

Islam in the identity of people from the ancient sultanates of Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines

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When one looks at Southeast Asian pre-modern history, knowledge on the Philippines is few, scarce, not to say disturbingly absent. When I was an undergraduate student, I remember I asked at several occasions why we knew so few about the Philippines, compared to the neighbouring islands, Indonesia and Malaysia for example. One of the answer was that there was maybe not so much to say about this peripheral archipelago. This presentation is the result of my non-satisfaction with this answer and it is also a part of my work about the non-colonial history of the Philippines.

[SLIDE 2]

Introduction: A bit of theory and methodology first...

A traditional way to approach Southeast Asian sultanates history is through the lens of socio-economical history.

Historiography on the region has been developed, mostly, based on the idea that states formed and expanded through trade and warfare.

In short, the idea is that complex societies result from

- interactions with external actors.
 - Analysing trade – people, network, commodities – allow to understand contacts and relations between the different actors involved in Southeast Asian trade.
 - Combining this approach with traces of material or immaterial culture allow to reconstruct possible cultural influences and transfer.

In my study of Islam in Southeast Asian sultanates, I have focused on a particular part of social history - the so-called cultural history which deals with

- the various forms of consciousness,
- habits of thought
- and world view of past societies;
 - what have been called the “third level”, over economy and social organisation, by the French historian Pierre Chaunu.

[SLIDE 3]

The question that seems crucial to me was not so much when the first ruler converted - although it remains of importance - but

- what the coming and the spread of Islam changed in people's world view?
- What cultural influence did it implied, what does it tell us about the origins of Islam in the Philippines?

This is essential because

- First: Islamization is not an instant but a long-term process. Therefore islamization often, if not always, results from multiple influences.
- Second: Social cohesion is assured by shared beliefs or representations. Therefore to understand the construction of the sultanates, we need to understand how people thought,
 - in other words we need to have a picture of the mental mechanism which underlies the relations between people.

= This brought me to work on the representation of spiritual and political authority among three ethnical groups in the Southern Philippines – the Tausug, the Magindanao and the Maranao. The question is simple: what legitimate the ruler?

= This question, we will see, link the polities of the Southern Philippines to the sultanates of the present day Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

For this study, I borrowed the tools of social anthropology, used in an historical perspective. These tools are

- the structural analysis of myths
- and kinship relation

They allow me to study the internal logic of locally produced texts:

- the genealogical narration of the sultanates (sarsila)
- their codes of law

These texts, 14 in total, are unfortunately incomplete and known to us through English translation, although for some we have their transliteration. But by reading between the lines and crossing sources, we can extract much more information than it has never been done whereas these sources are published for more than 100 years. Historians have to look at the sources like gold-hunter looking for the precious metal in a river. With patient, carefully, slowly, again and again.

My analysis of the texts aimed at uncovering variations between different versions of the sarsila or traces of rewriting in the narrations. For this I did

- a strict individual analysis of each text
- a comparison with other texts produced within sultanates in Southeast Asia

[SLIDE 4]

This presentation will be organized in three parts

I- a brief presentation of the Southern Philippines Muslim polities, to give the context,

II - then I will describe the scriptural culture of these sultanates

III – finally I will concentrate on the content of this scriptural culture, especially the myths of foundation

[SLIDE 5]

I - A short presentation of the Southern Philippines Muslim polities

There were three Muslim entities in the Southern Philippines, which started between the 15th and the 17th century and which had different spatial configuration.

[SLIDE 6 and 7]

1. The sultanate of Sulu (c. 1450- c.1900),

- It had the seat of its political power on the island of Jolo.
- It extended its influence over the coast of the whole Sulu archipelago, the coast of Palawan, and the northern coast of Borneo.
- The reign of the first sultan is dated by count-down, to the middle of the 15th century.
- The roots of the Sulu sultanate can be traced back to 1417. This is when Sulu appears for the first time in Chinese records. At that time, an embassy led by three kings (the king of the East, the king of the West and the king of the interior/mountain) reached China where they have been entertained with a special treatment reserved usually to Muslim kingdoms.

