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## Nusantara and Islam: A Study of the History and Challenges in the Preservation of Faith and Identity

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** *Nusantara* or the Malay Archipelago is the general term used to refer to the populace of Malays living in many parts of Southeast Asia, stretching from Vietnam, Cambodia, to Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and Southern Philippines. **Objective:** This paper attempts to shed light on the history and challenges the Malays faced in the preservation of their faith and identity as Muslims across the Malay world. **Results:** Islam came to the Malay world from many locations. In addition to the Indians and Persians, the Arabs also played a role in bringing Islamic civilization to the Malays. As opposed to the teachings of the Indians and Persians who were responsible for the spread of mysticism and other popular elements of Islam, the Arabs familiarized the Malays with the orthodox teachings of the religion. **Conclusion:** The paper concludes that the Islamic Malay culture today is a tapestry of numerous strands as the total impact of Islamization had come from many different directions while the Malays struggled with a host of issues to maintain their faith and identity

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## INTRODUCTION

*Nusantara* or the Malay world refers to the vast land areas in the Southeast Asian continent and islands located between the sea routes of China and India (Ishak, 1990). *Nusantara* covers the vicinity where the inhabitants are Malays such as in Sumatra, Jawa, Sulawesi, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, the Philippines and the Champ-Malays of Cambodia and Vietnam (Ishak, 1992).

The history of religion in the Malay world is wrought with complexity. One of the reasons for this religious complexity is due to the fact that Islam was not the first major religion to flourish in the *Nusantara*. The earlier presence of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity had dominated the religious faith of the local population (Ibrahim et al., 1985). Until today, there are Malays who are minorities in Buddhist and Christian majority nations. Subsequently, the Muslims of the Malay world are divided into Malay/Muslim majorities of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei and minorities of Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines.

### Islamization of Nusantara:

The Islamization of the Malay world is one of the most interesting episodes of the history of the spread of Islam through missionary efforts. Islam was accepted by the people of the Malay world without the use of swords but by peaceful and voluntary conversion (Arnold, 1913). Muslim missionaries came to the shores of the Malay world and proceeded centuries ago with their work, untiring efforts and full commitment to spread the word of Allah. It was generally accepted that the propagation and spread of Islam was largely due to the efforts of the Arab and Indian merchants (Mahmud, 1960). It is never an easy task to specifically pinpoint the exact moment when Islam first set foot in the Malay world. However, an early record of Arab contact with Malaya and Indonesia is found to be in the middle of the 7th century, indicated in the writings of Arabic-Persian geographers in which references were made to the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, particularly in the writings of an Arab scholar, Al-Mas'udi, who described the various spices available on the islands (Hall, 1981; Al-Attas, 1969).

Although contacts with Muslim merchants are reported in the early advent of Islam, it was not until the 13<sup>th</sup> century that Islam gained a significant influence. A classical document of Malay history, the *Annals of Acheen* (Fatimi, 1963), dates the arrival of Islam to Sumatra precisely in 1204 CE. The Muslim settlers intermarried

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with the local population and became integrated into the local community. The Islamization of Indonesia was a very gradual process, beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, gaining considerable momentum during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in differing ways continued the spread of the religion (Gordon, 2001) from that point onwards. Nevertheless, the dominant type of Islam that spread across the Malay world was the Shafi'i branch of the Sunni school.

While Pasai was recognised as the pioneering state to accept Islam, it was generally accepted that it was Malacca that provided the impetus for Islamic leadership and administration of the Malay states in the region. Parameswara's conversion to Islam after his marriage to a Pasai princess around the year 1414 and his adoption of the Muslim name 'Megat Iskandar Shah' was a couple of reasons for the rapid spread of the religion. Malacca was thus regarded the major catalyst in the eventual expansion of Islam to other regions such as Palembang in Sumatra, Patani in Southern Thailand, North Borneo, Brunei and Mindanao in Southern Philippines (Mutalib, 1977). Under the leadership of Parameswara, the Sultanate of Malacca had transformed into a centre of commerce and the dissemination of Islam across the Malay world. Islam was spread not just through commerce but through inter-marriages as well.

