



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

THE SPREAD OF ISLAM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA C. 1275-C.1625

BY PETER SLUGLETT

The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia should be understood in terms of a series of long drawn out and incremental developments, beginning with the arrival of Muslim merchants in the region in the eighth century, perhaps even earlier. There are records of Muslim merchants and Muslim communities in ports in southern China in the ninth century, and in Palembang, capital of the empire of Srivijaya (*Zabaj*) in Sumatra, in the tenth; their presence is attested to in contemporary Arab and Chinese accounts. Larger scale conversion to Islam, however, was a process rather than an event, which took on greater momentum between the late thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, generally spreading from the coasts to the interior of the islands, and generally, although not always, in a top-down process in which rulers were converted and then introduced more or less orthodox versions of Islam to their peoples.

The identities of the first Muslim merchants are not entirely clear: local tradition in Malaysia and Indonesia stresses their origins in the Hadhramawt, but evidence from Aceh and elsewhere in Sumatra indicates Gujarat and Malabar in India as more likely. Some of them were members of Sufi orders, and Sufism performed a highly significant role in easing the transition to Islam from previous belief systems, through the *barakat* or spiritual power of

Sufi “holy men” and rulers, whose tombs were and are still visited regularly by the faithful. Islam met most resistance in inland Java, where it had to compete with the highly sophisticated rituals of the Hindu and Buddhist courts, as well as the generally low esteem in which trade and merchants were held, although since many merchants were relatively wealthy and enjoyed a prosperous lifestyle, there was a sense in which Islam became identified with wealth, success, and power. When the Hindu-Buddhist polities did convert permanently, their elaborate court ceremonies were often retained.

By the end of the thirteenth century Marco Polo recorded the existence of two small Muslim polities in Aceh in northern Sumatra, in Perlak and Samudra-Pasai. The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, who visited the island in the 1340s, noted that the ruler and people of Samudra followed the Shafi‘i *madhhab* (school of [Islamic] religious law) and engaged in *jihad* against their non-Muslim neighbors. By this time Islam had spread to the Malay peninsula, and to Brunei and the Sulu Archipelago. A greater degree of political institutionalization began with the establishment of the sultanate of Aceh (c.1496-1903), which came to dominate trade with India and China and rivalled the Portuguese at Malacca.

According to the Portuguese chronicler Tomé Pires, writing of his experiences in Malacca between 1512 and 1515, all the rulers of northern and eastern Sumatra were Muslims. In the early fifteenth century, a kingdom had been founded at Malacca, the center of an important Muslim trading empire, with vassals in Malaya and Sumatra and connections with Java and China, whose rulers imposed tolls on ships sailing through the Straits of Malacca.

Malacca's powers were eclipsed by the Portuguese, who captured the city in 1511, making it the hub of their East Asian empire until its seizure by the Dutch in 1641.

Much of the wealth of the area came from the spices obtained from the Molucca or Spice Islands, especially Ternate and Tidore, whose rulers converted to Islam in the late fifteenth century. At that time the islands were exporting 52 tons of cloves and 26 tons of nutmeg annually. The Ottomans and the Portuguese became major contenders for control of this trade during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; as it happened, Ottoman interest in the region coincided with the rise of Islam, and some of the emerging Muslim sultanates received Ottoman military assistance in their struggles against the Portuguese in return for the recognition of Ottoman "caliphal legitimacy."

In Java, the leading power was the Hindu/Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit (1293-c.1500). In the mid-fourteenth century Ibn Battuta described Java as "the country of the infidels (*kuffar*)," and the process of Islamization would begin some decades after his visit. Recent research (based mostly on the first appearance of Muslim gravestones) suggests the influential role in this process played by "refugees" from the long-established Muslim community at Quanzhou/Zaiton in the province of Fuzhou in southern China. This region came under attack during the chaos and lawlessness of the 1360s that heralded the end of the Yuan dynasty and the rise of the Ming. Some found their way to the court of Majapahit, while other Muslims arrived in Surabaya, Gresik, and Cirebon from Quanzhou and Champa (in the south of modern Vietnam) in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, assisting in the gradual conversion of eastern and central Java. In the early fifteenth century,

many of the senior commanders of the huge naval expeditions sent out by the Emperor Yongle from southeastern China (to Malacca and northern Sumatra, amongst other places) were Muslims, and this undoubtedly facilitated the spread of Islam in this region. Most prominent among these was the Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433), who made many visits to Southeast Asia and India.

