

Section I. Dynamics of Islamization in the Early Period

Islam is the religion of over a billion people, nearly a fifth of the world's population. It is also - one of the three religious traditions that are sometimes collectively referred to as the 'Abrahamic' religions. Like Judaism and Christianity, Islam also acknowledges a spiritual lineage from Abraham (*Ar. Ibrahim*) and teaches that one God has communicated to humanity through a succession of prophets. The prophet of Islam is Muhammad (d. 632) who lived in the Arabian Peninsula, mostly in the two towns of Mecca and Medina. Religious history teaches that—like many prophets before him, such as Abraham, Noah, and Jesus—the Prophet Muhammad's message was not accepted at first by many in his own home. For this reason, in 622, he moved from Mecca to the agricultural oasis of Medina where he was welcomed as the new leader of the community. This move, called the *Hijra* in Arabic, is such an important event in the history of the Muslim community that the Islamic calendar starts from this point.

From his new position in Medina, Muhammad was able to spread his message of belief in one God and associated moral obligations to a religious community that spread quickly throughout the Middle East. (For a short summary of the basics of the message of Muhammad's prophecy, often referred to as the "Five Pillars" of Islam, please see the first paragraphs of Section III below.) Within ten years, until his death in 632, the Prophet Muhammad was able to unite almost the entire Arabian Peninsula under the banner of Islam. From this point, the new faith rapidly spread, so that before the end of the first century of the Muslim calendar it extended from the northwest frontier of India to the east across North Africa to what is today Spain and Portugal in the west. In some of these areas, the Arabic language spread with the acceptance of Islam, both having a profound effect on the cultural landscapes of these regions. In other regions, such as the Persian-speaking areas of Iran and its neighbors, Islam was often also interpreted in terms of the existing language and culture, establishing a pattern of religious and cultural synthesis that contributed richly to Islamic civilization.

Over the centuries that followed, Islam continued to spread by various routes of trade and conquest to even further regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as to Central and Eastern Asia, with a sizable Muslim population establishing itself in China. Islam also came to the vast Malay Archipelago of Southeast Asia, where a majority of the inhabitants gradually converted and developed unique patterns of Muslim culture, just as other peoples had done in the diverse areas of the Muslim world. Southeast Asia is now home to one of the world's largest Muslim populations, yet it is nevertheless an area of the world which rarely comes to mind when many people think or speak about Islam. Indonesia alone, with nearly ninety percent of its two hundred million people identifying themselves as Muslim, has the greatest Muslim population of any nation on earth. In fact, today, the Muslim population of Indonesia is almost the same as the Muslim population of all of the Arabic-speaking countries combined. Gaining an appreciation of the rich history and culture of Islam in Southeast Asia not only enhances an understanding of Islam as a world religion, but it is also an important corrective to long-enduring stereotypes that tend to equate Islam with the Arab Middle East. One of the many things to be learned from studying Islam in Indonesia is how Muslims have interacted with people of amazingly varied cultures and religions, especially those represented by other major religions in modern Indonesia today, which include Buddhism, Hinduism, and

Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity. The historical processes that brought Islam to Indonesia are complex, and after more than a century of intense international scholarly effort, no real consensus has "been reached on exactly how and when the region was 'Islamicized', or, in other words, the processes through which Islam was accepted as a dominant religious tradition. Some scholars have focused on the role of Sufism (esoteric piety) and its institutional orders in Islamization, while others direct their attention to the local politics of military campaigns in several regions. Although the particulars are not always known, scholars agree on the general point that these developments took place within the larger context of Indian Ocean commercial trade in the later middle ages and what is known as the 'early modern period.'

Reconstructing the history of the coming of Islam to Southeast Asia has consumed the efforts of a number of gifted scholars who have drawn upon the evidence available from such disciplines as archaeology, sociology, philology, and the anthropological and historical study of written and oral documents composed in literally dozens of languages. Chinese court chronicles from the early centuries of the Muslim era (seventh to twelfth centuries) tell us of the presence of what is called 'western' (Arab and Persian) Muslims in the trading ports of the Southern Ocean. These sources also describe the role of these traders as intermediaries in bearing tribute from these small states to the 'Celestial Court' in China. Muslims seem to have played an even greater role in such transactions after the relocation of Muslim traders throughout Southeast Asia following a series of 'anti-foreign' revolts in China and the subsequent expulsion of Muslims from China in the ninth century.