[SLIDE 8 and 9]

2. The sultanate of Magindanao (c. 1520- c.1900),

- Located along the Pulangi river, in Mindanao, was organised following the upstream-downstream model (Hulu-hilir).
- Formed by several settlements called “nigri”, most important were Bwayan (upstream, Nagtangan/Kabuntalan in the middle and Magindanao also called Mandanawi (downstream)
- In 1693 sultana Barahaman write to the governor Van de Duyn “The population of Maguindanao is known under one name but we are several nations”

[SLIDE 10]

3. The Pat a Pengampong,

- It was a political entity which developed around the lake Lanao, in Mindanao before Islam. This polity is usually designated as the 4 encampment of the lake (Unayan, Nayabao, Masiu and Baoi
- It maintained a close relationship with Magindanao through marriage and trade
- Called sultanates but extremely fragmented. In 1774 Forrest witnessed there were 33 sultanates

[SLIDE 11, 12]

Sarsila and codes of laws reveal cultural practices (scriptural, literary and historiographical) and representation (mythical and religious world view) which give information on the process of islamization

[slide 13]

II– Scriptural Malay culture

[slide 14]

1. Arabic alphabet adapted to local language

- The most important element connecting the different sultanates in Southeast Asia was a lingua franca, the Malay.
- It was used by traders but also, in a literary form. Malay was then written in an adapted Arabic alphabet and called jawi
= jawi comes from the name given to the Malays by the Arabs in Mekka, Jawa was used as a toponym to call the whole region of insular Southeast Asia)
= when used to write Tausug, kept the name jawi

= when used to write magindanao and after maranao called kirim, in reference to the Malay word meaning 'to send'. It could indicate a primary use, or an important use, of the kirim in the writing of letter, diplomatic ones, which were commonly sent between sultanates or to trading cie. In the 17th century, the correspondence with the VOC was maintained through Malay letters.

- Jawi/Kirim was used for the writing of
 - genealogy, and accompanying narrations related to the origins of people or ruling dynasties
 - codes of laws
 - official correspondence (letter),

But also for the

- transmission of Islamic and esoteric knowledge
- literary works

[slide 15]

- Manila and Cebu

The use of an Arabic alphabet adapted to local language is also attested outside of Mindanao and Sulu, in the trading port of Manila and Cebu. The conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi (1565-1571) who stayed in Cebu 6 years, wrote that the people on the Visayas have

“their own letters and alphabets, like the one of the Malay from whom they learnt it”.

The governor Antonia de Morga wrote, in the very beginning of the 17th century, that the people of Luzon and the Visayas had a different writing system compared to the rest of the population who use an indic derived syllabary. He added this writing was similar to Arabic.

However we may infer that the use of this alphabet didn't developed in Cebu and Manila as in the Southern Philippines as there was no political entity which could have been the seat, or at least impulse, a scriptural practice like in Sulu and Magindanao

In Sulu contemporary time, the term surat sug (Tausug letter) is synonym to jawi. there was a progressive disappearance of the Malay in Sulu writings, from one copy to another, the Malay was replaced by Tausug.

A command of Malay, then a lost of this knowledge appear clearly in the sarsila which have been gradually translated to local language through successive copies. This explains the name jawi remain in use whereas the writings where no more in Malay.

This linguistic situation also appear in European accounts. The use of Malay was not something deeply rooted and shared by a large part of the local society. That is the impression we get when we read that

2. Use of Malay/disappearance of Malay

- Malay in Magindanao

In 1686, William Dampier reported that two languages were in use in Magindanao, that he called the Mindanao and the Malay.

In fact, when Thomas Forrest passed by Magindanao one century later he collected an oral genealogy which was recited to him in Malay by Fakymolano, the brother of the sultan Pakar-ud-Din.

But in the beginning of the 18th century, a ruler of Magindanao, sultan Bayan, use Spanish to write to Dutch and he requested they do the same because he said, his writers did not understand the Malay.

- Malay in Sulu

Regarding Sulu, I do not know any testimonial regarding the use of Malay for a period before the 18th century. This does not mean Malay was not in use, but it was more difficult for European to access the archipelago. Military presence were short (1638-1646), there was no permanent establishment and when there was, like the one of the Jesuits (1744-48), their freedom of movement was limited.

In 1774 the British traveller Thomas Forrest stopped in Cagayan de Sulu, a tiny island situated between Palawan and Jolo and part of the sultanates. He relates that the local raja talked fluently in Malay.

However, in 1879, the sultan of Sulu has difficulty to read a letter in Malay (because it is written without diacritical signs when Tausug in jawi have the vowels marked.)

- Bruneian Malay

Besides these factual elements, studies in historical linguistic show Bruneian Malay was in use in Manila between the 16th and the 18th centuries, which is the period when a majority of Malay terms passed in Tagalog. Due to the contact with Sulu, we can infer a similar situation in the archipelago.

= The use of Malay was clearly attested between the 16th and the 19th in the southern Philippines, a common cultural feature shared with the other sultanates in Southeast Asia. However, it was not widely spread among people and reserved to the elite of the Sultanate.

