FOCUS ON ISLAM IV
Archaeological approaches to the study of Islam in Island Southeast Asia

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The Indonesian archipelago (Island Southeast Asia) now has the largest Muslim population in the world. How, when and why did Islam arrive? Archaeological investigations show that the conversion process was long and patchy with many forces at work.

Keywords: Island Southeast Asia, Islam, conversion, pig bones

Introduction

By the end of the seventeenth century, Islam had become an important part of people's lives in large portions of Island Southeast Asia. The social processes at work behind this remarkable transformation, which has left the contemporary nation of Indonesia with the world's largest Muslim population, remain unclear. Scholars have approached these questions from a variety of perspectives, but their evidence has been primarily from textual sources. This article briefly considers how archaeological evidence has contributed to this scholarship, and assesses its potential as a source of data for future research.

Research questions

The study of Islam in Island Southeast Asia has differed somewhat from the study of Islam in the Middle East. As with other regions outside the 'core' of middle-eastern Muslim culture, such as Africa and South Asia, scholarship about Island Southeast Asian Islam has been dominated by social and political historians and anthropologists, although this difference may be overstated if one considers the contribution of Islamic scholarship from within religious institutions (Andaya 1993; Cummings 1998, 2001; Dobbin 1980; Feener 1998; Gordon 2001; Hall 1977, 2001; Hooker 1983; Johns 1980, 1981, 1995; Kathirithamby-Wells 1987; Manguin 2001; Pelras 2001; Reid 1993a,b,c; Ricklefs 1979; Riddell 2001; Riddell & Cotterell 2003; Steenbrink 1993). However, a review of primarily Western literature reveals a variety of related questions guiding research on Island Southeast Asian Islam which are relevant to those interested in how historical processes contributed to the contemporary practices of Muslims in Island Southeast Asia today.

Origin questions ask when Islam first reached south-east Asia, where the entry points were, who brought it and from where they came. Many of the foreign visitors to Island Southeast Asia whose impressions were recorded in writing were also interested in how and

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Received: 22 January 2004; Accepted: 18 May 2004; Revised: 26 May 2004

ANTIQUITY 79 (2005): 829–836

when Islam first appeared in the region. European visitors were particularly concerned with this issue; the first Portuguese traders to reach the East Indies always recorded whether people were *moors*. Often they also asked local people how long they had been believers, and in many cases people told the Portuguese that they had only recently converted (Barbosa 1921; Galvão 1862). In what is now the Maluku province of Indonesia, for example, people told Portuguese visitors in 1512 that they had converted only 50 years earlier (Pires & Rodrigues 1944). These and other Christian European visitors were interested in these questions because their voyages were in part motivated by competition (both on economic and ideological grounds) with Muslims. These European observers, whose writings make up the bulk of the oldest available documents about Island Southeast Asia, speculated that Islam was brought to these regions, far from the Middle East, by traders rather than religious specialists. However, as I will discuss in more detail below, these documents are the record of ideologically biased and not always well-informed observers.

Questions about the origins of southeast Asian Islam have continued to be of central interest for both Asian and non-Asian scholars. Interestingly, prevailing theories about the chronology of conversion and the people who brought Islamic ideas to the region have not been seriously revised from the earliest Portuguese speculations. In general, these theories hold that Islam was brought to Island Southeast Asia primarily by traders rather than religious specialists or missionaries, and that these traders came from South Asia rather than the Middle East. The dating of the first Islamic influence on the archipelago relies primarily on evidence from epigraphic inscriptions on gravestones from Muslim burials, the earliest of which were found in Sumatra and date to the twelfth century AD (Hall 2001). There is some evidence from Arab texts that Muslim Arabs visited the region even earlier, and it is likely that Islamic ideas were introduced to the region by the tenth or eleventh century (Tibbetts 1979).

Questions of *Islamisation* ask how Islam came to be accepted and practised by political leaders and large numbers of their followers. They build on evidence for the chronology and cultural context of the people that scholars believe brought Muslim ideas to Island Southeast Asia. Two basic theoretical approaches guide these questions. One proposes a top-down conversion, in which political leaders drive the large-scale conversion of their followers, while the alternative proposes that Islamisation was a ground-up process, whereby political leaders converted only when sufficient numbers of their subjects were already Muslim. Within these frameworks, there has been considerable debate about the relative role of political Islam and Sufism in relation to the degree to which new Islamic ideas were understandable and sensible to south-east Asians and their diverse pre-existing belief systems (Reid 1995).

There has been considerably more variation in Islamisation theory compared with origin theory. As more old texts authored by south-east Asians have come to light, theories have tended to emphasise south-east Asian agency as well as regional and local variations in the cultural processes at work.

