back.}

\footnote{This account is based on ‘Meeting of the state Kathis held at Johor Bharu on 10th Shigatsu [April] 2604’, in PAJ 102/03. See also Menteri Besar Johor 37/2603, ‘Uchapan Wakil2 Islam Malaya-Sumatra dan Uchapan aluan dari Pemerintah Am di Syonan Kokkai-do’ [Speeches of representatives of Muslims from Malaya–Sumatra and welcoming speech from an official of the MMA at Shonan Kokkai-do]; PAJ 102/03, ‘Letter from President of the Ecclesiastical Department to the Johor Chief of Police dated 16 April 2603’.}

\footnote{PAJ 102/03, ‘List Nama tempat2 diadakan Perhimpunan Kerana bersyarah dalam Bandar dan kampung bagi Johor dan Daerah’ [List of places where gatherings will be organised as part of lectures in towns and villages in Johor and the districts].}

\footnote{PAJ 102/03, ‘Decisions taken at the Kathis Meeting held at Johore Bharu, on 10th and 11th Shigatsu, 2603’.}
mosque or surau), and the total number of mosques and surau in the whole of Johor.\textsuperscript{22} The issue of how to publicise the Singapore conference appeared on the agenda of a kashifis’ meeting scheduled for May 1943, but it is not known what was said.\textsuperscript{23}

**The December 1944 Islamic Conference**

A second Islamic conference took place at the Iskandariah Palace, Kuala Kangsar, on 13–15 December 1944. This gathering was, in essence, a further effort by the Japanese to use religion for propaganda purposes. The MMA was represented by the Bunkyo-kacho (chief of the Bunkyo-ka, Culture and Religion Office), Perak MMA officials, a Professor Watanabe and Burhanuddin Al-Helmy, the MMA advisor on Malaya customs and Islamic affairs.\textsuperscript{24} The Malay states (excluding Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, which had been retroceded to Thailand) and the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malaka and Singapore were each represented by two or three delegates, with the Johor and Perak delegations led by their respective raja muda (the heir apparent to the throne).

In opening the conference, Fujimura Masuzo, who had replaced Watanabe Wataru in early 1943, commended the Malay-Muslim community for its support towards Japan, notably during the early invasion period, and its cooperation with the MMA in increasing food production and enlisting in the volunteer army (giyugun), but he asked Malay-Muslims to give even more to the Japanese war effort by bringing their ‘view of life’ in line with the new order:

> Gentlemen, look back at what our noble ancestors have done, now wake up to defend East Asia by sacrificing ourselves and through religion besides concentrating our efforts towards this end. Look! Is it not the case that the holy land of Mekah has been neglected all this while under the power of the Anglo-Saxons? The way of the resurgence of East Asia is to reach all the way to the holy land of Mekah until it is under the hand of Muslims. Muslims who believe in the Quran will bear witness to the bravery of Muslims in their history. The Muslims of Malaya are responsible for [overcoming] all the present difficulties. I hope Muslims in Malaya will ponder about God’s assistance to destroy all those who had oppressed others all the way from East Asia to Mekah. And this is the basis for Malaya’s involvement in the present war and Muslims must defend their beloved homeland.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{22} See, for example, PAJ 41/2603, ‘List orang2 Islam yang duduk dalam Mukim Masjid Daerah Pontian bagi Tahun 2603’ [List of Muslims domiciled in mosque mukims in Pontian district for the year 2603], ‘Penduduk2 Islam dalam Johor dan Daerah bagi Tahun Hijaah 1362 bersamaan dengan 2603 Hitungan’ [Total of Muslims in Johor state and districts for the year 1362 H or 2603], and ‘Hitungan orang2 Islam Penduduk2 Mukim masjid Bandar dan kampung daerah Segamat’ [Total Muslim population based on town and village mosques].

\textsuperscript{23} For a record of visits undertaken in Pontian, see PAJ 102/03, ‘Kenayatan tempat2 yang telah diadakan Bersyarah oleh Kathi Pontian’ [Statement on places where the Pontian Kathi had conducted lectures]. See also PAJ 54/04, ‘Penyata Keria Pemeriksa Hal2 Agama Johor Bharu bagi bulan Mei 2603’ [Statement of the works of the Inspector of Religion for May 1943]; and PAJ 35/2604, ‘Repot Tahun 2603 bagi Pejabat Kathi Segamat’ [Report for the year 1943 for the Segamat Kathi Office].

