

Advent of Islam in Indonesia

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Editor's Note

When Dr. N. A. Baloch visited Indonesia in June 1979, on a brief visit, he received an invitation from the Centre for Religious and Social Studies, Jakarta, to deliver a lecture on The Advent of Islam in Indonesia at the Centre the same evening. As the invitation left little time for preparing and writing out the lecture in advance, it was delivered orally. The following pages represent the substance and sequence of the main ideas which were then presented. Some arguments have been elaborated and a few quotations supplied wherever necessary. The main sources on which this talk was based are given in the Bibliography.

The question often raised is: "whether Islam came to Indonesia from Arabia, the Sub-Continent of India, or China?" Firstly, it is not a question of 'or' but of 'and'. Muslims from these and other countries, but more so from the different parts of the archipelago itself, contributed to the growth and development of Islam in what is now known as Indonesia. However, the first to bring Islam to the Indonesian shores, and further north to China, were the early Arab Muslims. On the basis of available record, it would be reasonable to conclude that their intransit visits and temporary halts, most probably on the coastlines of Sumatra, at first, took place in the first century of the Hijra (7th century A.D.), while the more frequent and longer visits as well as permanent settlements came during the second century of the Hijra (8th century A.D.).

These early visits and settlements were the result of the expertise of the Muslim navigators and sailors as well as the dynamism of

Muslim merchants and traders who not only followed the ancient sea-trade route from the Middle East to China, but also charted the coastlines more accurately and made voyages safer than before, so that within the first century of the Hijra, this sea route began to develop into an ocean highway for international trade and commerce.

Historically, the process of Islam becoming the faith of most of the peoples of the Malaysian-Indonesian regions, went through two main stages. The first stage consisted of the early contacts and initial introduction and acceptance of Islam mainly in port towns and coastal belts. This was achieved during the long period of five centuries from the first century after the Hijra (7th century A.D.) to the fifth century A.H. (12th century A.D.). The second stage of more extensive propagation and universal acceptance of Islam, not only in the coastal belts but also into the interior, commenced from the 6th century A.H. (13th century A.D.).

So far, the main attention of historians and other writers has remained centered on external factors: that is, the Muslim pioneers and preachers coming from abroad. The role played by the early native faithfuls and the small indigenous Islamic communities has not yet been fully studied. Secondly, it is also to be realised that in this process of Islam coming to Indonesia, the learned, the pious, the Sufi saints and the devoted preachers appeared essentially at the second stage. At the initial stage, it was the simple, straightforward and exemplary behaviour of the first arriving Muslims whose firm faith, sincerity of purpose, honesty in business dealings, sense of justice and equality in human relations, sympathy for the poor and charity in the name of Allah, and their community conduct both inside the mosque and outside in the market had a direct impact on the local population. Those who came in contact with them were so much impressed and inspired by their clean living and honest dealings that they were motivated to embrace the same faith of Islam which guaranteed justice and equality and a worthwhile role in the Islamic community. This was in direct contrast to their previous life experience of the caste system of the Hindu society, the formalities of the monk-directed Buddhist rites, or the superstitions-ridden rituals of paganism.

Generalisation

The statement that Islam came to Indonesia from 'Arabia, the Sub-Continent of India and China', is correct only to the extent that it is accepted as a broad generalisation. However, it is too broad a generalisation to be comprehended easily. So far as China is concerned, the first Muslims who came from there to the Indonesian coastal belts were also mainly of Arab stock: they had settled down earlier in the Chinese port towns but were displaced from there in the wake of some fateful events (such as Haung Chao's rebellion in 876 A.D.) and migrated to the Indonesian port towns. So far as the ethnic Chinese Muslims were concerned, they came much later as part of the embassies and trade missions, or with the Muslim Chinese dignitaries and navigators (such as the great Muslim Admiral Cheng Ho who visited Indonesian shores in 1413); however, it is doubtful if they settled down here in any large numbers. Besides China, the early Muslims (the Arab Muslims first, and then both the Arab and Persian Muslims) were also settled in other maritime countries beyond the Straits of Malacca. They had their early settlements mainly in *Sans* (Champa/Annam) and *Sila* (Korea). They also found their safe refuge in the Malaysian-Indonesian lands in times of crises.

