



SOUTHEAST ASIA II. SHI'ITES IN

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i. SHI'ITES IN

The historical course and circumstances of Southeast Asia's Islamization are still the subject of heated debate among scholars (for differing views see Al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on a General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago*; Idem, "Indonesia. iv-History: (a) Islamic period"; Drewes, "New Light on the Coming of Islam to Indonesia?"). In the following I will limit my geographical scope to Aceh in Sumatra, and to a lesser extent to the Malay Peninsula, since these two areas produced the two most vigorous Muslim powers of the region: the Malacca sultanate of the 15th and early 16th centuries and the Aceh sultanate, which reached its apogee in the first half of the 17th century.

The overwhelming majority of the Muslims in Southeast Asia today are Sunnis of the Shafi'ite School and are Ash'arite in their theological outlook. Although Muslims certainly visited Southeast Asia much earlier as traders from the Middle East and India, the large-scale Islamization of the Malay/Indonesian Archipelago (Sumatra and parts of Java in particular) during the 13th and 14th centuries was advanced by Arab traders from the Ḥaḍramaut in southern Arabia, as well as by merchants from southern India, areas in which Shafi'ite



Sunnism was prevalent. Many of them were attached to the leading mystical orders then active in the Middle East and India (for the most popular orders on the Malay Peninsula see Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism, as Understood and Practised Among the Malays*; for a general overview see Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*). From the Ghaznavids (q.v.) onwards, but especially after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the 13th century, Persian served as the *lingua franca* among the educated Muslims of India (Marcinkowski, *Persian Historiography and Geography*, pp. 64 ff.). The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia at that time was predominantly by way of the southern and western Indian trade emporia (Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, pp. 221 ff.) and was propagated in the garb of a mysticism imbued with the ideals of sainthood (*velāyat*) of classical Persian Sufism. These tendencies met and blended with local folk beliefs and even shamanistic elements from the region's pre-Islamic period (for a still telling example see Rinkes, *Nine Saints of Java*; Gordon (ed.), *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*).

Along with Sufism, Shi'ite elements too entered Malay-Indonesian Islam, certainly by way of southern India, where it was well represented (see Khalidi, "The Shi'is of the Deccan: A Historical Outline," with an excellent bibliography). We do not know whether the activities of the Isma'ilis in India had any bearing on the Archipelago. At any rate, at the end of the 13th century, Shi'ites did not manage to establish a state of their own, although at that time Shi'ism is said to have caused a split in the ruling family of Perlak, apparently the earliest Muslim sultanate on Sumatra's northeastern coast (Zakaria Ali, *Islamic Art in Southeast Asia*, p. 214). Shi'ite influences are nevertheless manifest in the Muslim literatures of the Archipelago and have been studied by several Western and Indonesian scholars, most importantly by Baried and Wieringa (see Bibliography). These influences are particularly evident in what is known as the *hekāyat* genre. The anonymous *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah*, of which we have an excellent study and English translation by Brakel (see Bibliography), seems to be the oldest Malay work of this kind of literature that is still popular among the Muslim peoples of Southeast Asia. It appears that the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah* was translated, at times literally, possibly at Pasai in northeastern Sumatra, from a Persian original (Brakel, I, p. 56; Winstedt, *A History of Classical Malay Literature*, pp. 8, 12). Basing his conclusions on internal evidence in the Malay translation, Brakel places the (unknown) Persian original in the 14th century and advocates a date "not much later" (perhaps 2nd half of 14th century) for the Malay translation, the oldest manuscript of which dates from 1632. Brakel



(I, pp. 102 ff.) provides a detailed list of other versions or translations of the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyya* into several Indonesian languages, such as Javanese, and refers also to versions in Turkish, Urdu, Dakhni and Punjabi. The *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah*, “part of the common literary heritage of the Muslim peoples of Asia” (Brakel, I, p. 108), recounts the epic struggle between the Omayyads and Moḥammad Ebn al-Hanafiyya, an enigmatic, archetypal heroic figure of early Shi‘ism and a son of the first Shi‘ite Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Ṭalib. Significantly, Brakel, who also noticed certain affinities with the genre of *Abu Muslim nāmas* of the Turco-Iranian world (Brakel, I, pp. 26-27; see also Mélikoff, *Abū Muslim, le ‘Porte-Hache’ du Khorassan dans la tradition épique turco-iranienne*), states (loc. cit., p. 58) that later manuscript versions of the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah* have been “purged” of some of their too inimical statements concerning Mo‘āwiya, Abu Ḥurayra and their group. I am not sure what the author means here].

Although the period between the 15th and 17th centuries was marked by vigorous Islamization activities on the part of the sultanates of Malacca and Acheh respectively, the spread of Islam was still in its initial stages at that time in other parts of Southeast Asia, i.e. the rest of Indonesia and the Philippines (Al-Attas, “Indonesia. iv-History: (a) Islamic period”). Even the low degree of Islamization on the Peninsula and in Sumatra itself is telling: after fall of Malacca to the Portuguese in 1511, for instance, Kedah on the Malay peninsula had to be re-Islamized by Acheh after the people there had relapsed into animism.

