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Challenging Epistemic Hegemony: Islam, Memory, and the Struggle over Southeast Asian History

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Abstract

A debated topic in the history of Southeast Asia revolves around the coming, spread, and influence of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago: whether Islam was brought to the region in the 13th century or earlier; whether it came from India or directly from Arabia; whether it was propagated by traders, by itinerant Sufis, or by missionaries; and whether conversion to Islam washed over traditional society but has left its basic way of life intact, or transformed the society and changed its underlying structure and worldview. This article seeks to "decolonise" the historical writing about the arrival and impact of Islam in the Malay world by critically assessing the positions and arguments of the European Orientalists and their opponents, often called "Revisionist" historians, who have presented new data and fresh interpretations in an effort to challenge the dominant view and separate fact from fiction, as well put the matter to rest.

Keywords

Islamic history, Islam in Southeast Asia, Malay-Indonesian Archipelago, orientalism, revisionist, decolonize

Abstrak

Salah satu topik yang diperdebatkan dalam sejarah Asia Tenggara berkaitan dengan kedatangan, penyebaran, dan pengaruh Islam di Kepulauan Melayu-Indonesia: apakah Islam masuk ke kawasan ini pada abad ke-13 atau lebih awal; apakah datang dari India atau langsung dari Arab; apakah disebarkan oleh para pedagang, sufi pengembara, atau

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para misionaris; serta apakah konversi ke Islam hanya melintas di permukaan masyarakat tradisional namun tetap mempertahankan cara hidup dasarnya, atau justru mentransformasikan masyarakat dan mengubah struktur serta pandangan dunianya. Artikel ini berupaya untuk "mendekolonisasi" penulisan sejarah tentang kedatangan dan dampak Islam di dunia Melayu dengan secara kritis menelaah posisi dan argumen para orientalis Eropa beserta para penentangnya, yang kerap disebut sejarawan "revisionis", yang telah menghadirkan data baru dan interpretasi segar dalam upaya menantang pandangan dominan, memisahkan fakta dari fiksi, sekaligus berupaya menuntaskan persoalan ini.

Katakunci:
Sejarah Islam, Islam di Asia Tenggara, Kepulauan Melayu-Indonesia, orientalisme, revisionis, dekolonisasi

Introduction

In his 2011 book, Historical Fact and Fiction, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas submits the history of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago to close scrutiny.2 He focuses on the important role that the Arab sayyids (descendants of the Prophet's family) from Arabia, India, and Persia had played in propagating Islam to the peoples in the "Lands below the Wind" right from the earliest periods to the 12th century onwards. This pioneering role has not been properly acknowledged, if not totally ignored and denied, by most historians. While he duly appraises the contributions of European scholars and affirms what is true in their writings, al-Attas sharply criticises the idea that Islam was spread by merchants via trade routes and points out to the errors and confusions that many scholars have succumbed to, insofar as they are too eager to fit historical data into their preconceived time frame. In opposition to the dominant paradigm that sees Islam as nothing more than "a thin layer resting on top of large and essentially intact societies," al-Attas argues that the spread of Islam in the Archipelago has brought about a profound change of ideas in the worldview and culture of its peoples. What follows is an attempt to evaluate contending theories and to overcome biases and prejudices that are tacitly embedded in the prevalent historical narrative and may have clouded rational judgment.

Results and Discussion

Dating the Arrival

There is a great deal of obscurity and uncertainty about the earliest presence of Islam in the regions now known as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines. When did Islam reach this part of the world? Historians are still divided on the answer to this basic question. It is commonplace to suggest that Islam arrived in these regions in the 13th century CE, following the collapse of the 'Abbasid Dynasty after the Mongol invasion and sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE. The famous Dutch orientalist and colonial advisor Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (d. 1936), for

example, writes that "*Toen de Mongolenvorst Hoelagoe in 1258 na Chr. Baghdad verwoestte, ... was de Islam langzaam and begonnen, in de eilanden van den Oost-Indischen Archipel door te dringen*" [As the Mongolian prince Hulagu devastated Baghdad in 1258 AD, ... Islam had gradually begun to penetrate the islands of the East Indian Archipelago] (Hurgronje, 1923, p. 361).3 Those who share this opinion often refer to the inscription on Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ's tombstone dated 696 AH (= 1296 CE). Others cite the travel account of Marco Polo who, on his journey to China by sea, had stopped in Sumatra sometime in 1292 and noted that the people of the kingdom of Ferlac (i.e. Perlak) had embraced Islam (Polo, 1866; Peliot, 1959). Many have, on the basis of these data, argued that if Islam had been in place before the 13th century CE, why was there no written, concrete, or empirical evidence about it? The absence of evidence is evidence of absence, so goes the argument. It is therefore concluded that Islam could not have been present earlier than the 13th century.

But is there really no evidence for the earlier presence of Islam in the region? The answer would be affirmative had it not been for a tombstone found in Leran, Gresik, East Java, which bears the name of a certain Fāṭimah bint Maymūn bin Hibatillāh. The gravestone is dated 495 Hijri (=1102 CE), according to J. P. Moquette (1921), or 475 AH (=1082 CE), according to Paul Ravaisse (1925). This hard evidence, which certain scholars either missed or simply ignored, has allowed us to draw a rational conclusion that Islam must have gained a foothold in the Archipelago at least two centuries earlier than what Hurgronje had suggested. In other words, one can take the year 475 Hijri (=1082 CE) as the *terminus ante quem* for the arrival of Islam, especially on the island of Java—namely, it is the latest time Islam may have reached the region; it could be earlier, but it cannot possibly be later than the 11th century CE.