Limitations of textual evidence

Scholars of south-east Asian Islamisation have relied on texts written by south-east Asians, including manuscripts and inscriptions on stone monuments, and texts written by foreigners,

including Muslims from South Asia and the Middle East, and non-Muslims from Asia and Europe. This body of evidence, as with any, is subject to bias related to the differential preservation and curation of the body of texts as a whole, as well as bias in the writing and reproduction of individual documents (Lape 2003). In the case of the whole body of evidence, the most influential factor is the fact that the warm and humid south-east Asian climate has probably resulted in the loss of many more paper documents than those from drier, colder climates. There are relatively few documents that record the voice of south-east Asians, particularly for the earliest introduction and acceptance of Islam before the fifteenth century. Most of the earliest surviving south-east Asian texts come from stone inscriptions on gravestones.

The majority of surviving texts analysed to date were written by foreigners. This introduces another set of biases, which are exacerbated by the highly politicised nature of the relationship between early modern (and contemporary) Europeans and Muslims. European visitors wrote most of these documents, and historians have to untangle a complex set of attitudes and histories of the relationship of Islam to Europe and the European colonial projects in south-east Asia to get at social processes related to Islamisation.

Even for the minority of texts written by south-east Asians, there are considerable biases. Unlike the documentary record for some other places and periods, the pre-seventeenth-century record of Island Southeast Asia consists almost entirely of texts authored by the political elite explicitly for memorialising purposes. There are few documentary records of the day-to-day activities of non-elites. The vast majority of Island Southeast Asians are essentially voiceless, particularly for the crucial period before the seventeenth century when they were presumably undergoing a major cultural shift.

This bias, while recognised by most historians, has also been reproduced in some of the scholarship. For example, the date of 'conversion' for regions in what is now Indonesia is typically assumed to be the date of conversion to Islam by a political leader, as explicitly memorialised by them. The conversion of their subjects has typically been assumed to coincide with that of their leader. Further complicating things is the known existence of 'foreigner' enclaves in many regions, from Sumatra to the Moluccas, most of which were established quite early, at least as far back as the twelfth century AD. How socially and ethnically separate these enclaves were from the rest of their host settlements remain poorly understood, but it is clear that many of these were identified as Muslim, and pre-dated the conversion to Islam by local leaders, as in Makassar for example. There are some excellent analyses of invented and augmented traditions in Island Southeast Asia (Bowen 1989; Ellen 1986, 1993, 1997), but this type of research has yet to see wide application.

Archaeological studies of south-east Asian Islam

Considering the dearth of texts from the earliest periods and the considerable limitations of even the later period texts, one would think archaeologists would rush to fill the gaps. However, despite what seems like an obvious place for archaeological data to make a difference, there has been relatively little archaeological research directed to answering either origin or adaptation questions in Island Southeast Asian Islam to date. Both south-east Asian and foreign scholars have been apparently uninterested in this period. For example, a survey of Indonesian archaeology theses and dissertations reveals only 2 out of 26 papers in the

past two decades focused on the Islamic period (Tanudirjo 1995). Most archaeology of the Islamic period has been in the classical archaeology tradition, oriented towards describing Islamic period tombs and monuments rather than answering questions of social change (e.g. Ambary 1980). Those with an anthropological approach are few, and are worth briefly reviewing here in order to demonstrate the potential for additional work.

For the Malacca straits region and Java, Allen has taken a geoarchaeological perspective in her studies of sites on the Malay Peninsula. Using the documentary record as a starting point, Allen asks what 'foreigner' Muslim settlements and enclaves would look like. She concludes that extensive coastal progradation has altered the landscape considerably in this region in the past 600 years, and that we may be looking for these sites in the wrong places; they are probably located inland from the contemporary coastline (Allen 1991, 1998). Miksic's research similarly challenges conventional archaeological wisdom. In looking for traditional hallmarks of urbanised settlements thought to be distinctive characteristics of Malay trading 'states' beginning at about AD 0 and developing through the Islamic period, Miksic suggests that south-east Asian urban centres may look completely different from cities in other parts of the world. Perhaps because of logistical problems related to water supply in the humid tropics, he suggests that 'urban' centres were more ephemeral and less densely populated than we expect, which, if correct, will have important implications for future survey work in the region (Miksic 1989, 1999, 2000).

Other archaeologists have challenged textual sources more directly. Working in south Sulawesi, Bulbeck used texts authored by Sulawesi religious and political leaders as a starting point to ask questions of the archaeological record (Caldwell 1995; Cummings 2001). He found that Luwu origin stories did not necessarily agree with his archaeological data; the stories appear to have overstated the rapidity of social change, as the archaeological data suggests considerable continuity over time (Bulbeck 1992; Bulbeck & Prasetyo 1999, 2000).