\textsuperscript{24} Ramlah Adam, *Burhanuddin Al-Helmy: Suatu Kemelut Politik* [Burhanuddin Al-Helmy: A political crisis] (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1996), chs. 1–2. Before the war Burhanuddin was a prominent member of the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore. At the urging of Mustapha Hussein, the KMM Vice-President, he had joined the KMM, but only as an ordinary member.

\textsuperscript{25} Pejabat Kathi Besar Johor 257/2604, ‘Uchapar nasihat daripada Gunseikan’ [A word of advice from the Chief of Military Administration]. The original text is as follows: ‘Tian2 saklian memandang balik
The documentary evidence suggests that this gathering of conservative religious leaders (although this description perhaps should not be applied to Burhanuddin) only raised issues acceptable to the MMA. The points discussed included:

- The need for uniformity regarding the Muslim calendar for all states.
- The need to establish a ‘national’ committee of Islam for the whole of Malaya.
- The need for provisions allowing religious authorities to take legal action against Muslims in Melaka, Penang and Singapore (the former Straits Settlements where there were no Malay rulers) who openly flouted Islamic laws.
- The need to allow religious authorities to punish Muslims who were involved in vices such as gambling.
- A proposal to urge the MMA to allow Muslims in the army to fast during Ramadhan as well as permission for teachers to conduct religious classes among army/police personnel.
- The need for Muslims to be given a lunch break long enough to allow them to complete their noon (Zuhur) and Friday prayers.

It is not clear whether these resolutions were accepted by the MMA, although some state Islamic councils subsequently became more energetic in enforcing various aspects of pre-war Islamic enactments, taking to court those who failed to attend Friday prayers without any valid reason, and prosecuting Muslims involved in gambling. There is also less mention of MMA interference in religious matters, although Japanese officers continued to attend Islamic Council meetings in the states. In Pahang, six Japanese officials including the governor, Hashigawa, attended the council meeting on 25 July 1945, sitting at the same table as the sultan and the Tengku Besar Pahang, the man responsible for the Department of Religious Affairs. Only three state religious officials were present, namely the state mufti, the kathi of Pekan, and one Haji Muhammad Daud.


26 ‘Mesyuarat Agong walik? Majlis Mesyuarat Ugama Islam Malai’ [Conference of Representatives from Islamic Councils in Malaya] in Tokugawa Shiryo no. 38, Pejabat Kathi Besar Johor 257/2604; and Tengku Basar Pahang (TBP) Files, 8/2605
27 ‘Daftar Nama Ahli2 Mesyuarat Majlis Agama Islam Pahang yang akan diadakan pada 25 haribulan Julai 2605 pada pukul 10 pagi di rumah Lebal Tunggal Pekan’ [List of the members of the Pahang Religious Council to be held on 25 July 2605 at Lebal Tunggal Pekan (official residence of the Tengku Besar Pahang)], TBP Files, ‘Surat2 yang Tiada Jenis bagi 2605’ [Unclassified letters for 1945].
During the conference, delegates agreed to urge fellow Malay-Muslims to work with Japan to achieve the final aims of the Greater East Asian war by (a) soliciting donations for war purposes (something the Pahang religious elites did energetically in early 1945); (b) advising people to cooperate fully with Dai Nippon; (c) increasing food production; (d) ensuring that law and order continued to prevail in Malaya; and (e) praying for the speedy end of the war with victory for Japan. As in 1943 the delegates expressed their profound gratitude to the MMA for sanctioning the 1944 conference. At the end of the deliberations all delegates undertook a solemn oath of loyalty to Japan and the Shōwa Tenno:

1. Let us be loyal to the Tenno Heika – the Emperor of Dai Nippon and her territories – for assistance to our religion;

2. Let us march towards the final victory by concentrating all our power in line with the real aims of the East Asian war;

3. Let us give our fullest trust to the Nippon army and sacrifice ourselves for and unite with Dai Nippon; and

4. Let us fulfill our obligations to safeguard and reconstruct Malaya based on Islamic principles.  

It is not clear who formulated these resolutions, although the last one reflected a local rather than a Japanese concern.