From the side of Arabia, early Islam came all along the sea route followed by the Muslim navigators and merchants. However, those early Muslims came to Indonesia not only from Arabia but also from other coastal regions such as Oman, Iraq, Iran, the present Pakistani Provinces of Baluchistan and Sind, the Indian coastline belts (mainly Cambay, Gujrat, Konkan, Malabar and Ma'abar (Coromandal), Ceylon and the eastern coastal belt to Bengal (both of India and Bangladesh). The periods of their advent, however, differed. The Arab Muslims were the pioneers and led the way approximately during the first two centuries of the Hijra (7th-8th century A.D.). Thereafter, both the Arab and the Persian Muslim sailors, merchants, researchers and religious scholars continued coming in during the next four or five centuries (3rd-8th century A.H.—9th-15th century A.D.). Lastly, in addition, came the Muslim sailors, merchants, religious scholars and sufi saints from Hindostan (Pakistan-India-Bangladesh) Sub-Continent, mainly during the period

extending from 6th to 11th century A.H. (13th to 18th century A.D.).

An exclusive emphasis is usually placed, in some circles, on the role of Muslims from the Arab lands or from two or three regions of the Indian Sub-Continent (such as Gujrat, the Coromandal and the Tamil speaking parts of South India, or Bengal) in the growth of Islam in Indonesia. This is contrary to historical facts. On the other hand, the role played by Muslims from Persia (Iran), or the coming of Muslims to Indonesia from the maritime Provinces of Pakistan, has not yet been fully recognised. This does not imply their distinctive role in terms of ethnology, but a distinction in terms of geography; for irrespective of being Arabs, Persians, Sindhians or Indians, they were essentially *true Muslims* in their pioneering efforts of bringing Islam to Indonesia. Moreover, there were many among the early Muslim navigators or traders who hailed from Persia but were actually of Arab origin.

The Persian Muslims

From the 2nd century A.H. onward, the Persian Muslims along with the Arab Muslims played a significant role in trade and travel along the Middle East-China ocean highway. Early in the 9th century, the Persian port of Siraf developed into an important entrepot for maritime trade and commerce with Sind, Hind, Malaysia-Indonesia, and the destinations beyond up to China. The two famous merchant-sailors, Sulayman al-Tajir (237 A.H.—851 A.D.) and Abu Zaid (303 A.H.—916 A.D.), who have left written accounts of their voyages and chronicles of the countries they visited, both belonged to Siraf. Sulayman says that the ships for China used to take their cargo at Siraf. The ships of Persian Muslims had reached China as early as 671 A.D. when the Chinese I. Ching, according to his own statement, travelled in a ship which belonged to 'Po-sse' (Persian). Also the contemporary Chinese priest from Yang Chao had noted the existence of a large settlement of 'Po-sse' (Persian Muslims) in the island of Hainan in 748 A.D. According to the records of the King of Java who arrived at the royal Chinese Court in the year 992 A.D. were dressed like Persians. The Chinese sources amply confirm that both the early Arab and the Persian Muslims played an important role in the trade between the South Sea and China in the 10th century. According to Muhallibi, Kalah on the

west coast of the Malaysian Peninsula was inhabited by Muslims from Persia and India by the end of the tenth century. A Muslim town in Siam founded later (the recorded reports about which date from mid-14th to mid-18th century) was called by its Persian name 'Shahr-i-Nao' (after a town of the same name in Iran). This was the same Shahr Nawi of Hamza Fansuri, the great Sufi poet of Sumatra who died before 1607 A.D. Tombstones discovered in north Sumatra (both in Barus and in the Samudera-Pasai area) carrying Arabic and Persian inscriptions confirm that both the Arab and the Persian Muslims were settled there in the long past.