Although it is outside the area of direct Islamic influence, Junker's research in the Philippines demonstrates how texts (Chinese and Spanish texts in this case) often contradict pasts reconstructed with the use of archaeological data (Junker 1999). This approach, I suggest, may hold considerable promise at this moment in global scholarship to add to our understanding of the origins and development of south-east Asian Islam. By focusing on a small, local scale and using documentary evidence as a source of research questions rather than answers, there is considerable potential to achieve surprising results. This has been the most productive area in historical archaeology in general, and is one method for moving archaeological research of 'historical' periods out of its secondary role as 'handmaiden to history', where archaeological data merely illustrates or fills in the gaps of document-based research (Andrén 1998; Feinman 1997).

I chose this approach for my research in the eastern Indonesian Banda Islands. These small islands, once the world's sole source of nutmeg, and a local entrepôt for cloves, were situated at the eastern edge of the Muslim world system at the time of first Portuguese contact in 1512. Historians, working primarily with European documents, have concluded that the Bandanese converted to Islam sometime in the mid–fifteenth century (Abdurachman 1978; Hanna 1978; Villiers 1981, 1982, 1990). The story of the conquest of Banda by Dutch forces in the early seventeenth century has tended to lack significant Bandanese agents. Rather, Banda is merely an exotic setting for a battle between Portuguese, English

and Dutch merchant states. Preliminary archaeological data suggested a somewhat different story. Using pig remains as a religious marker (cf. Fennell 1998; Insoll 1999), I mapped patterns of pig use in 21 sites across three islands. Other researchers have concluded that pig avoidance was the most important public marker of Muslim identity in Island Southeast Asia; it would have been a dramatic gesture in a region where pigs are among the most important sources of protein (Groves 1981; Reid 1993c). Many of the sites analysed for this project coincided spatially with historically recorded and mapped villages, some of which were abandoned in the post-Dutch conquest period. Two surprising results were found.

If we assume that Bandanese converted to Islam *en masse* around AD 1450, we should expect to see a sharp drop in pig remains found in archaeological layers after that time, and in fact this is the case for several of the excavated Banda sites, with two important exceptions. In one settlement, pig remains were absent from its initial occupation in approximately AD 1200, 250 years earlier than expected (they appear in this site only in post-AD 1650 layers, when the site became the centre of Dutch colonial settlement). This settlement appears to coincide spatially with a 'Javanese' enclave described by early Portuguese and Dutch visitors. A second anomalous result comes from a settlement located just 1km from the one described above. On this site, pigs comprise the dominant faunal remains from initial habitation to site abandonment (*c*. AD 500-1650), evidence that people inhabiting this site were eating pigs about 100 years later than we would expect from the documentary evidence. When I returned to the documentary record to try to reconcile these apparent contradictions, new patterns emerged. Inspired to conduct a closer reading of details such as political titles, village alliances and warfare, I noticed important differences between the two anomalous settlements. For example, the political leaders in the second settlement never had Muslim titles like Imam, while all other villages had this title. Although European observers never acknowledged these differences as based on Muslim identity, Muslim identity difference nonetheless could explain both sets of data. I concluded that Banda had a much longer experience with Islam than previously assumed, but also that conversion happened gradually, and at European contact, differences in belief and behaviour were a significant source of social tension, tension that may have made Banda particularly vulnerable to European conquest (for more details on this analysis, see Lape 2000, 2002a,b).

Future directions

As has been emphasised in this paper, the archaeology of Island Southeast Asian Islam is mostly unrealised potential. Clearly, much work is needed to accurately date and characterise the earliest period of contact with Muslim traders. It is unlikely that significant new documents will emerge to shed light on this period; it is up to archaeologists to provide new insights. The period of AD 1400-1700, when an Islamic conversion movement swept through the archipelago, also requires more data and interpretation, particularly that focused on the lives of 'those of little note', the non-elite commoners. This class of people undoubtedly played an important role whether they were the causes or effects of the conversion of political elite. Archaeological data has particular strengths in analysing the material effects of Islamisation, such as changes in foodways and related environmental

after-effects, for example the impact of the sudden abandonment of pig predation on small island ecosystems (Lape 2004). Exploration of the archaeology of changing urban forms driven by emerging Muslim states, with attention paid to their possibly distinctive south-east Asian expression, is also needed. Further work on the sources of the distinctive Island Southeast Asian Muslim ideas, identity and practice, and the link between ideological sources and long distance trade, is another avenue for future exploration. Island Southeast Asian Islam cannot be understood as Middle-Eastern Islam expressed unchanged in a new region; it has a particular history, one that is increasingly relevant to contemporary global culture.

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