The enlightened and tolerant rule of the Achenese sultan ‘Alā’ al-Din Re‘āyat Ṣāh (r. 1588-1604) was propitious for a flourishing of mysticism based on the thought of Ebn al-‘Arabi (q.v.), as propounded by the pantheistic Malay Ṣufi poet Ḥamza Fanṣuri, (fl. second half of the 16th century; see the magisterial study by Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*). It should also be noted that this period, contemporary with the rule of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1603) in India, appears to reveal a general flourishing of speculative philosophy and mysticism in the Indian Ocean region. The rise to favor with the succeeding Achenese rulers of the staunch Shafi‘ite Sunni Nur-al-Din al-Rāniri (d. 1656), who was born in India (see Al-Attas, *A Commentary on the ‘Ḥujjat al-Siddiq’ of Nur al-Din al-Rāniri*, intro.), however, initiated a period of legalism, resulting in the persecution and repression of the heterodox, non-conformist Sufism associated with Fanṣuri and his followers.

In the past, this conflict between “heterodoxy” and “orthodoxy” in 17th-



century Aceh, personified by Faṣūri and Rāniri, has usually been studied within the context of mysticism alone (Al-Attas, *Rāniri and the Wujudiyyah of 17th Century Aceh*). According to Al-Attas (idem, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript*, p. 34), the circulation of treatises on the “orthodox” Sunni creed, such as the *‘Aqā’ed* of Al-Nasafi, in order to counter this trend is a clear indicator of this latent conflict. However, the prevalence of Shi’ite thought among “heterodox” Sufis in Aceh should also be taken into consideration. Faṣūri himself referred to the first imām of the Shi’ites in several of his poems. Besides his native Malay, Faṣūri was also fluent in Arabic and Persian. Apparently, he also went to Iraq during his travels to the Middle East. What he did in Iraq, the traditional destination of Shi’ite pilgrimage, can only be a matter of conjecture. Several modern scholars, among them Anthony Reid (*Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450-1680. Volume II: Expansion and Crisis*, p. 190) and the present author (Marcinkowski, “The Iranian-Siamese Connection: An Iranian Community in the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya,” p. 29), consider it plausible that Faṣūri himself was a Shi’ite. In the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, Twelver Shi’ism also had a strong foothold in nearby Siam, present-day Thailand. Faṣūri was born in Siamese Ayutthaya, home of a firmly entrenched Twelver Shi’ite community of Persian merchants (see [THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS](#) and [SAFINE-YE SOLAYMĀNI](#)). In one of his Malay poems, Faṣūri even applies a philosophical-mystical metaphor, “existence” (*wujud*), when referring to his birthplace, Šahr-e Nāv (q.v.), i.e. Ayutthaya. This could also be interpreted as the place where he found a new identity that led him towards the mystical path (“... Mendapat wujud ditanah Shahr Nawi,” i.e. “... He acquired his existence in the land of Shahr Nawi,” see Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri*, p. 7). It is remarkable that public mourning ceremonies commemorating the death of Ḥusayn (q.v.) during the ten first days of the month of Moḥarram (known among the local Sunni Muslims as *Asan-Usén*, i.e. “Ḥasan-Ḥusayn”) persisted among Sunnites in parts of Sumatra at least up to the beginning of the 20th century, as observed by S. Hurgronje (1906, II, pp. 202-6)

The conflict between the thought of Rāniri, who served as *Šaykh al-Eslām* to the rulers of the Aceh sultanate, and Faṣūri, whose followers had been persecuted by the former, thus gives evidence of two underlying peculiarities that persisted in Malay/Indonesian Islam: namely a profound “heterodox” mystical tradition with, at times, strong Shi’ite under-currents dating back to the time of the arrival of Islam in the region, hidden under a veneer of Sunni legalism. It is telling that the purge of classical Malay Muslim literature of its



earlier “heterodox” tendencies, as exemplified above with reference to the manuscripts of the *Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyyah*, did not prevent these texts from remaining popular among local Muslims.

Within this setting, it is significant that the issue of latent Shi'ite tendencies in Southeast Asia again became, at the beginning of the 20th century, the subject of a heated debate among the Muslims in British-administered Malaya and Singapore, as well as Dutch East India. Al-Sayyid Moḥammad b. al-ʿAqil al-Ḥaḍrami, a member of the resident Arab community, evoked an outcry among his peers and fellow Sunnis when he considered the cursing of the first Omayyad caliph, Moʿāwiya, meritorious in several of his works published in Singapore (see Bibliography; see also Ende, “Schiitische Tendenzen bei sunnitischen Sayyids aus Ḥaḍramaut”). Although this episode, which at times even involved leading Egyptian reformist scholars such as Rašid Redā, was significant with regard to the situation within the local Southeast Asian Arab communities, it nevertheless also revealed the persistence of Shi'ite tendencies in spite of the growing influence of Middle Eastern modernist thought on Southeast Asian Islam from the early 19th century onwards.

In Malaysia in particular, the second half of the 1990s saw a government-backed campaign against what was perceived as deviationist teachings, among them Twelver Shi'ism, and also against the cult of holy men and shamans (*bomohs*) prevalent among the rural Malays. However, it appears that this campaign was motivated by internal political considerations. In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, many Malaysians and Indonesians, mostly former Sunnis, were to be found at the theological study centers of Qom in Iran.

See also [THAILAND-IRAN RELATIONS](#), [SAFINE-YE SOLAYMĀNI](#), [SOUTHEAST ASIA](#) i.

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