Another opinion—which we may call the 'revisionist' theory—maintains that Islam was introduced to the people of the Archipelago as early as the 7th century CE, namely since the time of the Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn ('Rightly Guided Caliphs') who reigned in the first century AH (*Anno Hegirae*). This is the view of contemporary Muslim scholars of Malaysia (i.e. S. M. N. al- Attas), the Philippines (C.A. Majul), and Indonesia (i.e. Hamka), which is attested by quite a number of historical data (Hasymy, 1993).4 Indeed, a Chinese report of the T'ang Dynasty (618- 907 CE) mentions that the Ta-Shih people (i.e. Arabs) aborted their plan to attack the kingdom of Ho Ling ruled by Queen Sima (674 CE). It is thus concluded that Muslim people from Arab lands must have settled in the Archipelago—presumably Sumatra—as early as the first century Hijri (7th century CE) (Tjandrasasmita, 2000; Al-Attas, 2011; Groeneveldt, 1960).

Further corroboration is provided by Ibrahim Buchari, who refers to the date inscribed on the tombstone of a cleric named Shaykh Rukn al-Dīn in Barus, Tapanuli, northwest Sumatra, where it is written the year 48 AH which is equivalent to the year 670 CE (Azmi, 1993; Hill, 1963). It is interesting to note in this case that Barus was

already known to the Arabs even before the time of the Prophet for its product called *kāfūr* in Arabic (i.e. camphor), which was used in ancient times as a common perfume ingredient and preservative substance. Some scholars, including the late Buya Hamka and S. M. Naquib al-Attas, believe that what is mentioned in the Qur'an 86: 5 as "*kāfūr*" is none other than the camphor from Barus. Consequently, they argue that Islam was introduced to the Archipelago since the first century Hijri. Al-Attas refers to the earliest indigenous source, the *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, which mentions a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad urging his Companions to spread Islam in a place called 'Samudra' (Al-Attas, 2011).

In addition, there is similar information coming from Abū 'Abdillāh Muḥammad ibn Ṭālib ad-Dimasyqī (d. 1327 CE) known as Shaykh ar-Rabwah, the author of *Nukhbat al-Dahr fī 'Ajā'ib al-Barr wa al-Baḥr* ('Selected Chronicle on the Wonders of the Land and the Sea'), who says that Islam has entered the Archipelago through Champa (what is now Cambodia and Vietnam) since the time of the Caliph 'Uthmān, which is around 30 AH (651 CE). In Tibbetts' words: "The Muslim religion came there in the time of 'Uthman, and the 'Alids expelled by the Umaiyads and by al-Hajjaj, took refuge there, having crossed the Sea of Pitch" (Tibbetts, 1979, p. 63; Manguin, 1979, p. 257). According to al-Attas, it is probably related to the event mentioned in the *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai* that the Sharif of Mecca was ordered by the Caliph to send a mission to a "country below the wind" called Samudra (Al-Attas, 2011; Suryanegara, 2009).

Provenance

Disagreement also persists over the origin of those who first preached Islam in this part of the world. There are six notable 'theories', the first of which says that Islam was brought into the Archipelago by merchants from Gujarat, a province in southern India. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, for example, holds that the early Muslims who spread their religion in Indonesia did not come directly from Arabia, but rather, according to him, from the Indian subcontinent: "*la religion du prophète arabe a été introduite dans l'Archipel par l'intermédiaire de l'Inde*" (Hurgronje, 1923, p. 106).5 He points out as evidence some religious characteristics commonly observed among Muslims in Indonesia and their counterparts in India. Traditional folklore (*hikayat*) about the Prophet and his first followers in the local languages, for example, he says, are not only lacking historical values but also far from Islamic values, as these stories mostly originated from India. Moreover, certain rituals and festivals of Muslims in Indonesia show some similarities with those practiced by the Shiites on the coast of Malabar and Coromandel, even though Indonesian Muslims are generally Sunnīs and follow the Shafi'i school of law.

The aforementioned opinion, sometimes dubbed the 'Gujarat theory', was originally put forward for the first time by D. J. Pijnappel (1872), the first Malay

language professor at Leiden University. Based on the story of a sailor by the name of Sulaymān in 851 CE and the travel accounts of Marco Polo and Ibn Baṭṭūtah who visited Sumatra in the first half of the 14th century (1325-1353), it was concluded that the arrival of Islam must be through trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the west coast of India, then from Gujarat and Malabar to the Archipelago. This theory is defended by the French Orientalist J.P. Moquette (1913), according to whom the marble tombstones found in Samudra Pasai are likely to come from a factory in Cambay, Gujarat. Apart from C.S. Hurgronje, this opinion is held by the majority of historians, including H. J. Van den Bergh, H. Kroeskamp, Prijohutomo, I. P. Simandjoentak, Rosihan Anwar, and many others.6 R. A. Kern (1938, p. 313), for instance, writes that "it was in Cambay where the co-religionists lived, to whom one turned for such matters, where the ties of trade with India led, and from where Muslim merchants brought Islam to the Archipelago."