As early as 1943 the MMA had begun to define the Greater East Asian war as a holy war (jihād or perang suci). The Malay-Muslims had so far managed to forestall such declarations, but now the Japanese insisted that they support the principle that the ‘Japanese war was indeed a holy war, to liberate Muslims and the holy land from the tyrannical Anglo-Saxon yoke!’ The idea that the ‘Greater East Asian war was a holy war or jihād’ was driven home by the gunshireikan (commander of the army) when delegates for the Kusia Kangsar conference paid him a courtesy call at nearby Taiping. In that memorable meeting, the Japanese commander covered three major issues in a lengthy speech that resembled a Friday sermon: the real teachings of the Quran, the similarity between Islam and Shinto, and the Greater East Asian war as a holy war.

In general the Japanese tried to avoid the issue of the divinity of the emperor, an idea that was anathema to Muslims, but no such inhibitions can be seen in the statement of the gunshireikan. He told delegates that in essence all religions were the same, and the teachings of the Quran were similar to those of Shinto, Japan’s indigenous religion. There was, he alleged, a strong similarity between the Quranic revelations and the personality of the Tenno, the Japanese emperor, who the Japanese believed was descended from the sun goddess or Amaterasu Omikami Sama. The Japanese emperor, he told his bewildered guests, was the embodiment of the thoughts of the most powerful god and at the same

29 Pejabat Kathi Besar Johor 257/2604, ‘Sharahat Yang Terutama Tuan Gunshireikan kapada ahli2 yang hadzir di-Majlis Mesyuarat Agong wakil2 Majlis Mesyuarat Ugama Islam, Malai pada 15 haribulan 12, tahun Syowa 19 di-Shireibu’ [Lecture of the Hon. Gunshireikan to those who were attending the Malaya Islamic Conference on 15 December, 19th year of Showa at the Army Headquarters].
time imbued with godly spirit. Since time immemorial, the Japanese people had never questioned their emperor, who was the focus of national reverence, and as a result Japan was fair to all, powerful and succeeded at all times in its endeavours. There were similarities between Islam and Shinto in terms of sacrifice, courage, doing good and carrying out welfare activities. Both faiths shared the belief that their followers of were protected by a power higher than human. Japanese soldiers, because of their loyalty to their god (and emperor), could overcome all odds and defeat any enemy even if they had to face enormous numerical odds and other disadvantages. Shinto would never oppress Islam because the true spirit of both religions was similar.

Although he was already on dangerous ground, the gunshireikan then made his most contentious point, the declaration that the East Asian war was a jihad, and that Japan’s effort to ‘save the world’ was comparable to the jihad undertaken by the Prophet Muhammad during the early expansion of Islam on the Arabian peninsula. Despite Islam’s early success, he said, Muslims were later tramped upon and colonised by the West, especially Britain and the United States. Unlike during the glorious days of Islam, Western materialism came to the forefront in human life instead of religion. Japan under the Showa Tennō, he said, was undertaking a holy war, a jihad, to save mankind from rapacious and materialistic Britain and the United States, and Malay-Muslims in Malaya must play their part in this effort.

At this time Muslims who are convinced in their religion must arise and enter this holy war or endeavour to increase food production or join the volunteer army or volunteer corps. And through co-operation with the Imperial Japanese forces to smash the Americans and British. That is why we are welcoming them. The measurement of this holy war is wide and the fighting is severe, its result would be very great and the losses are big too; and all Muslims must remember this fact.  

The delegates would certainly have found these statements difficult to accept, for at times the gunshirekan’s exposition verged on blasphemy, in particular when he compared Japan’s war effort to the Prophet Muhammad’s jihad. However, at that juncture no one would have dared to dispute his interpretation. To conclude the session, the Gunshireikan issued a stern warning to the conservative religious elites on the futility of using religion for political purposes.

**Mosques and surau and the Japanese propaganda machinery**

The use of mosques for propaganda purposes by religious elites was nothing new. In 1942 such things were done in a very crude manner that drew strong protests from Malay-Muslims, especially at the local level. Even as late as May 1943 mosque officials in Johor were asking the governor’s office for posters written in Japanese requesting

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30 Ibid.
soldiers to respect the sanctity of mosques by taking off their shoes on entering one. After 1943 the MMA became much more refined in the use of mosques for propaganda purposes.

