



SOUTHEAST ASIA I. PERSIAN PRESENCE IN

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i. PERSIAN PRESENCE IN

A cohesive, comprehensive, and chronological account of the Persian cultural presence in Southeast Asia is difficult, if not impossible, to present due to the diverse and multifaceted nature of the Southeast Asian communities. Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date of Southeast Asia's early maritime contacts with its regional neighbors, as well as with East Asia and the Middle East, has been carried out by M. Jacq-Hergoualc'h (tr. V. Hobson, *The Malay Peninsula: Crossroads of the Maritime Silk Road [100 BC-1300 AD]*, Leiden, 2001), which partly supersedes an earlier work by P. Wheatley (*The Golden Chersonese*, Kuala Lumpur, 1961). In the following, attention will therefore be given to some of the most striking features of those Persian influences on Southeast Asian Islamic culture.

Persian influences are particularly discernible in the vocabulary of the two dominant languages of this region, i.e., Malay (the *lingua franca* of the Muslims in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago), and Thai or Siamese (from the 16th century and the Ayutthaya period onwards). To begin with Siam, present-day Thailand, it is deplorable that to the knowledge of the present writer, there exists no comprehensive study of Persian elements in this language. Modern



Thai does contain several words of Persian origin which are in current use: for example, the Thai words *dork kulaap* or *kulaap* (“rose,” from Persian *golāb*, “rosewater”), or *angun* (“grape,” from Persian *angur*). The Thai words for “cabbage,” *kalam plii*, and “cauliflower,” *kalam dork*, contain the Persian loanword *kalam*, “cabbage.” The Persian word for “cauliflower” is *gol-e kalam*, literally “the flower of the cabbage” which is the exact meaning of the Thai equivalent *kalam dork*. However, the most widely used Persian loanword is the Thai expression *farang*, meaning “European.” Its origins date to the conflict between the early Arab Muslims and their “Frankish” adversaries. The guava fruit, for instance, brought to Siam by the Portuguese, is still called in Thai *ton farang* (“Frank’s tree”; Harris, “The Persian Connection: Four Loanwords in Siamese,” pp. 9-12). As pointed out in [THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS](#), these Persian elements in the Thai vocabulary are to be traced back to the time of the establishment, in the 16th century, of a highly influential and thriving resident colony of Persian-speaking merchants in Siam’s then capital of Ayutthaya (see Subrahmanyam, “Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation”). Although I have presented elsewhere a more detailed outline of the political and cultural contacts between Siam and the Persian-speaking world, especially Safavid Persia (Marcinkowski, “The Iranian-Siamese Connection”; idem, *From Isfahan to Ayutthaya*), it is still necessary to address at least some of the most important issues here, since they seem to set Siam apart from developments in the Malay-Indonesian world.

It is significant that since the 15th century Ayutthaya itself has been known by a Persian epithet, i.e., *Šahr-e nāv* (q.v., “City of Boats and Canals”) among Persian and other Muslim merchants around the rim of the Indian Ocean (Browne, pp. 397-98; Ebn Mohammad Ebrāhim, *The Ship of Sulayman*, tr. John O’Kane). Beyond that, several corruptions of that Persian expression were current among Western mariners and other visitors to Southeast Asia the 17th and 18th centuries (Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 795-96, s.v. “Sarnau, Somau”). Another important result of the presence of Persian merchants in the Ayutthaya kingdom is the introduction of the office of *Šaykh al-Eslām* in the early 17th century in order to cater to the religious needs of Siam’s growing Persian community. This office, known in Thai as *Chularajmontri*, was held by the descendants of its first holder, all Shi’ites, until 1945 (Marcinkowski, “Iranians, *Shaykh al-Islams* and *Chularajmontris*”; Yusuf, “Islam and Democracy in Thailand: Reforming the Office of *Chularajmontri/Shaykh al-Islām*”). Persians held highly sensitive and responsible offices in the Siamese