Notwithstanding its popularity, the 'Gujarat theory' has been criticised by scholars for the factual errors it involves. G.E. Morrison, for example, argues that it is impossible for Islam in the 13th century to come to the Archipelago from the Indian province of Gujarat, considering the fact that Marco Polo described Cambay in 1293 as a Hindu city, and Gujarat did not fall into the Muslim hands until 1297. Morrison does not deny the existence of earlier Muslim settlements in southern India for centuries, albeit without political power, namely those who lived in Ceylon (Sarandīb or Sri Lanka), Malabar, and Coromandel before the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate in the early 14th century. Some of them are believed to be descendants of Arab Muslims from Iraq who fled to India towards the end of the 7th century CE in order to avoid Governor al-Hajjaj's cruelty. Furthermore, the 'Gujarat theory' does not tally with the fact that Gujarati Muslims were predominantly adherents of Ḥanafī rather than Shāfi'ī school of law, and Acehnese folklore was colored not so much by Hindi as by Tamil elements. So it is more appropriate to say, he concludes, that "the provenance of Malaysian [or Indonesian] Islam is in fact Southern India" (Morrison, 1951).

Morrison's conclusion leads us to the **second** theory according to which Islam came to the Archipelago from Bengal. This is the opinion of Syed Qadarullah Fatimi, who cites Tomé Pires' report, contemporaneous Chinese chronicle, and Sufi elements found in Indonesia and Malaysia as supporting evidence. Fatimi believes that the founder of the first kingdom in Aceh, namely Merah Silau, originated from Bengal. In his famous travelogue the Portuguese Tomé Pires writes that

> in the island of Çomotora [i.e. Sumatra] most of the kings are Moors [i.e. Muslims] and some are heathens. … Pase used to have heathen kings, and it must be a hundred and sixty years now since the said kings were worn out by the cunning of the merchant Moors … and

> the said Moors held the sea coast and they made a Moorish king of the Bengali caste, from that time until now the kings of Pase have always been Moors; except that up till now they have been unable to convert the people of the interior; yet in these kingdoms there are in the island of Sumatra, those on the sea coast are all Moors on the side of the Malacca Channel, and those who are not yet Moors are being made so every day, and no heathen among them is held in any esteem unless he is a merchant. (Cortesao, 1990, pp. 137 & 143)

This means that the kings in Sumatra at the time of his visit were already Muslim and that the kingdom of Samudra Pasai was originally ruled by pagans and only converted to Islam around 160 years earlier (i.e. around 1352 CE), after the arrival of Muslim traders ("the merchant Moors") who had long ruled the coastal area. It was they who later appointed a Muslim from Bengal as king in Pasai. Another clue is the habit of the Archipelago people wearing "sarong" cloth which is said to be the same as the habit of Bengali people. In conclusion, Fatimi maintains that "Bengal is the main provenance of Sumatran Islam, even though it does not at all exclude the possibility of strong influences from other parts of the Islamic world" (Fatimi, 1963, pp. 14-18, and 23).

Still, a **third** theory says that the spread of Islam in the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago is due to the efforts of early Muslim missionaries from Arabia. Although it cannot be known for certain when the first Muslims from Arabia came to preach in the Archipelago, information about the centuries-long relationship between Southeast Asia and the Middle East since pre- Islamic times does not rule out the possibility of Islam being introduced in the region by preachers from Arabia. Chinese royal sources from the T'ang Dynasty (618-907 CE) recorded the first diplomatic visit from an Arab country called Ta Shih in 31 AH/651 CE, namely during the Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān (d. 35 H/656 M). The second mission, which was recorded as *Tan-mi-mo-ni* (the Chinese term for Amirul Mu'minin), arrived at T'ang's palace some four years later (Broomhall, 1910; Nakahara, 1984). It is therefore certain that the coastal areas along the islands of Sumatra had become their transit place since the first Islamic century. The diplomatic relations between the early Muslim caliphs and the Chinese emperors of the T'ang dynasty continued into the days of the Umayyads (660-749 CE). With the rise of Srivijaya kingdom in Sumatra, the Archipelago's waters were increasingly traversed by trading ships from Arabia and Persia on their voyage to China (Hourani, 1995). This opinion was also held by Sir John Crawfurd who wrote in 1820 that "The Indian islanders first received the religion of Mahomed from the orthodox land of Arabia … with minute exceptions not worth mentioning, the Indian islanders were followers of the doctrine of Shāfi'ī, the prevalent doctrine of Arabia, and particularly of the maritime portions of that country, from whence proceeded the first apostles of

Islam to the Indian islands" (Crawfurd, 1820, pp. 259-260) The same conclusion was stated by Thomas W. Arnold (1913) in *The Preaching of Islam* and S.M.N. al-Attas in his *Historical Fact and Fiction*.