3. Manuscripts and pusaka

- Lontar and European paper

This use of jawi/kirim, which spread in the sultanates while Malay was in use, was not just an immaterial knowledge. It was also material manuscripts.

Writing tradition existed in the Philippines previously was on bamboo, Baybayin script.

According to the American administrator who collected and published the genealogical narration and the codes of laws, what the Sulu genealogy were also called "lontar", a name given in Southeast Asia to manuscripts made out of dried palmyra palm leaves. This tradition was widespread in indianized Southeast Asia lontar, among the places in contact with the Southern Philippines, it was used in Bali, Java and Sulawesi. And in the 18th century, these palm leaves were imported, a large quantity by Bugis to Sulu. It is therefore probable that this trade existed since an earlier time and that lontar have been transmitted to Sulu through a Bugis agents.

The use of the term lontar, to designate manuscripts which were no longer palm-leaves manuscripts, is the reminiscence of a previous use in Sulu writing. In the 19th century all documents were copied on European manuscript, like in the majority of Southeast Asia.

- Pusaka

The difficulty to secure manuscripts from the Southern Philippines comes from the special status these texts have. They are pusaka, a Malay word to say heirloom.

A simple definition of pusaka is: they are objects which bear a mystical dimension and which therefore are much more than objects. They are potent objectst which confers power and status to it their holder.

The form is therefore as important as the content. Sometimes, it is therefore more.

[SLIDE 18]

III – Conception of world and power

Finally, I reach the heart of the demonstration: the deep link between the Southeast Asian sultanates.

We have seen the form of the texts, but what is inside? Besides the genealogical information, the sarsila contain myths of islamization which are also myth of dynastic foundation.

1. Myths of Islamization

- In Sulu the composite nature of the sarsila appear when one try to analyse this myth. There is two different myth
 - one predating Islam, saying that the ancestors of the inhabitants of Sulu were

Jamiyun Kulisa and Indira Suga, then Tuan Mashaika who begot the mawmin (arab words for 'believers in islam')

- the other which states the arrival of Islam.

Several Muslims figures came to Sulu: Karimul Makhdum, then Raja Baginda, then Sharif Abu Bakr. It has to be underlined that these names are titles, built on Malay, and Arabic honorific terms (at the exception of Abu Bakr) therefore it is historically impossible to know if they existed, if they were the number stated and did what is said.

If it is evident that missionaries and Muslim traders came in the Southern Philippines, it is less evident to affirm that the sarsila state exact facts. Sarsila are not historical records in a European modern sense, they are “what allow to link origin to the present”, “what legitimate the existing order”.

[slide 19]

2. Topos of Malay literature: Iskandar Zulkarnain and the Muslim saints

The names are literary topos which are shared in the oral and written literature of the Southeast Asian sultanates. They are-

- Iskandar Zulkarnain** which is often presented as the ancestor of royal dynasties in the Malay literary world. It stands for Alexander the Great and reached this corner of the world through a long journey in the Muslim world where the tradition of Alexander the Great being a Muslim spread. In Malay literature, the Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain narrated its adventures but this figure is also found in several other texts

Hikayat Perak – Misa Melayu

Hikayat Palembang – Sili-sili Asal di Negeri Palembang

Hikayat Andalas

Hikayat Aceh

Undang-undang Melaka

Sulalat al-Salatin (also known as Sejarah Melayu) includes several episodes of the Hikayat Iskandar Zulkarnain

Bustan al-Salatin reproduces the genealogy of the Sulalat al-Salatin

Ceritera Asal Bangsa Jin dan Sehgala Dew-dewa where Iskandar convert jinn to Islam

- Iskandar Zulkarnain penetrated different Sulu myths, it can also be found in different oral tradition, *kissa*, collected in the 20th century in the archipelago. These tradition do not deal with islamization, because they start in an islamized context, their function is to explain who were the ancestor or the people of Sulu.
- In the sarsila of Magindanao, Iskandar Zulkarnain is the sultan of Johor, the grand-father of Sharif Kabungsuwan who islamized Mindanao.
- The name Sharif Kabungsuwan, which means ‘the younger of the sharif’, seems also to be the remaining element of the Malay tradition according to which

Iskandar had three sons who went abroad to rule over three kingdoms: Rum, China and Minangkabau