court and administration, resulting in a further increase of Persian cultural influences, as exemplified in Siam's royal court customs, selected features of architecture and mural painting, and in the diet and apparel of her rulers (THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS, with detailed bibliographical references; Marcinkowski, "The Iranian-Siamese Connection"; Ringis, *Thai Temples and Temple Murals*; Aasen, *Architecture of Siam*. [see index, s.v. "Persian," in the latter two works]). Close diplomatic contacts between Isfahan and Ayutthaya were reflected in the exchange of several embassies between the courts of Safavid Persia and Siam between the 1660s and the 1680s. The last embassy, sent by the Safavid Shah Solaymān (q.v.), was documented by Ebn Moḥammad Ebrāhīm's *Safine-ye Solaymāni* or *Ship of Solayman*. Despite its occasional tendentiousness with regard to Buddhism and Thai culture, this report is a source of prime importance since it constitutes the only extant Persian source on those contacts. From it we learn that Persian dignitaries at the Siamese court, in turn, served as Ayutthaya's ambassadors to the Shah, a circumstance that was also recorded by Engelbert Kaempfer, who visited Persia and Siam (Kaempfer, *Am Hofe*, p. 199; Aubin, "Les Persans," pp. 121-22). *Safine-ye Solaymāni* also refers to the religious life in the resident Persian Muslim community of Ayutthaya, such as the public performance of *ta'ziyas*, for which we have also a detailed eyewitness account from the French Catholic missionary Guy Tachard, who was present at the same time in the Siamese capital (Tachard, *A Relation of the Voyage to Siam*, pt. 2, pp. 214-15; see also SOUTHEAST ASIA ii). Apparently, these ceremonies were not only tolerated but also sponsored by King Narai the Great (r. 1656-88), Siam's Buddhist monarch. Moreover, from these accounts we can infer that the majority of the Muslims residing in the Ayutthaya kingdom were Twelver Shi'ites. However, it is remarkable that, given the religious freedom enjoyed by Ayutthaya's Persian Muslim community, we have no information today (whether in Persian or Thai historical writing or from archeological remains) on their intellectual activity there: we do not know the names of religious scholars, whether there existed religious institutions beyond those connected with the above-mentioned mourning ceremonies, whether there were connections with Shi'ite scholars in India or Persia, or whether Persian Shi'ite culture in Siam was dominated by Sufism and philosophy or by traditional legal thought. These matters would be important to know, particularly in the light of Isfahan's intellectual tradition during the 17th century in what is generally known as "high Sufism" and philosophy, and its supposed antagonism to the legalistic tradition. The absence of such sources might be attributed to the conquest of Ayutthaya by Burmese invaders in 1767, which resulted in the



total destruction of the city and its monuments, and the almost complete annihilation of Thai literary and historiographical sources, a disaster that also affected its foreign communities, among them the Persians. Thus, we can only assume that the presence of Islam in the Ayutthaya kingdom might have been marked by Persian cultural influences on Islamic scholarship as well. Such influences appear to have affected the mystical thought of the enigmatic Malay Sufi poet Ḥamzah Faṣṣuri (see below). The end of the Ayutthaya kingdom in 1767 also resulted in the end of Persian cultural dominance among its Muslims. However, the descendants of some of the original Persian traders, members of the Bunnag, Siphon and Singhseni families, continued to be in positions close to the throne into the 20th century. The Muslim community of present-day Thailand, although not ethnically homogeneous, is culturally dominated by southern Thailand's Malays who adhere firmly to the Sunni Shafi'ite legal school (RISEAP, ed., *Muslim Almanach Asia Pacific*, entry "Thailand"; Omar, "The Muslims of Thailand"). The cultural and religious perspective of the latter is directed towards neighboring Malaysia and the Arab world rather than toward Persia.

To sum up, we do have some knowledge of diplomatic contacts between Siam and Persia in the 17th century, and of the stages of the immigration of Persians to Ayutthaya, but we know nothing about their intellectual contribution. It remains to be mentioned that since the 1990s the Iranian embassy in Bangkok has organized several conferences dealing with Siamese-Iranian connections (see [THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS](#)), besides publishing Thai translations of classical Persian literature, such as the poetry of Hafez, Sa'di, and others.

A somewhat different picture emerges with regard to Persian cultural influences among the Muslims of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. Persian cultural elements appear to be predominant in the classical as well as the contemporary Malay language. Several studies of varying scholarly quality have been published during the last decades: Muhammad Abdul Jabbar Beg's *Persian and Turkish Loan-Words in Malay* (see Bibliography) cannot be considered an academic work since it is based mostly on guesswork about the etymology of words of supposedly Persian origin. More scholarly and comprehensive is the work by Kuš-Haikal Āzād (idem, *Vāžehā-ye fārsi-ye dakil dar zabān-e malāyu*, with further references to studies written in Malay-Indonesian), who himself has a good command of Malay-Indonesian. Loanwords from Arabic and Sanskrit in classical as well as contemporary Malay/Indonesian are doubtlessly more numerous than those of definitely