The Malay nomenclature *Negeri Bawah Angin* is a literal translation of the Persian *zīr- bād*, meaning "below the wind", i.e. *leeward* (Yule, 1903; Clifford & Swettenham, 1894, p. 63; Azra, 1995, p. 183). It is a navigation term used by seamen from the Persian Gulf to designate the countries east of India, presumably Bengal, Malacca, and Sumatra, in contradistinction to those countries "above the wind" to the west of India, which were probably Ceylon, the Maldives, Socotra, etc. According to Leonard Andaya, however, in the early Malay sources such as the *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai* and the *Sulālat al-Salāṭīn*, the term "*bawah angin*" was used to refer to a region of mainly Muslim kingdoms stretching from Sumatra to Maluku, whereas the opposite term "*atas angin*" would mean those lands the west of Sumatra (Andaya, 2008). In any case, this term leads us to the **fourth** theory that Islam was brought into this region by people from Persia. Indeed, there are written records of the voyages of the Persians to India, and via the Archipelago, to China since pre-Islamic times (Hasan, 1928; Purbatjaraka, 1961). The Chinese chronicler Yuan-Tchao, in his *Tcheng-yuan-sin-ting-che-kiao-mou-lou*, which he wrote in the early 9th century, records that in 99 AH/717 CE there were about 35 ships from Persia arriving in Palembang (Ferrand, 1913; Azra, 1995). Linguistic data seems to confirm what we may call the 'Persian theory' of Islam's provenance. There are many words in Malay that are derived from Persian, such as *bandar* (town), *shah* (king, chief), *tahta* (throne), *pasar* (market), *penjara* (jail), *gandum* (wheat), *kurma* (dates), *anggur* (grapes), and many more (Bausani, 1964; Beg, 1982). Aspects of Persian influence in the Malay life have also been pointed out by G.E. Morrison (1955).

The **fifth** theory argues from the fact that the Muslims in the Archipelago adhere to the Shāfiʿī school of law and suggests that Egypt could be the origin of early Muslim missionaries to the region. This conjecture was put forth by S. Keyzer, a professor of oriental law from the Netherlands, and was immediately rejected. As G. W. J. Drewes (1985) says, it seems that Keyzer did not know that almost all Arabs living in Indonesia came from Hadramaut (southern Yemen), where the Shafi'i school was a common school. Had he known that, surely he would name it as the origin of Islam which came to the Archipelago. Nevertheless, it would still be wrong, according to Drewes, because the migration of Arabs from Hadramaut to the Archipelago only took place long after Islam came to Indonesia.

Finally, the **sixth** theory asserts that Islam was spread in the Archipelago by Muslims from China. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the Chinese imperial record of the T'ang Dynasty states that there were Muslim communities both in Kanfu (Canton) and in Sumatra. This is in accordance with the narrative of I-Tsing, a famous Chinese cleric and wanderer who in 51 H/671 CE boarded a Muslim-owned ship from Canton

and stopped at the port of the mouth of the river Bhoga or Sribhoga (Sribuza) in Palembang, the seat of the Srivijaya empire (I-Tsing, 1896; Groeneveldt, 1960). Among those holding this 'China theory' is Slamet Muljana, a historian and philologist from the University of Indonesia, Jakarta. According to him, Islam in the Archipelago originated not only from India and the Middle East (i.e. Arabia and Persia), but also from the Chinese province of Yunnan, owing to the trade relations between Yunnan Muslims and the inhabitants of the Archipelago. Muljana also cites the legendary mission of the Chinese empire during the Ming Dynasty (around 1405 CE), which sent its fleet under the command of Admiral Cheng Ho or Zhèng Hé *alias* Ma Sanbao (H. Maḥmūd Shams al-Dīn, d.1433) with the intention of securing sea routes from China to India, Arabia, and Africa, apart from establishing diplomatic relations with local kingdoms.

Muljana constructed his story on the basis of unofficial historical sources such as the *Babad Tanah Jawi* and the *Serat Kanda* written in the 17th century during the Mataram period. Yet both the historicity and authenticity of these two books are questioned, as history is so interwoven with folktales that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction, making the 'China theory' far from convincing. Muljana also refers to the *Preambule Prasaran*, a Chinese report from the Talang temple, some Portuguese sources, and a certain note from the Sam Po Kong Temple in Semarang. On the basis of these documents, Muljana tells us that Raden Rahmat (better known as Sunan Ampel) is a native of Yunan whose real name is Bong Swi Hoo, son of Makhdum Ibrahim and grandson of Bong Tak Keng, the supreme ruler of Champa. Two years after his arrival in Java in 1445, Raden Rahmat is said to marry a Majapahit princess named Ni Gede Manila who was the daughter of Gan Eng Cu (also known as Tumenggung Wilawaktikta), a former Chinese commander in Manila who had been stationed in Tuban since 1423. From the marriage was born Bong Ang (later called Sunan Bonang).