There is no evidence to show that the Bunkyo-ka influenced directly or otherwise the way the Religious Department wrote sermons, which in the case of Johor were normally delivered in Arabic. Some imams prepared their own sermons, but they were required to send copies to Johor Bharu. (In Terengganu and Kedah there is evidence that the Japanese kept a close watch on imams, and the same was probably true in Johor and other parts of the peninsula.) Samples of sermons written in Malay suggest that the Johor religious bureaucracy only highlighted religious and moral issues. Yet the Bunkyo-ka could make its influence felt in other ways, particularly in the form of addenda to these sermons, such as the one shown below, which was extremely political in nature. The Religious Affairs Department directed all imams and district Kathis to read this statement after the Friday congregation of 12 February 1943:

I (the Imam) must stress here and am asking you all to take note of the war that is going on at present. As you all know, in our country there is no chaos and difficulties as we had experienced before, and at the moment all of us are under the protection of the government of Nippon which is treating the local population well. Despite the comfortable life at the moment don’t forget that the war is still going on in other areas and in other countries with the brave Nippon soldiers doing their utmost to wipe out the Allied British and American force whose intention is merely to enslave us and other East Asians. Because of this we should ask Allah the Merciful and the Almighty who possesses supreme power over all living beings in this world to destroy the wicked races of this world which have been enslaving and oppressing others as was done by the British, Americans and others, and may He grant victory to the race that espouses fairness and well-being while fighting to preserve life and the religion of others, that is the government and people of Nippon which stands up today in defence of the rights of humanity in Greater East Asia.

During the previous month the Friday congregants had been informed that the Rangoa mosque had been bombed by British and American warplanes, resulting in the loss of scores of innocent Muslim lives. On that occasion the imam delivered an addendum that stated: the cruelties perpetrated by the enemy are never condoned by Muslims and today we stand in the house of God asking Allah the Almighty and the Merciful to banish all the cruel races from the face of the earth.

This use of mosques was more refined than the MMA’s earlier, more direct method, in which such speeches were read by Japanese officers who ‘forced their way’ into the mosques on suitable occasions, such as during Aidilfitri and Aidiladha celebrations. The presence of these officials turned religious occasions into farcical political shows. In the first place their arrival was ceremonious, requiring special seating within the mosque precincts, and as part of the charade both the guests and the congregation, the latter still on their prayer mats, had to bow to the Imperial Palace. For the Muslims this required

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32 Pejabat Kathis Besar Johor 67/2603.
33 See the texts in Pejabat Kathis Besar Johor 10/2603.
34 PAJ 26/2603.
35 PAJ 26/2603.
making a 180-degree turn from the direction of the Ka’ba. Worshippers found this strange and many considered it un-Islamic, but they had to comply. When the chokan (governor) was present it was mandatory for the congregants to listen to his speech, which was duly translated. Popular themes in such speeches included the need for Malay-Muslims to change their way of life in line with the new situation in East Asia and to make sacrifices in rebuilding Malaya within the Co-Prosperity Sphere.  

The Japanese used religious occasions selectively to build support in ways that would have maximum impact on the Malay-Muslim community. One such occasion was the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Usually there were interesting programmes lined up for this very auspicious day, which was an important occasion for every Muslim. In 1944 the event was celebrated on 5 March. At the Abu Bakar mosque in Johor a series of lectures touched on the reasons for celebrating the Prophet’s birthday, the life history of the Prophet and general matters regarding Islam, and Islamic solidarity (persaudaraan Islam). The fourth lecture, however, given by one Dato’ Abdullah Isa, concerned the benefits and advantages of Japanese-sponsored neighbourhood associations (tonarigumi) for rural villagers, and how they fulfilled Islamic ideals.