The history of the spread of Islam in Indo-China is obscure; Arab and Persian merchants probably introduced the religion into the sea-port towns from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Arnold, 1896). But its most significant expansion was due to the migration of the Malays from Malaya and Indonesia which began at the close of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Newbold, 1971). The largest group, which constituted over 80% of Muslims in Cambodia and the majority of Muslims in Vietnam, identified itself simply as 'Champ,' in reference to its ethnic ties with Champa. The Champs are composed of Muslims of Malay and Javanese descent and follow Sunni practices (Tarling, 1992). The remaining minority group of Muslims in Cambodia is known as 'Chvea' and their composition is unclear on account of the shared religious practices, but the Chvea who speak only Khmer refer to themselves as 'Khmer Islam' in reference to their assimilation into Cambodian society. Like the Champ communities, the Chvea practise the Shafi'i school of Sunni while maintaining strong ties with its religious texts and with the Malay Muslims.

In the north of Malaya which was commonly known as 'Siam,' Islam exercised considerable influence on the Siamese Buddhists; those who had converted were called *Samsams* and spoke a language that is a mixed jargon of the languages of the two people (Moor, 1968). More specifically, the advent of Islam to Thailand was from three directions as there were traces of Islam in Southern Thailand in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries through Muslim and Arab merchants; Shia Persians and Sunni merchants in Ayudhya, Thailand in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and Indian, Bengali and Chinese Muslims in the North Thailand in the 1870s and 1890s respectively (Abdullah, 2010).

Meanwhile, the Sulu Archipelago between Indonesia and the Philippines served as the springboard through which Islam entered the southern islands of the Philippines from Borneo and the Celebes. Muslim merchants and missionaries brought Islam from India, Malaya and Indonesia to the islands of the Philippines (Matthews, 1944). Also, from Sumatra, Islam spread to the other islands of the Archipelago and entered the Philippines from Borneo by two different routes. One route was via Balabac and Pahlawan to Luzon and Manila Bay. The other route was via Tawi-Tawi and Sulu to Cotabato on the island of Mindanao. Islam is believed to have reached Sulu by the year 1380 (Lobinger, 1919).

The Brunei sources that contain records of the conversion to Islam are the *Silsilah Raja-Raja Brunei* (Books of Succession). The *Silsilah* list the Muslim rulers with the first sultan being Awang Alak Betatar, who took the title 'Sultan' and the name 'Muhammad' upon embracing Islam (Hassan, 2000). Awang Alak Betatar became a Muslim after his marriage to a Johorean Princess and Islam became the official religion of Brunei. The date of conversion remains obscured as there is a difference of a century in the principal rival claims for the date of conversion (Saunders, 1944). In the meantime, Islam came to Singapore in 1819 when two wealthy Arab merchants, Syed Mohammad bin Harun Aljunid and his nephew, Syed Omar bin Ali Aljunid travelled from Palembang, Sumatra and settled in Kampong Glam (Turnbull, 1997). They were Hadhrami Arabs who originated from Tarim, Hadramaut and had travelled to the Malay Archipelago to trade and eventually settle down in Palembang.

Generally, the main factor that led to the conversion of the Malays in the Malay Archipelago was the contribution of the Sufis. The process of Islamization of the Malay world was attributed by their contribution to syncretise Islamic principles with existing local beliefs and religious notions and their tolerance towards pre-Islamic beliefs. The Islam that was brought to the Southeast Asian converts was strongly influenced by Sufi doctrines and practices. The Islamization was due to active proselytization by Sufi missionaries accompanying foreign merchants and traders (Bruinessen, 1994). Throughout Southeast Asia and certainly in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, Islam settled predominantly into the Hindu-Buddhist civilization through the very strong elements of Sufism from the sub-continent, notably India. The individuals who historically brought Islam were mostly Sufi mystic types (Shih, 2002). These views are shared by Al-Attas, a prominent contemporary Muslim scholar, who affirmably believes that it was the Sufis who actually propagated and finally made it possible for Islam to become established among the people (Al-Attas, 1963). Another interesting observation

was that the earliest Muslim authors such as Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsuddin and Nuruddin Raniri who flourished in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries had traces of influence of the Gujarati or Shattariyya order from India (Bruinessen, 1994) in their writings.