Furthermore, in Muljana's story, Raden Patah, who founded the Islamic kingdom of Demak and bore the title Jembun Panembahan (as written in the *Serat Kanda* and *Babad Tanah Djawi*), was none other than Jin Bun, one of the famous legendary figures of overseas Chinese community. As for Raden Alit who became Prabu Brawijaya VII (king of Majapahit), he is said to marry a Chinese Muslim princess and had children who did not grow up in the royal palace, but were raised by the Chinese Muslim community in Palembang. So, according to Muljana, the Islamic kingdom of Demak was actually built by an authentic Chinese Muslim community and their descendants who settled in Semarang. Raden Patah, who became the first Sultan of Demak (1475-1518) with the title Senapati Jimbun Ngabdurrahman Panembahan Palembang Sayidin Panata Agama, studied with Sunan Ampel before establishing the Muslim community in Demak. Muljana also tells us that Sunan Kalijaga (Raden Said) was none other than Gan Si Cang, a Muslim leader of Chinese

descent who led the construction of the Demak Mosque with carpenters from Semarang. While Sharīf Hidāyatullāh (Sunan Gunung Jati) was Toh Ah Bo, the son of Tung Ka Lo (Sultan Trenggono). The same is supposedly true with regard to Sunan Giri and Sunan Kudus whose real name Jafar Sidik [*sic!*] Muljana claims to be Ja Tik Su. So, of the nine famous saints of Java, six of them allegedly had an admixture of Chinese blood in their veins (Muljana, 2005).

Many scholars take issues with Muljana's outlandish claims. Ahmad Mansur Suryanegara, a historian from Padjadjaran University in Bandung, for example, finds Muljana's argument unsound. Just because some documents from a local Chinese temple mention the names of Muslim saints in Chinese dialect one cannot simply conclude that they are of Chinese descent. Indeed the Chinese people often modify foreign names of people and places to suit their pronunciation and orthography. "Why not take each and every name of historical actors and places mentioned in the Sam Po Kong Temple chronicle to be all Chinese? In the sense that none of them is indigenous," Mansur asks rhetorically. Muljana's account is analogous to the popular practice in Java when dealing with foreign names. For example, the Dutch J.P. Coen is called "Mur Jangkung" and Mulla Sadra becomes "Mullo Sodro", which in no way indicate that they are of Javanese descent. "Will we also conclude that Nahdlatul Ulama's founder, Hasjim Asj'ari, is an Arab only because his name sounds Arabic?" (Suryanegara, 2009, pp. 100-101).

Merchants or Scholars?

Historians also differ about the identity of those who spread Islam in the Indonesian Archipelago. Were they merchants, full-time professional missionaries, itinerant Sufis, or just Muslim laymen? Most Orientalists and local historians believe that Islam was brought by traders. This conjecture is usually based on the travel notes of Marco Polo, who on his voyage from China in 1292 stopped on the island of Java Minor (i.e. Sumatra), where he said there were eight kingdoms, one of which was Ferlec (Peureulak or Perlak). He noted that "this kingdom is much frequented by the Saracen merchants that they have converted the natives to the Religion of Muhammad" (Yule, 1929, p. 23).

Although not totally impossible, this surmise is problematic in several respects. One may want to know, for example, if those early preachers were professional merchants or part- time traders. If they were true businessmen, how is it possible that they also had another concern besides profits, given the considerable risk they should face in navigating the seas? More importantly, do they have the capacity to teach and explain the teachings of Islam in a clear, wise, and convincing manner? Questions such as these cast doubts about the 'traders thesis'. Marco Polo of course recorded what he saw at a glance in the port where commercial ships transited. But it can be ascertained that along with merchants, captains, and crew from

helmsmen to cooks—all of whom can simply be referred to as sailors—there could be among the passengers some who were physicians or medical doctors, religious experts, and scholars such as Ibn Battuta, or even possibly goldsmiths and carpenters. This would especially be true if the majority of the crew and passengers were Muslims, so that there must be at least one person capable of leading the congregational prayer and giving a sermon on the ship during the voyage—a task that normal sailors and ordinary traders cannot perform. The same argument is put forward by historian Nehemiah Levtzion (1979, pp. 16-17): "Traders did open routes, exposed isolated societies to external cultural influences, and maintain communications. But it seems that traders were not themselves engaged in the propagation of Islam. They were accompanied or followed by Muslim divines, professional men of religion, who rendered religious services to the traders in the caravans or to the newly established commercial communities."

A second opinion says that the early preachers of Islam in the Archipelago were learned men or scholars who came from Arabia on board merchant ships. As Anthony H. Johns put it, "to say that Islam came with trade is to beg the question. It is not usual to think of sailors or merchants as bearers of a religion. If, however, we think of certain traders belonging to Sufi trade guilds, accredited by their Shaikhs, there seems to be a more plausible basis for the spread of Islam". Thus, according to Johns, it was the wandering Sufi masters who broadcast Islam throughout the known world at that time. While they chose to live as *darwīsh* or *faqīr*, those itinerant mystics were related to trade unions or artisans, according to their respective orders (*ṭuruq*, sing. *ṭarīqah*) such as al-Ḥaddād (blacksmith), al-Saqqāf (roofers), etc.7 In addition to teaching the subjects of religion and Sufism to the natives, they are also believed to have supernatural knowledge and powers, and some of them even married the daughters of local aristocrats, thereby making the influence of Islam even stronger among the population (Johns, 1961, pp.10-23; Laffan, 2011). Despite its plausibility, Johns' opinion does not explain whether those early preachers arrived in the first Islamic century or several centuries later, because, as stated by Fatimi, the Sufi missionary movement only began to flourish in the second half of the 13th century or around the 1250s (Fatimi, 1963).