After the Mongol conquest of Baghdad and other 'central lands' of Islam in the thirteenth century, Muslim trading networks in Southeast Asia continued to expand dramatically. Many individuals are known for their travels throughout the cosmopolitan system of Islamicate culture in this period, and a personal account of experiences in Southeast Asia, given by Ibn Batuta (a traveler some have called the 'Arab Marco Polo'), is included in Appendix I. (Ibn Batuta not only visited Southeast Asia, but he is famous for his travels throughout Africa, India, and China as well.) The networks traversed by 'Muslim travelers' like Ibn Batuta were consolidating during the same period that also saw wide-scale Islamization of the population of Southeast Asia. During this period, Islam became more deeply entrenched in political, social, and cultural life, which meant more than simply the presence of Muslims at scattered trading stations and local courts in the region. In the later thirteenth century, there is documentation of the first conversions of local rulers, such as those of the North Sumatran state of Samudra/Pasai. Shortly after the official conversion of Samudra/Pasai, a number of other ports on the same coast, in addition to ports across the straits on the Malay Peninsula accepted Islam, creating a new local Muslim trading network. These developments also strengthened links among larger circles of Muslim commercial

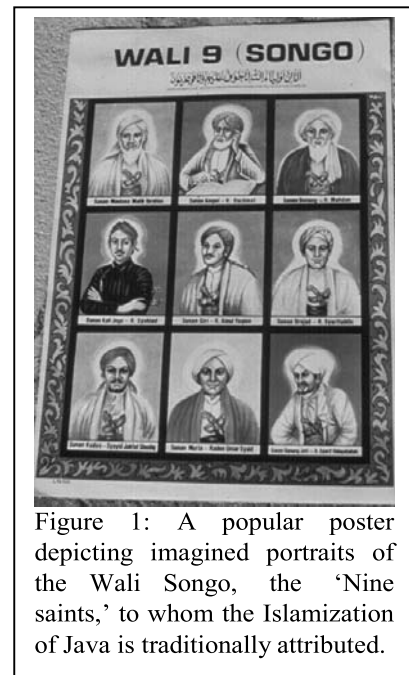


Figure 1: A popular poster depicting imagined portraits of the Wali Songo, the 'Nine saints,' to whom the Islamization of Java is traditionally attributed.



Figure 2: Men visiting the tomb of Sunang Sonang, one of the Wali Songo. The blue and white porcelain decorating the walls around the cemetery is a reminder of trade routes connecting China and Western Asia; this trade network was highly influential in the historical process of Indonesian Islamization.

activity that dominated the Indian Ocean at the time. One major center of this activity was the Malay city of Malacca (Melaka), whose rulers first accepted Islam during the fifteenth century.

Malacca was not only a thriving hub of global commerce, but it was also the cradle of a new Muslim Malay culture that was to spread throughout large areas of the Archipelago, unifying the nascent Islamic identity of the region. These emerging patterns fostered the formation of a language of communication, study, and trade (Malay), as well as an 'Islamicate' way of life that brought together the far-flung port cities of the Archipelago. A new religious and cultural superstratum tied such geographically distant and ethnically distinct areas as Aceh (Northern Sumatra), Pattani (now Southern Thailand), and Banjarmasin (South Borneo/Kalimantan) into a cosmopolitan network of trade, travel, and religious scholarship. At the same time, other areas of the Archipelago began to participate in this regional Muslim trading network, expanding to the east by establishing connections with states such as Champa (which is located in what is currently known as Southern Vietnam), and the

Southern Philippines. In the Islamic history of the island of Java, the early period of Islamization is often referred to as the time of the 'Wali Songo,' the 'Nine Saints' traditionally credited with the conversion of the island (figure 1). For the most part, information about these figures comes from the stories of sacred biography (hagiography) from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to extract concrete historical data. Nonetheless, such stories have long served as meaningful explanations of aspects of local religious and political experience, including the fall of the former 'Indianized' (Hindu- Buddhist) kingdom of Majapahit. The stories also explain and legitimize distinctive Javanese cultural expressions in terms of a more recently acquired Muslim identity. (See Appendix II for a well known story about events in the time of the Wali Songo.) The tombs of these figures remained centers of religious activity throughout the centuries, with people traveling for miles to visit them (figure 2).

Some narratives of the Wali Songo and their descendants (that is, followers in both the spiritual and genealogical senses) also tell of their influence on the subsequent Islamization of other parts of the Archipelago, including the island of Lombok, east of Bali (figure 3) and the outer 'Spice Islands' of the Moluccas, which enjoyed considerable commerce with the ports of the North



Figure 3: The Mosque of Bayan Beleg in Northern Lombok. This recently restored mosque has long been considered one of the primary seats of this island's indigenized interpretation of Islamic culture.