The MMA also used the mosques and surau to celebrate occasions that had nothing to do with the Malay-Muslim community or Islam, such as the anniversary of the outbreak of the Greater East Asian war on 8 December, and the birthday of the Japanese emperor (Tencho Setsu) on 29 April. Although these events were organised by the secular bureaucracy at the district level, religious officials as well as mosques/surau were nevertheless required to play their parts. The anniversary of the war was celebrated between 1942–4 without fail and with much fanfare, involving the reading of speeches by various community leaders at public gatherings, some of them at mosques and surau. The speech delivered by the leader of the Malay-Muslim community at the 1943 celebration was a lengthy presentation that covered the ongoing war and Japan’s efforts to drive out the ‘evil and enslaving West’. It touched on the need for the Malay-Muslim community to remember the war, and to support Japan, the country which made possible ‘the deliverance from British enslavement’ and freedom from Western colonialism. Out of gratitude, Malay-Muslims needed to repay the debt they owed the Japanese by remaining loyal to Japan and making serious efforts to rebuild Malaya so that the country could be a useful component of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, by seriously undertaking the study of the Japanese language so as to understand the Japanese better, and increasing food production to lessen the burden on the military authorities.

A doa (a special request to Allah) normally accompanied occasions such as this. In 1944, on the Friday of the week in December that marked the anniversary of the start of the war, the doa asked that Allah secure victory for Japan in the ongoing East Asian war,

36 Ahmed Meah Baba Ahmed, Penaklukan Jepun, pp. 70, 92, 117.
37 PAJ 13/2605, ‘Pemberitahau Aturan membaca Maulud Nabi pada hari Isnin diadakan di Masjid Abu Bakar Johor Bharu pada 12 haribulan Rabi ulawal 1363 bersamaan dengan 5 March 2604’ [Notice on the Prophet’s birthday celebrations to be held on Monday at the Abu Bakar mosque on 12 Rabiuul Awal 1363 or 5 March 1944]; ‘Peraturan membuka Majlis membaca Maulud Nabi SAW di Masjid Abu Bakar Johor Bharu pada hari Sabtu 12 Rabiuul Awal 1364 bersamaan 24 Nigatsu 2604’ [Procedures for the opening ceremony for celebrating the Prophet’s Birthday at the Abu Bakar mosque on Saturday 12 Rabi ulawal 1364 or 24 February 1944].
38 PAJ 413/2602.
ensure the defeat of Japan’s enemies, and banish the enemies of Japan from the face of the earth. Kathis were asked to ensure that Malay-Muslims attended the Friday congregation on 15 December for the reading of this doa, a demand that seemed necessary because attendance at Friday prayers had fallen to very low levels: for much of 1943 in the districts of Johor Bharu, Muar, Batu Pahat and Pontian between 25 and 45 per cent of gariyah members were routinely absent from Friday prayer.

On the emperor’s birthday, mosques and surau were routinely used in local celebrations, which were organised by district officers. On this day all the imams were instructed to sound the gong at mosques and surau early in the morning, something normally done to announce prayer times, to announce this ‘auspicious occasion’. Imams were required to organise a special prayer for the Japanese emperor and the ‘brave Japanese soldiers’ who had died in the Greater East Asian war. At 10 o’clock in the morning (Tokyo time) the gong sounded again, and all Malay-Muslims observed a minute of silence as a sign of respect. All imams and surau supervisors had to say a special doa for the Japanese emperor, which concluded with the following words:

We Johoreans sincerely ask Allah that He would grant longevity of life to the Japanese Emperor, that he would be able to unite all East Asia under Japanese rule, that Allah would hinder any misfortunes from befalling the Emperor, his family and subjects, and that Allah would grant the Emperor the final victory against the Allies so as to ensure everlasting prosperity within the region.

Both this doa and the earlier one were composed and read in Arabic, and they were read in the original Arabic versions, sparing the Malay-Muslims – the majority of whom could not understand Arabic – from having to confront a potentially divisive issue.

Throughout the wartime period, sultans remained the protectors of Islam within the Malay states and the MMA fully capitalised on this situation. In 1943–4 the MMA organised meetings between the Malay sultans (including those from Sumatra) and senior Japanese officers, who delivered briefings on the war situation. The rulers were expected to impart what they had learned to the people in their respective states or territories. In Johor the sultan issued an edict after each session in compliance with Japanese requests. The first, entitled ‘An edict of His Highness Ibrahim Sultan of Johore and Protector of Islam for the State and Territory of Johore’, appeared on 18 July 1943, and stressed that the paramount objective of Dai Nippon in waging the war against the West was to ‘enable Malayans to find and assume their proper role and place in order to secure and enjoy permanent peace, security and happiness’. It reminded Johor residents that the war was still far from over, and informed them that the creation of the new order ‘was not going on smoothly and satisfactorily’ as the Japanese had expected. The edict