The third opinion, which is no less interesting, has been put forth by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in his recent book, *Historical Fact and Fiction*. According to him, the carrier of Islam to the Archipelago was a certain Shaykh Ismā'īl who, by order of the Governor (Sharīf) of Mecca, around the 9th century CE sailed to Sumatra. On his voyage, Shaykh Ismail stopped at Mengiri, a city on the northwestern border of Bengal, where he met Sulṭān Muḥammad, who then joined with his son to sail to Sumatra to spread Islam by posing as *faqīr*. Sulṭān Muḥammad is believed to have founded the first Islamic empire in the Archipelago, the Semutra kingdom—from the word *semut* ('ants') and *raya* ('big'). According to al-Attas, it is a mistake to identify

Merah Silau as Sulṭān al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, nor was he the first king of Samudra Pasai (2011, p. 17), because the inscription on the tombstone informs us that someone else had ruled Semutra-Pasai before him, namely Sulṭān al-Malik al-Kāmil, who died on Sunday, 7 Jumādā al-Ūlā 607 AH/1210 CE (Al-Attas, 2011, pp. 15-16). In his own words:

> From my interpretation of the way in which the first establishment of an Islamic kingdom in the Malay world as derived from the earliest of Malay sources, it becomes clear that in contradiction to the position taken by European and other like-minded historians, Islam was introduced at a very early date in a manner planned directly from its land of origin, and not from India or Persia. Its first king received his instruments of office and legitimation from the Sharif of Makkah as instructed by Caliph. It was nowhere reported in the *Hikayat Raja-raja Pasai* that Indians or Persians were the missionaries that spread Islam in the Malay world. Moreover, the Islam that was brought and disseminated was the original 'Arab' Islam and not a 'transformed' Islam that had first to pass through the sieve of Indian and Persian (i.e. Shi'ite) culture and interpretation. I am not denying that there had been Indian and Persian influence involved in the process of Islamization in the Archipelago, especially in activities having to do with trade and literary and artistic creations. Traders and transmitters of literary and artistic creations were not missionaries of the religion. The initial missionaries were from the noble families (*ashraf*) among the Arabs, learned men of spiritual discernment, some of whom had come directly from Arabia, some from Persia, and some via India and Indo-China, and some looked and dressed like Indians and Persians, being easily mistaken for them; and the spread of Islam by these Arab missionaries in the Malay World was not a haphazard matter, a disorganized sporadic affair carried on by *merchants* and *traders* and *port authorities*, and even by *Sufi orders* conceived somewhat as *trade guilds*, whose role have been exaggerated. It was a gradual process, but it was planned and organized and executed in accordance with the timeliness of the situation. (Al-Attas, 2011, pp. 32)

Al-Attas' reasoning corresponds with the growing awareness among Western scholars of the crucial role of Sufis in the propagation of Islam in the Archipelago. Schrieke (1957), for example, pointed out that the Muslim scholars and preachers played an important part in the conversion of local princes. Wertheim (1956) added that indigenous tradition was not wrong in stating the saints or *walis* contributed largely to the dissemination of the new religion. What al-Attas emphasises is that the early Muslim preachers throughout the Archipelago, including the Philippines, were descendants of al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib through the line of Muḥammad (d. 1156)—a descendant of Aḥmad ibn 'Īsā al-Muhājir (d. 961)—better known as Ṣāḥib Marbāṭ in Zofar, Oman, who was born in Tarim, Hadramaut, Yemen (Freitag & Clarence- Smith 1997; Feener, 2004). Although notable migration of Hadhramis to

India and Nusantara did not take place until the 12th century onwards, the process of Islamisation had begun since the 9th or 10th century CE or even before. According to al-Attas, they came to the Archipelago with a conscious purpose to fulfill, namely to spread Islam, and they were learned men (*'ulamā'*).

Conversion Patterns

How did people in the Archipelago convert to Islam? It is difficult to answer this question since we have very little historical data and scanty evidence that are often mixed with myths and legends.8 Indigenous sources such as the *Sejarah Melayu* provide an interesting case in point:

> The Prophet said to his Companions, "In the time to come there will arise a state the east called Samudra. When you hear of it, go there and convert the people to Islam, for many saints will arise in that country; but there is an ascetic (faqir) in Ma'abri [= Mengiri] whom you are to take with you." Some time after the pronouncement of the Prophet, the name of Samudra became known to all the people of Mecca. The Sharif of Mecca thereupon dispatched a vessel in which he had royal regalia loaded with instructions for it to call at Ma'abri. The captain's name was Shaikh Isma'il.
>
> So they set sail and called at Ma'abri and Shaikh Isma'il anchored in the roads. The king of that city was Sultan Muhammad, and he enquired whence their ship had come. The sailors informed him that they were from Mecca and were heading for Samudra. Now Sultan Muhammad was of the lineage of Abu Bakr. The sailors told him they were making the voyage on the instruction of the Prophet. When Sultan Muhammad heard it, he surrendered the government of Ma'abri to his eldest son, and he himself with his youngest son adopted the guise of an ascetic, leaving his palace and his kingdom and boarded the ship and told the sailors to bring him to Samudra. Everyone aboard was aware that this was the ascetic predicted by the Prophet; so they set sail with him on board.
>
> After some time at sea they reached Fansur [= Barus] and all the inhabitants were converted to Islam. The following day the ascetic landed with his Qur'an which he desired the people of Barus to read, but no one was able; so he said to himself: "This is not the city intended by our Prophet Muhammad."
>
> So Captain Isma'il sailed on. Some time later they reached Lamiri [= Acheh] and the people there also entered Islam, and again the ascetic landed with his Qur'an, but no one could read it, so he embarked again and sailed away; then they came to Haru [=Delhi] and they became Muslims and the ascetic landed with his Qur'an, but no one could read it; so he asked the town's people: "Where is this place Samudra?" They