Persian origin. However, the frequent occurrence of the latter in daily usage, such as *shah* (“king,” only when added to the names of the Malay rulers, otherwise *raja*), *gandom* (“wheat”), *angur* (“grape”) or *dewan* (“assembly-hall,” e.g., *Dewan Rakyat*, the Malaysian Parliament), may serve to indicate that the Persian lexical presence in the Malay language is by no means marginal.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Alessandro Bausani published a series of pioneering studies that address not only the issue of Persian vocabulary in Malay, but also that of the *hekāyat* genre in classical Malay literature (see bibliography). The *hekāyat* genre reveals strong Shi‘ite elements that evoke the epic struggle between the Umayyads and early Shi‘ite archetypal figures such as Moḥammad Ebn al-Ḥanafiyya (see [SOUTHEAST ASIA ii](#) with further references; Baried, “Shi‘a Elements in Malay Literature”; also Winstedt, *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, and Roolvink, “Indonesia. vi-Literatures,” for a general introduction).

The advice- or *naṣiḥat* genre of classical Persian literature, too, is well represented in classical Malay literature. An example is the *Tāj al-Salāṭin* by Boḳāri al-Jawhari (of Johore in southern Malaya?) from the 17th century, rendered into Malay from an unknown Persian source for the rulers of the Aceh sultanate of Sumatra. The presentation of its topics reveals a close relation to earlier Persian patterns, such as Neẓām al-Molk’s *Siāsat-nāma*, from which the author translates generous selections, besides using the Persian expression *nowruz* when referring to the beginning of a new year. (Winstedt, *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, p. 96; idem, “Taju’s-salatin,” pp. 37-38; van Ronkel, “De Kroon der Koningen”; Romanized Malay ed.: Bukhāri al-Jauhari, *Taj Us-Salatin*, ed. Khalid M. Hussain). Similar in character, although more encyclopedic, is *Bustān al-Salāṭin* by Nur-al-Din Rāniri, Faṣṣuri’s fierce legalistic adversary. This work was also written at Aceh, about the middle of the 17th century (Winstedt, *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, pp. 100-101; Romanized Malay ed.: Siti Hawa Haji Salleh, ed., *Bustan al-Salatin*). Close adherence to their Persian models makes both works appear to be faithful translations from Persian language and thought into an intellectually less elaborate Malay setting. It should be noted that Rāniri, who was well read in the Persian scholarly tradition, was born in India (on Rāniri, see Al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq of Nur al-Din al Rāniri*, pp. 3-48). Moreover, both works refer extensively to the topic of the “Just King,” as exemplified by Anoshervan (q.v.), the archetypal ruler of Sasanian Iran. Recently, the concept of the “Just King” and its correlation to topics in several Islamic and pre-



Islamic literatures of Southeast Asia has been studied extensively by Setudeh-Nejad (see bibliography).

The issue of Persian cultural influences in Southeast Asia is also closely related to the ongoing dispute among scholars concerning the historical course of the Islamization of that region. At times ideologically over-weighted, the polemical debate has focused so far on the questions of the origin of Islam in Southeast Asia, whether from Arabia, India, or Iran, and of the time when the coming of Islam to the region was supposed to have taken place (see, e.g., Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*, and Drewes, “New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia?”). I do not intend to contribute further to that discussion here (see Gordon, ed., *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*, with detailed bibliography on that issue). In fact, the vast majority of the Muslims in what is now Malaysia and Indonesia are Shafi‘ite Sunnis. The same is the case with the Muslims of southern India, contrary to northern India, where the Ḥanafite School is prevalent. One has also to consider the circumstance that South India was also the seat of the Twelver Shi‘ite kingdom of Golconda, which lasted until the 1680s.

Persian influences on Islamic religious thought in Southeast Asia (on particularly Shi‘ite elements therein; see also [SOUTHEAST ASIA ii](#)) are substantial with regard to the Aceh sultanate, which was able to proceed to a dominant position at the Straits after the fall of Malacca in 1511 had caused the latter’s peninsular Malay successor states to lapse into a period of isolation. According to S. Hurgonje (1906, II, pp. 202-6), Moḥarram, the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, used to be called *Asan-Usén* by the Achenese, in commemoration of the Prophet’s two grandchildren Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, whereas they referred to the 10th of that month as *Achura*. He adds that some of the Achenese, although Sunnis, used to perform mourning ceremonies reminiscent of those in Shi‘ite countries, although on smaller scale. He adds (*ibid.*, p. 206) that the Achenese used to consider the first ten days of Moḥarram as unlucky, but opts for a South Indian connection rather than in favor of a direct link to Persia.