Java Coast. While Java exerted great influence in some parts of the Archipelago, some populations of the eastern islands were Islamicized by way of the powerful sultanate of Makassar in southern Sulawesi (Celebes). During the first decade of the seventeenth century, the rulers of Makassar converted to Islam; shortly thereafter they initiated a series of campaigns which resulted in the conversion of neighboring ethnic Bugis states, and, later, other small states such as Bima (on the eastern edge of the island of Sumbawa). People in this area are still proud of their Muslim seafaring heritage (figure 4).

As with the Wali Songo of Java, these wide-scale conversions are also attributed to the work of a group of 'saints' (Ar. *wali*). Many of these figures are widely believed to have origins in far away places and they are often described as '*sayyids*,' or direct descendants of the prophet Muhammad. An example of a story about this kind of figure is that of the conversion of the first Sultan of Buton, (Southeast Sulawesi) who had received instruction from Sayyid whose father, it is said, had come from Arabia and then had married a local princess in Johor, Malaysia. The ongoing process of Islamization in a region such as Buton incorporated the most fundamental institutions of society, and eventually Islamic mystical and theological ideas provided an idealized model of statecraft in Buton, as well as other areas of the Archipelago (figure 5). During this period, other factors came to have a significant effect on many of the societies of the Indonesian Archipelago. Over time, one particular set of interests became increasingly powerful in asserting their influence in the region; they were of non-Islamic origin. From the sixteenth century on, Europeans increasingly sailed the seas of the Archipelago in the service of their mercantile and colonial objectives. First the Portuguese, and then later the Dutch had a profound impact, not only on economics and politics, but even on social and religious developments



Figure 4: Float of a 'Bugis Schooner' representing the South Sulawesi team in the parade opening the MTQ National Contest for the Recitation of the Qur'an (Jambi, Sumatra, 1997). Inscribed on the boat in both Bugis and Roman script is a motto which translates as, "We pledge our unity."

in the region. For example, early on the Portuguese actively promoted their Roman Catholic faith among the peoples they encountered, especially in the eastern parts of the Archipelago. Arriving somewhat later, the Dutch invested relatively less effort in such missionary activity, but they were ultimately to exert a much more widespread impact on the region as a whole. The Dutch eventually became the colonial rulers of the entire Indonesian Archipelago, from Sumatra to Western New Guinea, in an empire that lasted until the Second World War. Dutch domination did-not stand unchallenged, however. From the seventeenth century until Indonesian independence in 1945, many Muslim leaders took up the struggle for freedom from foreign domination. Although resistance movements during these three hundred years of history arose out of local concerns and conditions, many of them shared some important aspects, including their

reliance on Islamic tradition to provide powerful symbols which could motivate struggle. Leaders of these movements also drew on long-distance relationships with fellow Muslims from other islands, and even further beyond, for support. In cases such as such Shaykh Yusuf's resistance in seventeenth-century Banten (see also Section III), and the Padri movement in nineteenth-century Sumatra, for example, political and military struggles against the Dutch both inspired and were inspired by popular movements for the further Islamization of social attitudes and practices. In conclusion, the processes of Islamization described above involve numerous cross-currents of both external and internal origin, making any single model of conversion impossible to apply. As will be shown in the following sections, Islamization is also an ongoing process that continues to this day. Part of reaching a better understanding of the patterns of Islam in Muslim Indonesia today -- whether one is studying an old, 'traditional' practice like the *slametan* (see Section II below), or a 'modern' institution like a new Islamic university -- is to recognize the ongoing characteristics of long-term processes of Islamization.



Figure 5: Royal heirlooms held by descendants of the last Sultan at the Balai Kuning (Yellow Hall) in Sumbawa Sesar (central Indonesia). Many of these items demonstrate the kinds of luxury goods traded in the Archipelago in earlier centuries of maritime history; they also represent symbolic elements drawing upon a wide range of Sumbawan, Indic, and Islamicate conceptions of power and authority.

1. What are some of the 'internal' and 'external' influences that helped to shape the religious landscape of the Indonesian Archipelago?
2. Describe the roles of local rulers, 'saints,' and colonial interests in the Islamic religious landscape of the Indonesian Archipelago.
3. What role did international trade and commerce play in the Islamization of the Indonesian Archipelago? It may be helpful to consider the account in Appendix I for specific examples.
4. Compare what you know of the dynamics of the early Islamic community in Arabia in the seventh-century with those of the early Islamic states in the Indonesian Archipelago.
5. With a majority of the Muslims in the world today living in Asia, why do you think Islam in Asia is so seldom emphasized in the conversations of North Americans?