> replied: "You've passed it". So he boarded again and set sail; and they chanced to make a landfall at Perlak and there too the people were converted to Islam; and their ship then headed for Samudra.
>
> When they reached Samudra, the ascetic landed and met Merah Silu [or Silau] who was collecting shells on the sea shore. He asked him what the name of the place was and Merah Silu told him it was Samudra. Then he asked who was the chief of the place, and Merah Silu replied that he was. So the ascetic converted Merah Silu, who recited the creed (kalimah shahadat). After Merah Silu had been converted, he returned to his house and the ascetic to his ship.
>
> That night while Merah Silu was asleep, he dreamt he was in the presence of the Prophet, who said to him: "Merah Silu, open your mouth!" So he opened his mouth and the Prophet spat into it; and he woke from his sleep and perceived that his body was fragrant like incense. The next morning the ascetic came ashore with his Qur'an and desired Merah Silu to read it; which Merah Silu did. And the ascetic said to Shaikh Isma'il, the captain of the ship: "This is the Samudra which the Prophet spoke of". Shaikh Isma'il had all the royal regalia which he had brought unloaded, and Merah Silu was installed as king with the title of al-Malik al-Salih. (Marrison, 1951, pp. 29-30).

Three plausible accounts have been proposed concerning the early mass conversion to Islam in the Archipelago. First, the local population willingly and gradually came to embrace Islam as a result of persuasion and long-established contact with the preachers, who managed to impress the native people they encountered with their virtuous conduct and spiritual appeal. In other words, the mass conversion to Islam was not accomplished by sword or military invasion, but rather by slow and peaceful penetration (*pénétration pacifique*) through effective persuasion and guidance. Second, large-scale conversion to Islam might have been propelled by the conversion of the ruling aristocrats. As usual in pre-modern societies, once a king, prince, or lord accepted a new religion, he would impose it on his subjects. Third, the spread of Islam was partly facilitated by the cross-racial marriages between the Muslim preachers, who were Arab, Indian, or Persian, with indigenous women. As Thomas W. Arnold (1913) rightly suggests, "settling in the centers of commerce, they intermarried with the people of the land, and these heathen wives and the slaves of their households thus formed the nucleus of a Muslim community which its members made every effort in their power to increase" (pp. 365-368). In addition to proselytisation in the sense of seeking new converts, marriage with members of the royal family or ruling aristocrats often served a double purpose of securing peace and building alliances.

In short, thanks to their relentless efforts since the 7th century, more and more people were converting to Islam. By the time Marco Polo visited Sumatra in 1292, the entire population in the kingdom of Perlak had embraced Islam (Polo, 1866).

Although the stories surrounding the conversion of kings in the Archipelago are often doubtful and questionable, what is clear is that they all point to one thing: a change in religious identity is not always accompanied by changes in social or political order. Anthony H. Johns (1961, p.15) says that the conversion to Islam might have also been due to the radiant charism and magical power of the preachers with Sufi backgrounds. "They master the magical arts, and have the ability to treat disease, are able to maintain continuity with past traditions, but also use the terms and elements of pre-Islamic local culture in the Islamic context," he adds.

Underlying Motives

A variety of reasons have been offered, over the past century or so, about the motives behind the propagation of Islam to all parts of the world, the conversion of indigenous peoples to the new religion, and the circumstances in which the conversion took place. One such reason is put forward by Van Leur, who first argued that the spread of Islam in the Archipelago was motivated by the economic and political interests of the Muslim preachers. As the kingdoms of Sriwijaya and Majapahit were approaching breakdown and could not protect their vast territories, Muslim merchants and missionaries seized upon the opportunity to take over and establish new kingdoms. They allegedly became supporters of rebelling or seceding provinces and later developed a mutually beneficial relationship in which one party offered material assistance and support, while the other provided freedom and protection to the other. Van Leur (1955) has palpably cast the early Muslim preachers in a negative light when he declared that

> the Islamization of Indonesia was a development determined step for step by political situations and political motives. At the end of the thirteenth century rulers of some newly- arisen coastal states in northern Sumatra (and later Malacca) adopted Islam and used it as a political instrument against Indian trade, against Siam and China, against Hindu regime on Java. Like the dynasty of Malacca, but for Javanese political motives, the aristocratic communities striving upwards accepted Islam out of opposition to the Hindu central authority. (pp. 112-113)

In Van Leur's opinion, the conflict between the aristocrats and the Majapahit rulers and their conflicting ambitions in Java paved the way for Islamisation which was used as a political tool to exercise influence and gather power.