Chinese sources also attest to the significant role played by Chinese Muslims in the conversion of northern Java. The origins of the sultanate of Demak (1511-50) are obscure, although the town itself was probably founded in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, also by “Muslim refugees” from China. Demak’s prosperity as a major exporter of rice from central Java dates from the late fifteenth century and especially to the activities of a wealthy Muslim ship owner named Ko Po (or Cek Ko-po), whose son (or possibly brother) Trenggana (1505-46) was known as *sultan* and was the principal figure behind Demak’s brief domination of Java. Trenggana was also an important participant in the conversion of Banjarmasin in south Borneo in the 1520s, and was a major military commander. In some chronicles, the conqueror of Majapahit (and of a successor or parallel Hindu-Buddhist state at Kediri) around 1527 is identified as Raden Patah, a heroic figure in Javanese history who was at once sultan of Demak and a descendant of the royal family of Majapahit, thus legitimizing the political and religious transition of the Hindu-Buddhist state to an Islamic polity.

In the west of the island, the influence of Demak was crucial in the consolidation of Islam in Cirebon in the early sixteenth century. In the 1520s, an army from Demak led by the semi-legendary Sunan Gunungjati (or Fatah-

Ilah) eventually created the sultanate of Bantam in Pajajaran in western Java, which lasted until 1918. In the course of this expedition he took the port of Sunda Kelapa, which he renamed Jayakarta. His descendants eventually became independent of Demak, and a grandson or great-grandson, Molana Yusup (c.1570-80), conquered the rest of Pajajaran, the last major Hindu-Buddhist state in western Java to accept Islam. Other major Islamic centers founded in Java in the sixteenth century include Kudus, associated with Sunan Kudus, a doughty campaigner against Majapahit, and Giri, associated with Sunan Giri. Both men are numbered among the revered *wali sanga*, the “nine saints” associated with the conversion of Java to Islam. Sunan Giri and his successors are said to have been instrumental in bringing Islam to Lombok, Makassar, and eastern and southeastern Borneo in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, although other accounts attribute the Islamization of the south Celebes (modern Sulawesi) to missionaries from Minangkabau.

The fall of Majapahit/Kediri did not lead to its immediate replacement by a Muslim state, and much of the power of Demak was dissipated when Trenggana was killed in the course of a *jihad* against the Hindu state of Pasuruan in 1546. In general, there seems to have been a long period of intra-Muslim fighting and rivalry before the emergence of the “Empire of Mataram” in the 1580s, under the leadership of Senapati (c.1584-c.1601), who, like Raden Patah some 60 years earlier, was a putative descendant of the royal family of Majapahit.

Senapati’s life and career cannot be precisely reconstructed from the Javanese chronicles, and it is possible that the first “real” Muslim ruler of

Mataram was either Senapati's son Krapyak (c.1601-13) or his grandson Sultan Agung (1613-46). Krapyak initiated a series of military campaigns against the sultanate of Surabaya, Mataram's main Muslim rival, and he was also the first Javanese ruler to make contact with the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, which had been chartered in 1602. The VOC, which would force the Portuguese out in the 1640s, would play a major role in the economics and politics of Southeast Asia for more than three centuries, and its detailed correspondence at least facilitates the construction of an accurate chronology of the subsequent history of the region.

Eventually, after a long siege ending in 1625, Agung, the "Great Sultan" of Mataram, conquered Surabaya, which also controlled Gresik (near the renowned Muslim site of Giri), Sidayu, Madura, and possibly east central Java as far south as the Brantas valley. For a brief period after this, Mataram came to control most of Java, with the exception of the Sultanate of Banten, and of the Dutch settlement of Batavia.

Bibliography

R. Michael Feener, "South-East Asian Localisations of Islam and Participation Within a Global *Umma*, c. 1500-1800," in Morgan and Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 470-503.

David O. Morgan and Anthony Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Jan M. Pluvier, *Historical Atlas of South-East Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680, Volume One: The Lands Below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); *Volume Two: Expansion and Crisis* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993).

Anthony Reid, *Charting the Shape of Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Chang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 1999).

Anthony Reid, "Islam in South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean Littoral, 1500-1800: Expansion, Polarization, Synthesis," in Morgan and Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 427-469.

M.C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia, Fourth Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Francis Robinson, *Atlas of the Islamic World since 1500* (New York: Facts on File, 1982).

Geoff Wade, "Early Muslim Expansion in South-East Asia, Eighth to Fifteenth Centuries," in Morgan and Reid (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 366-408.

Peter Sluglett, Visiting Research Professor at the Middle East Institute, has been Professor of Middle Eastern History at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City since 1994. He has published widely on Iraq, including Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship, 3rd edn. (2001, with Marion Farouk-Sluglett) and Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country (2007). He has also edited and contributed to Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman Rule: Essays in Honour of Abdul-Karim Rafeq (2010, with Stefan Weber) and The Urban Social History of the Middle East 1750-1950 (2008).