The Sufis travelled extensively and virtually all of them established mosques and *madrrasah* (Islamic religious schools) from which they travelled to the neighbouring areas to preach their faith. Just as they had done in other parts of the Middle East and India, the Sufis who spread Islam in the Malay world varied widely in personality and approach. Significantly, the most crucial aspect of their preaching had to do with the mystical belief of the faith as well as its tolerance of other religious beliefs.

### ***The Conversion and Spread of Islam in the Nusantara:***

The spread of Islam in the *Nusantara* or Malay world came through Muslim merchants and traders of the Arab, Persian and Indian descents. Many of these merchants and traders focused their trading activities in the islands of the Malay Archipelago since the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. They came to the coastal city-states and settled down permanently. Thereafter, colonies were established along the trade routes, which led to intermarriages and subsequent conversions of some of the families that proffered women who married the Arab, Persian and Indian merchants (Al-Attas, 1969). Through these intermarriages, the Muslim merchants and traders slowly became integrated with the locals. Where these Muslims settled, their association with Islam manifested itself in their families they started from marriage with the local women (Ravaisse, 1922). It is interesting to note that in most of these regions of the Malay world, Islam spread peacefully and voluntary conversion was far more important than force and conquest. Though the spread was uneven and mainly confined to the key ports of Sumatra, Java, the Malay Peninsula, Sulu and Sulawesi, the rulers on these major trade routes were quicker to convert and were more interested in seeing the religion spread among the population (Federspiel, 2007).

Trading contacts paved the way for the conversion and submission of the Malays to Islam. There is no denying the close apparent link between early Islamization and certain kinds of economic activity in promoting wide adherence and conversion to the new faith. Accompanying them were the dedicated and persuasive Muslim missionaries – theologian, preachers, teachers and saints – who continuously spread the teachings of Islam to the Malays (Jones, 1979). Islam's growth in the Malay world began slowly in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, increased in momentum in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and dominated much of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Muslim merchants and traders impressed on the local Malays that much of the world in West Asia and Africa had already converted to Islam where they inevitable augmented the spread of Islam on the travels and that the values and rituals of the Islamic faith were essentially universal in nature (Schrieke, 1955). They won their way into the hearts of the locals by learning their language and adopting their manners and customs while quietly and gradually spreading the religion of Islam; they quickly built the institutions necessary to support the full practice of the religion (Majul, 1962). The long duration of time they spent with the locals had given them the opportunity to demonstrate their very rigid observation of their religious duties. Soon the "Pillars of Islam" were adopted and practised by the Malays while other values in Islam gradually permeated into the culture (Johns, 1981). Slowly but increasingly, the Malays later assimilated Islamic values into their socio-religious dimensions of life such as in communal feasts, marriages and weddings while purging many of the forms of prior religious and belief systems and customs.

An important shift in the spread of Islam in the Malay world is the Muslim mystical movement known as Sufism. Islam was spread by Sufi mystics who came and lived their interpretation of Islam among the people (Landon, 1949). The early Indian Muslim missionaries were actually Sufis who were able to syncretise Islamic teachings with the existing customary law (*adat*) in which Islam came to be received, adopted, absorbed and translated into the existing cultures and the manner in which Islam had been understood and elaborated (Roff, 2000). Initially, the Sufis had tolerated some aspects of the teachings contrary to the Islamic doctrine such as the worshipping of saints and continuance of time-hallowed offerings at the graves of highly revered ancestors, rulers and teachers (Federspiel, 2007). However, through Sufism, the masses enjoyed a measure of spiritual care in the traditional Malay areas (Williams, 1961). Today, there are glimpses of previous legends and traditions in certain regions of the Malay world as time was required to disentangle the adherents completely from the Hindu-Buddhist legends and traditions.

Today, varied numbers of Muslims can be found across the Malay Archipelago. Specifically, the tabulation of Muslims in the Malay world in 2010 is shown in the following table (Kettani, 2010):

**Table 1:** Malay Muslims in the Malay Archipelago.

Country	Total Population	Muslim Population		Total Southeast Asian Muslim Community (%)
		(No.)	(%)	
Brunei Darussalam	407,297	273,581	67	0.001
Cambodia	15,048,610	288,933	1.9	0.001
Indonesia	232,676,007	205,266,733	88.2	87.23
Malaysia	27,936,164	16,862,268	60.36	7.13
Philippines	93,652,595	4,738,821	5.06	2.0

Thailand	68,207,210	3,100,249	4.56	1.31
Singapore	4,855,632	723,489	14.9	1.71
Vietnam	89,077,289	71,262	0.08	0.03
Malay World	531,830,884	236,377,415		100.00

### **Challenges for the Preservation of Faith and Identity:**

There are more than 236 million Muslims in the Malay world. The following discussion attempts to highlight some of the challenges according to the respective countries.