However, not all Western historians share Van Leur's negative view. Those with missionary backgrounds cannot fail to notice the ubiquity of highly motivated individuals who believe that it is their duty to share the teachings of their faith with all other humans and so are willing to devote their lives to the mission. To quote Thomas Arnold, "it is such a zeal for the truth of their religion that has inspired the Muhammadans to carry with them the message of Islam to the people of every land into which they penetrate … with a fervour and enthusiasm that imparted an almost

invincible strength. Unaided also by the temporal power, Muslim missionaries have carried their faith into Central Africa, China and the East India Islands" (Arnold, 1913, pp. 1-2).

Arnold mentions the verses of the Qur'an that tell people to preach, but he fails to note that the Qur'an also contains verses which encourage the faithful to emigrate and seek new opportunities in other countries where they may find a better life (*murāghaman kathīran wa sa'ah*/many safe havens and bountiful resources, al-Nisā' 4:100). This means that economic motives that are indeed permissible and may have inspired the Arab Muslims to foster commercial relations with foreign nations as well as to spread Islam among them. The anthropologist Frode F. Jacobsen has seen a combination of several external and internal factors as the cause of the arrival of the Arabs from Hadramaut to the Archipelago, namely the threat of foreign power, political pressure, poverty, as well as business opportunities and mission calls (Jacobsen, 2011). In short, the Islamisation process and motives are not quite as simple as Van Leur would have us believe.

Impact of Islamisation

Most Western scholars assert that the influence of Islam on the people of the Archipelago is neither profound nor significant. Particularly in the case of Indonesia, the widely held opinion is that the new faith is nothing but a thin layer applied over an ancient body of Hindu-Buddhist and animistic beliefs. Landon (1949, pp. 134-164), among others, famously says that Islam in this region is like "a veneer over the indigenous culture of the Archipelago people." In a similar vein, Winstedt (1951) claims that Islam in the Malay world still retains some Hindu elements. The most negative view is expressed by Van Leur (1960). According to him, although various foreign cultures and world religions have gained a foothold and cast influences in Indonesia, in general, these influences remain weak. Whether the foreign import is Hinduism, Islam, Western influence, or communism, these have only washed over traditional village society but have left its basic way of life intact.

All these claims have been refuted by Syed Hussein and Syed Naquib al-Attas. The former states that the impact of Islamisation on the Malay society and culture is quite considerable and that Islam's egalitarianism made conversion attractive to lower-class people who wished to escape the Hindu caste system (Al-Attas, 1963). According to Syed Naquib al- Attas, the arrival of Islam was no doubt a very important event in the history of the Archipelago because it had not only changed the religious landscape of Southeast Asia but also had a huge impact on the worldview of its people. Islam has caused a rise of rationalism and intellectualism in the society, turning it away from a crumbling world of mythology and superstitions to the world of reason and intelligence (Al-Attas, 1969). The coming of Islam has brought about many changes to their lifestyle and value orientations, including a change of personal names (e.g. from 'Joko' to 'Muhammad'), honorific titles (e.g. from 'Raja' to 'Sultan'), a shift from

the indigenous time count system of five market days (*pancawara*) or six days (*sadwara*) to the Arabic-Islamic seven-day week, and the adoption of Islamic law (Shari'ah). One cannot disagree with Wertheim (1959, p. 204) when he writes that *"the Islamic faith had, in many respects, a revolutionizing and modernizing effect on Indonesian and Malay society."*

Conclusion

While it would be irrational to deny any objective standard against which some historical accounts could be judged fair and others unfair, it is a fact that historical narratives, explanations, and interpretations are often informed and colored by the historians' own perceptions and preferences and often reflect, as they do, the authors' interests and vision of past events, so that unwanted parts could be omitted and things be made to appear better or worse than they really were. Indeed, there is a growing tendency among modern scholars to acknowledge that historians, like other human beings, are not immune to certain prejudices and implicit personal or cultural biases. As Richard T. Vann (2020) rightly pointed out, there are certain people who undertake to write histories "in the service of political agendas, sometimes for entirely understandable reasons," such as the Jews who are determined that nobody should forget the Holocaust and defenders of capitalism who will continue to remind us that the Soviet experiment turned out badly.

The coming of Islam, the means of its propagation, and its influence in the Archipelago, will continue to be a topic of debate that is historically and politically significant both now and in the future (Boland & Farjon, 1983). It will remain so because it concerns the identity and fate of the largest Muslim population in the world with rich natural resources. Western scholars who examine the history of the Archipelago Islam are generally more interested in and tend to highlight the traces of Hindu-Buddhist culture as being more important and far more glorious than the Islamic elements and influence, which are so manifest and strongly felt in the language, culture, and thought of the people.

Contrary to the Orientalists' view, the revisionist historians see Islam as a positive determinant of social, political, and intellectual changes. The lack of consensus among scholars reflects the complexity of these issues rather than disagreement about the importance of Islam and its place in the 'Lands below the Wind'. One need only realise what David Lowenthal has rightly observed, that "the past is everywhere a battleground of rival attachments; competing groups struggle to validate present goals by appealing to continuity with or inheritance from, ancestral or other precursors" (Lowenthal, 1990, p. 308), and history is not simply a collection of records and reports, stories and narratives, but often represents the different interests, conflicting ideologies, or incompatible worldviews of its actors and authors.

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