At any rate, Persian influences in Aceh, which had close maritime and trade links with India and the Persian Gulf region, are more apparent in 17th-century Islamic thought and mysticism. Ḥamza Fanṣuri (fl. 2nd half of the 16th century), the enigmatic Malay mystical poet, was the main exponent and disseminator of *wojudiya*-thought, the pantheistic teachings of Ebn al-‘Arabi



(q.v.) in the region during that time (for a good introduction see Al-Attas, *Rāniri and the Wujudiyyah of 17th Century Aceh*). The majority of modern scholars now seem to hold that Faṣuri was born in the Siamese capital Ayutthaya, (*Šahr-e nāv*), although his family background stems from Barus (Faṣur) in north-west Sumatra (Marcinkowski, “The Iranian-Siamese Connection,” pp. 27-28; Al-Attas, “New Light on the Life of Hamzah Fansuri”; idem, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* [introd.]; for a different view see Brakel, “The Birth Place of Hamza Pansuri”). Besides his native Malay, he had a thorough knowledge of Arabic and Persian. In some of his works, he quotes from the masters of classical Persian mysticism such as Šabestari, either in Persian, or in Malay translation (Osman bin Bakar, “Sufism in the Malay-Indonesian World,” pp. 284 ff.). From references in his work, it appears that he had visited Mecca, Medina, and probably also Iraq (including, perhaps, the holy shrines there). Faṣuri flourished during the rule of Sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Re‘āyat Šāh (r. 1588-1604), to whom he refers in his poems. This ruler encouraged Sufis and was known for his liberal interpretation of Islam, which set him apart from his successors who were under the influence of legalistic scholars, often from India, such as Rāniri (d. 1658). The conflict between Rāniri and Faṣuri exemplifies the issue of “orthodox” or “sober” Sufism, as promoted about the same time in India by Sirhindi (d. 1624), and “heterodox,” “pantheistic” Sufism, and broadened the conflict from India to Southeast Asia (Vakily, “Sufism, Power, Politics, and Reform: Al-Rāniri’s Opposition to Hamzah al-Fansūrī’s Teachings Reconsidered”). The “purifying” activities of Rāniri and his royal patrons, however, might have had a reverse effect, because mysticism among the Malays since then has been characterized by a relapse into superstition and even animism (Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of —Sufism, as Understood and Practised Among the Malays*, 97-102).

Persian cultural influences are also discernible with regard to the Malay principality and trade emporium of Malacca, a state which lasted from the early 15th century to 1511 when it was conquered by the Portuguese (Andaya, “Malacca”; Muhammad Yusoff Hashim, tr. D. J. Muzaffar Tate, *The Malay Sultanate of Malacca*). Although Malacca was at least nominally a vassal of Siam, which also claimed the suzerainty over the entire Malay Peninsula (Wyatt, “The Thai ‘Palatine Law’ and Malacca”), it was able to establish itself as the foremost power in the Archipelago, giving the propagation of Islam in the region a vigorous new impetus (for convenient introductions see Gordon, ed., and Al-Attas, “Indonesia. iv-History: (a) Islamic period”). At that time, Persian was the *lingua franca* in the Indian Ocean trading world and a Persian-



speaking merchant community was present in Malacca. The office with the Persian title of *Šāhbandar* (“harbor master”), known in many of the Indian Ocean trade ports as well as in several parts of the Ottoman Empire, was also established in Malacca. It has attracted the attention of several Western scholars (see Andaya, “The Indian ‘Saudagar Raja’ (The King’s Merchants) in Traditional Malay Courts”; Moreland, “The Shahbandar in the Eastern Seas”: Raymond, “*Shāhbandar*: In the Arab world”; Hooker, “*Shāhbandar*: In South-East Asia”; Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 816-17, s.v. “Shabunder,” with detailed references, and *ibid*, p. 914, s.v. “Tenasserim”). The office appears to have been known in the Indian Ocean region as early as about 1350 (Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, pp. 816, s.v. “Shabunder,” referring to Ebn Baṭṭuṭa’s visit to the Malabar coast in southern India).

The introduction of steamships to the Indian Ocean region by the British and Dutch colonial powers in the first half of the 19th century facilitated the contacts of Southeast Asian Muslims with the Arab lands of the Middle East, in particular with the sacred places on the Arabian peninsula and the study centers in Egypt. Returning pilgrims and religious students began to spread puritanical ideas, particularly Wahhabism, in the Archipelago. Philosophical Sufism in the tradition of Faṣṣuri and his followers again became increasingly associated with heresy and deviant thought, such as Shi‘ism “from Persia.” This constricting development is currently continuing and it affects negatively the general climate of stability and scholarship. To the knowledge of the present writer, for instance, the only university-level institution in Malaysia that teaches Persian is the broad-minded International Institute of Islamic Thought of Civilization (ISTAC) at Kuala Lumpur. At the time of writing, however, the future course of this institution, too, was uncertain.

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