[SLIDE 20]

b. Muslim saints: shaikh/sayyid and makhdum

- The sayyid/shaikh are figures who have here the function to link the dynasty to an Arab ancestor and to the Prophet Muhammad.
- As for the Makhdum, this case is slightly different and interesting because it links the sarsila with the practice of a pilgrimage in the Southern Philippines. Mkhдум means the one who is served but it is also used for religious people who have a particularly important knowledge. In Malay texts it always refer to people from the Middle East with extraordinary spiritual power and it is also found in South Asia to call important sufi figure

Figures of makhdum are found in the following texts from Kalimantan, Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula:

Sulalat al-Salatin
Hikayat Hasanuddin
Syair Hamzah Fansuri
Hikayat Banjar
Tuhfat al-Nafis

- The makdhum being a man with spiritual power, the places where he is buried, or the places where he passed, are believed to be potent. Therefore people go to the places – called tempat - believed to be their grave, marked by stone but no epigraphical traces, to pray. This practice, widespread in the Muslim and Malay world where it bears another name, kramat. Kramta and tempat are the same reality, and involve common practice of piety on the the said graves. Tempat is a May bruneien term meaning “place”. In the Southern Philippines, these tempat where the makhdum is said to be passed or buried are in

Simunul (Tawi-Tawi), near Bohe Indangan Mosque
Sibutu (Tawi-Tawi), Tandu Banak
Bud Bungao (Tawi-Tawi)
Tubig Dao (Tapul, Sulu)

[SLIDE 21]

c. The Johor and the Sumatran origin: connecting to the literary world of the Southeast Asian sultanates through Brunei

There is a second element which is important for our purpose : these people are said to come from specific places located in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula. These places are given in other texts for Southeast Asian sultanates as the source of their political legitimacy:

- Palembang (near the mythical Bukit Siguntang, Siguntang Mount, from where the rulers of Melaka are said to come from)
- Minangkabau (in the *Selesilah raja-raja Brunei*, the equivalent of the sarsila for Brunei, Minangkabau is given as the place of origin of the royal regalia)
- Johor (sultanate which was built after the fall of Melaka into Portuguese hands, by the ruler who could escape)

The selesilah Brunei is known through manuscript and an inscription on Stone, the Batu tarsila. Here is the extract interested for our concern (in power point):

“Maka Seri Sultan Mahomed Tej-Waldin menitahkan pada Tuan Haji Khatib Abdul Latif menurahkan Selesilah ini supaya dikatakan segala anak chuchu-nia Raja yang mempunyai takhta mahkota karajaan dalam kandang dairah negri Bruni Darusalam yang turun tamurun yang mengambil pusaka nobat nagara dan gunta alamat deri negri **Johor** Kamal-ul-Makam dan mengambil lagi pusaka nobat nagara gunta alamat deri **Menangkerbau** itu negri Andalas”

Batu Tarsila

= These myths show cultural contact with the neighbouring sultanates through different literary elements – key figures, places – which are small unit constitutive of myths in Southeast Asian sultanates

- The Sulu and Magindanao sultanates have the same mythical geography which is centred on the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. I insist on the term imaginary because other places with which the southern Philippines were in close contact are not stated: Ternate and Sulawesi. This show the sarsila select the information it gives as – again - it is not a strict record of the past but a charter to trace legitimacy and give authority to the rulers.
- Therefore the lands cited in the sarsila do not represent the extent of the known territories. They are “a certain territory” which, in the genealogical narration, has a clear function.
= The Western part of the Malay world is pointed as the origin of Islam, it is the center of the political and spiritual legitimacy for the ruling families of the sultanates of Sulu and Magindanao.

= therefore, this geography should be read as a filiation geography – for the people of Sulu and Magindanao, political and religious authority originally derived from the Malay kings of Johor.

An important note is that Malay here is the adjective to define the dynasty of the rulers, not the ethnical group (and it has also nothing to do with Malay of Malaysia as well).

[Slide 22]

Conclusion:

This presentation had two purposes:

- 1- To show that “weak” sources from the Southern Philippines,(no original, translated in English) can be used when crossed with other materials and analysed in details. For this we have to enlarge the frame of study and to look at the Philippines at different scales, not only regional or national but also interinsular (or what is now called international).
- 2- To show Islam came with a culture, which was not a pure Arab or Persian one. This culture can be called Malay because of the lingua franca which contributed to circulate it (although not exclusively) but also the Muslim culture of the Southeast Asian sultanates. This culture involved a language, a system of writing, stories and myth but also the copy of manuscript and illuminations of manuscripts, especially Coran.
 - Each sultanate had individual features, particularity, but they also shared common references, the most important being the source of political and spiritual legitimacy. Disguised under different myths, the matrix was the same, it traced the origin the lineage of the rulers of Melaka/Johor.