39 PAJ 247/2604.
40 See, for instance, PAJ 30/1940, 43/2603, 49/2603, and 72/2603.
41 Pejabat Kathi Besar Johor 53/2602.
42 The composition of a doa required an exceptionally high level of proficiency in Arabic, and would have been beyond the abilities of most people (personal communication, Associate Professor Mohd Radzi Othman, 21 Nov. 2000). I am most grateful to this Medina-trained scholar for the translation of both doa into Malay.
43 On one such occasion, in Singapore during July 1943, Premier Tojo Hideki and General Hitza Saito, the Japanese military commander in Malaya-Sumatra, were both present. A final meeting with the Gunshireikan or commander of Japanese forces in Malaya took place in Kuala Lumpur early in 1944.
emphasised Tojo’s instruction that all the sultans were ‘to enlighten and guide the masses of the indigenous population, to exert ever greater effort towards this end so that all the peoples of Greater East Asia would be united together into a complete and harmonious solidarity dedicated to the common objective of establishing a new order of things in East Asia [based] on ethical principles and moral justice’, and it ended with the following exhortation:

I wish to impress upon you all the noble and altruistic intention of gallant and prudent Nippon towards us. We must not therefore rest on our oars but instead should do whatever we can with the idea of contributing our sort of aid towards the prosecution of this war or the establishment of a new order of things here. For instance, if we all grow plenty of food, there is no necessity and trouble on the part of the military administration to import our food from foreign countries. For this reason, I strongly warn you to exert every effort to grow more food, to do every useful work, to see to the proper upkeep of your dwellings, to live a healthy life and to preserve peace, as all these means co-operation. I wish to add a little more – that you must behave well, carry on with your work honestly and whole heartedly, always be thankful to God by saying your prayers which is your bounden duty to Him. Convey my words to all my beloved subjects who are absent from here [today].  

The Bunkyo-ka subsequently sent its approval, although where the sultan had written ‘by God’s will all the battleships were bombed and sunk’, the Japanese preferred ‘by the Tenno Heika’s will all the battleships were bombed and sunk’. This suggestion, however, was ignored in the versions read across the state.  

The second edict was issued on 19 July 1943. In it, along with the usual praise for the Japanese and exhortations to strive harder in support of the war effort, the sultan stressed the point that the governor was respectful of the sultan’s position as traditional head of the Malays and that the Japanese had not violated the Islamic religion in the state.

A third and last edict was issued on 25 April 1944. It urged Malay-Muslims to enlist as soldiers and volunteers because ‘the Malays were noted for their bravery and loyalty to their country and sultan, and registered Japanese displeasure at Malays who had failed to comprehend fully the aims of the Greater East Asian war and as a result of their folly, had joined the communists and bad elements and thought that they would be safe by doing so’. The Japanese were in Malaya to ‘assist the Malay-Muslims’, who should be patient despite the lack of proper clothing and the shortage of food. They needed to stay united and have faith in Allah, carry on faithfully with their prayers as decreed by Allah, and plant more food crops to stabilise the prices of basic commodities in the state. This edict was read at the various mosques in the state on 5 May 1944 after the weekly Friday congregation.

44 PAJ 117/2603, ‘An edict of His Highness Ibrahim Sultan of Johore and Protector of Islam for the State and Territory of Johore.’
45 PAJ 117/2603, ‘Letter from President Religious Department to the Administrator of Education and Religion, Johore dated 24th July 1944.’
47 FAJ 117/2603, ‘Letter from President Religious Department to the Batu Pahat Kathi dated 30 April 1944’.
Concluding remarks

The preceding discussion is based mainly on documents of Johor’s Religious Department that show how the Japanese manipulated the religious elite, mosques and surau, and even Islam itself as part of their propaganda efforts directed towards winning a war in which neither Islam nor Malay-Muslims had any vested interest. Johor religious leaders submitted to this new role without much protest, and they seem to have been unwilling or unable to resist the machinations of the Japanese.\footnote{Yahaya Abu Bakar, ‘Kebangkitan Tok Janggut menentang Jepun’ [The Tok Janggut uprising against Japan] in Malaysia in History, 19, 1 (June 1976): 22–37.}