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May peace and blessings of Allah be on thee

Islam From The Beginning To 1300
Date: 2002

The Spread Of Islam To Southeast Asia

The spread of Islam to various parts of coastal India set the stage for its further expansion to island Southeast Asia. As we have seen, Arab traders and sailors regularly visited the ports of Southeast Asia long before they converted to Islam. Initially the region was little more than a middle ground, where the Chinese segment of the great Euroasian trading complex met the Indian Ocean trading zone to the west. At ports on the coast of the Malayan peninsula, east Sumatra, and somewhat later north Java, goods from China were transferred from East Asian vessels to Arab or Indian ships, and products from as far west as Rome were loaded into the emptied Chinese ships to be carried to East Asia. By the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., sailors and ships from areas within Southeast Asia - particularly Sumatra and Malaya - had become active in the seaborne trade of the region. Southeast Asian products, especially luxury items, such as aromatic woods from the rainforests of Borneo and Sumatra, and spices, such as cloves, nutmeg, and mace from the far end of the Indonesian archipelago, had also become important exports to both China in the east and India and the Mediterranean area in the west. These trading links were to prove even more critical to the expansion of Islam in Southeast Asia than they had earlier been to the spread of Buddhism and Hinduism.

As the coastal trade and shipping of India came to be controlled (from the 8th century onward) increasingly by Muslims from such regions as Gujarat and various parts of south India, elements of Islamic culture began to filter into island Southeast Asia. But only in the 13th century after the collapse of the far-flung trading empire of Shrivijaya, which was centered on the Straits of Malacca between Malaya and the north tip of Sumatra, was the way open for the widespread proselytization of Islam. With its great war fleets, Shrivijaya controlled trade in much of the area and was at times so powerful that it could launch attacks on rival empires in south India. Indian traders, Muslim or otherwise, were welcome to trade in the chain of ports controlled by Shrivijaya. Since the rulers and officials of Shrivijaya were devout Buddhists, however, there was little incentive for the traders and sailors of Southeast Asian ports to convert to Islam, the religion of growing numbers of the merchants and sailors from India. With the fall of Shrivijaya, the way was open for the establishment of Muslim trading centers and efforts to preach the faith to the coastal peoples. Muslim conquests in areas such as Gujarat and Bengal, which separated Southeast Asia from Buddhist centers in India from the 11th century onward, also played a role in opening the way for Muslim conversion.

The Pattern Of Conversion

As was the case in most of the areas to which Islam spread, peaceful and voluntary conversion was far more important than conquest and force in spreading the faith in Southeast Asia. Almost everywhere in the islands of the region, trading contacts paved the way for conversion. Muslim merchants and sailors introduced local peoples to the ideas and rituals of the new faith and impressed on them how much of the known world had already been converted. Muslim ships also carried Sufis to various parts of Southeast Asia, where they were destined to play as vital a role in conversion as they had in India. The first areas to be won to Islam in the last decades of the 13th century were several small port centers on the northern coast of Sumatra. From these ports, the religion spread in the following centuries across the Strait of Malacca to Malaya.

On the mainland the key to widespread conversion was the powerful trading city of Malacca, whose smaller trading empire had replaced the fallen Shrivijaya. From the capital at Malacca, Islam spread down the east coast of Sumatra, up the east and west coasts of Malaya, to the island of Borneo, and to the trading center of Demak on the north coast of Java. From Demak, the most powerful of the trading states on north Java, the Muslim faith was disseminated to other Javanese ports and, after a long struggle with a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in the interior, to the rest of the island. From Demak, Islam was also carried to the Celebes, tha spice islands in the eastern archipelago, and from there to Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

This progress of Islamic conversion shows that port cities in coastal areas were particularly receptive to the new faith. Here the trading links were critical. Once one of the key cities in a trading cluster converted, it was in the best interest of others to follow suit in order to enhance personal ties and provide a common basis in Muslim law to regulate business deals. Conversion to Islam also linked these centers, culturally as well as economically, to the merchants and ports of India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean. Islam made slow progress in areas such as central Java, where Hindu-Buddhist dynasties contested its spread. But the fact that the earlier conversion to these Indian religions had been confined mainly to the ruling elites in Java and other island areas left openings for mass conversions to Islam that the Sufis eventually exploited. The island of Bali, where Hinduism had taken deep root at the popular level, remained largely impervious to the spread of Islam. The same was true of most of mainland Southeast Asia, where

centuries before the coming of Islam, Theravada Buddhism had spread from India and Ceylon and won the fervent adherence of both the ruling elites and the peasant masses.

Sufi Mystics And The Nature Of Southeast Asian Islam

The fact that Islam came to Southeast Asia primarily from India and that it was spread in many areas by Sufis had much to do with the mystical quality of the religion and its tolerance for coexistence with earlier animist, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs and rituals. Just as they had in the Middle East and India, the Sufis who spread Islam in Southeast Asia varied widely in personality and approach. Most were believed by those who followed them to have magical powers, and virtually all Sufis established mosque and school centers from which they traveled in neighboring regions to preach the faith.

In winning converts, the Sufis were willing to allow the inhabitants of island Southeast Asia to retain pre-Islamic beliefs and practices that orthodox scholars would clearly have found contrary to Islamic doctrine. Pre-Islamic customary law remained important in regulating social interaction, while Islamic law was confined to specific sorts of agreements and exchanges. Women retained a much stronger position, both within the family and in society, than they had in the Middle East and India. Local and regional markets, for example, continued to be dominated by the trading of small-scale female buyers and sellers. In such areas as western Sumatra, lineage and inheritance continued to be traced through the female line after the coming of Islam, despite its tendency to promote male dominance and descent through the male line. Perhaps most tellingly, pre-Muslim religious beliefs and rituals were incorporated into Muslim ceremonies. Indigenous cultural staples, such as the brilliant Javanese shadow plays that were based on the Indian epics of the Brahmanic age, were refined, and they became even more central to popular and elite belief and practice than they had been in the pre-Muslim era.