The more convincing evidence comes from the continuous use by the Indonesian society, since early times till today, of some key Persian words representing important navigational, commercial-cum-administrative, and cultural concepts. Thus, Nakhuda (the Captain) and Muallim (the Navigator), the two key figures in early Muslim navigation, continue to be known by these designations to this day. So also Bandar (port) and Shahbandar (Master of the port) are retained. Pahalwan in Indonesian society is being used in the sense of 'hero' to this day.

Muslims from the Maritime Provinces of Pakistan

Sind came under the fold of Islam as early as 712 A.D. Being a maritime country, it was but natural that the Sindhian sailors and merchants should have followed the ocean highway to Malaysia-Indonesia. An indirect but conclusive evidence of this comes from the Sufi Sindhi poetry of 17th/18th century. Obviously, the Sufi poets of the 17th/18th century, particularly Shah Inayatullah (d. 1719) and Shah Abdul Latif (d. 1752), were well aware of the early sea-trade between Sind and the Indonesian ports, which had continued (though much diminished) up to their times. Jawa, the port of Perlak in Sumatra, and other features of this sea trade find frequent mention in this poetry. Also, Muslim sailors and scholars from the maritime province of Baluchistan had been in Indonesia, though very little is known about them at the stage. However, one specific reference to this has come to light very recently. To one of the families which had settled down in Sumatra, belonged the scholar historian "Abu Ishaq al-Makrani al-Fasi" (i.e. who originally came

from Makran but then belonged to Pasai in Sumatra) who wrote an important work on the dynastic history of the rulers of Perlak. This book entitled *Kitab Izhar al-Haqq fi Silsilat Raja Perlak*, which was discovered more recently, shows that the first Muslim State of Perlak was founded as early as 225 H. (847 A.D.).

Chronologically speaking, in the process of Muslims coming to Indonesia from the maritime countries situated on the Middle East-China Ocean Highway, the year 15th of Hijra (637 A.D.) is of special importance. It was in this year that the Muslim victory in the battle of Qadsiyyah against the last Sassanid Emperor paved the way for the spread of Islam in the vast Sassanid Empire of Iran. It was also in this year that naval victories were achieved by Muslims against the Sassanid navy in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the ports of Debal (Sind), Barus (Bharoach in Gujrat) and Thana (south of the present city of Bombay). This naval expedition was despatched by Uthman b. Abi al-As al-Thaqafi, the Governor of Oman, in 15 A.H. (637 A.D.).

The next important year was 92/93 A.H. (711/712 A.D.), when Muhammad b. al-Qasim al-Thaqafi conquered Sind, and the port of Debal came within the domain of Islam. Thus, for the first time the Muslims had an important foothold for their onward voyage along the Indian coastline. This led to other permanent Muslim settlements further south in the ports of Bharoach (Barus), Cambay, Thana, Kallam etc., and also in Ceylon.

From 13th century onward, Muslim rule extended to other coastal regions of the subcontinent. Bengal came under Muslim political influence as early as 1203 A.D., while Gujrat was conquered in 1395. Thus, all along the Indian coastline, Muslim power was consolidated both in the ports of entry (Sind and Gujrat) as well as departure (Bengal) for Malaysia-Indonesia and to China. In the 14th century, Sind, Gujrat and Bengal became independent Sultanates. Thereafter, the Sultans of Sind (1350-1520), Sultans of Gujrat (1396-1576) and the Sultans of Bengal (1336-1576), encouraged maritime trade and gave full support to the trading Muslim communities settled in the port towns. This contributed to their closer communications-economic, social and religious-with Indonesia/Malaysia

during 14th to 16th century. Also it was mainly during this period that the Indian Muslim merchants, scholars and Sufi saints found their way to Malaysia/Indonesia. From the 17th century onwards the propagation and consolidation of Islam in Indonesia passed on mainly into the hands of the faithfuls residing within the archipelago itself. It was the Indonesian Ulema and Imams, Saints and Sunans who finally laid the foundations of faith among people in the interior.

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