#### **Brunei:**

Brunei, though small in terms of population and demography, is the second highest developed nation after Singapore in Southeast Asia. The Malays which form 67% of the population adhere to the Brunei traditions which are dictated by the Islamic culture. As a nation with huge oil reserves where its sale outputs are the major source of revenue for the kingdom, Brunei sees to the basic amenities of its people. The government builds hospitals, schools, universities and mosques (The Brunei Government, 1984). Relatively, there is no poverty in the state and the cost of living is kept at a minimum level through various government subsidies. In view of its small land area and population, Brunei's problem is closely connected to the two issues. Brunei is overly dependent on neighbouring countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand for various goods and commodities. There is scarcity of land for agricultural purposes and to feed its people, Brunei relies heavily on imports even rice from Thailand which is their essential staple. Another problem is the low population growth rate of 1.81% which is considered one of the lowest in Asia. In the future, Brunei will have to deal with a more ageing population which could pose a real obstacle for sustaining economic growth and productivity of the nation.

#### **Cambodia:**

The majority of the Muslims are of Malay-Champ origin which constitutes 88% of the Muslim population while the remaining are Indian Muslims. The Champ Muslims are Sunnis of the Shafi'i school. They are generally found in towns and rural fishing villages on the banks of Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers. Historically, the Muslims suffered severe persecution under the Khmer Rouge which eroded their numbers (Bredenberg, 2008). Today, there are about 289,000 Muslims and the number forms 1.9% of the population of Cambodia (Kettani, 2010). The present government is far more tolerant than the previous Khmer Rouge regime. The constitution of Cambodia designates Buddhism as the state religion but provides constitutional rights for freedom of religion, construction of houses of worship and the setting up of religious schools. However, the law requires all religious groups to obtain the necessary approvals from the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs.

Poverty is the main concern of the Muslims in Cambodia. Due to its limited resources, Cambodia allows foreign religious groups to help and provide assistance in education, rural development and training as long as they do not become involved in illegal or political affairs. The Champ people still regard themselves as Malays; adopting the Malay customs and family organization and largely maintaining close contacts and intermarriages among the community.

After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime, Cambodia's Muslims began to receive some help from various social school networks from Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Muslim nations. Much of the help continues to be directed toward religious reconstruction and refugee work (Blengsli, 2009). The Muslims for the most part are well-integrated into the larger society and at the moment the different Muslim school networks seem contend to serve their respective goals and missions. For some time now, they are responsible for educating almost half of the Muslim youth in the country.

#### **Indonesia:**

Indonesia, a populous nation of more than 232 million is in fact the fourth largest nation in the world in terms of population. Its boundaries cross more than 13,000 islands and the country consists of more than 300 ethnic groups (Kipp, 1987). Indian, Arabic, Chinese, Malay and European origins influence each group with distinctive cultural practices developed over the centuries.

With a Muslim population of more than 205 million people, it makes Indonesia the largest Muslim nation in the world. In view of the huge population distributed across the many islands, there are striking variations in the practice and interpretation of Islam. Before the coming of Islam, the Indonesian islands were dominated by Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Until today, there are certain elements of mystical beliefs inherited from these traditions practised in certain parts of Java, the most populous island of Indonesia and Sulawesi (Geertz, 1963). It is regarded as one of the *agama* (religious teaching) which is based on *kebatinan* (spiritual mysticism). *Kebatinan* is the belief in pantheism where the nature or spirits have divine powers. More often, the practice involves a form of sacrifice and devotion to local and ancestral spirits.

In Sumatra, northern Java and Kalimantan, where Islam first set foot, the practice of Islam is in the form of Sufi tradition. Sufism has gained acceptance, is widespread in the rural areas and has become synthesised with the local Malay culture (Bowen, 1987).

Among the urban elite and intellectual community, there is yet another form of practice which is gaining widespread acceptance. The State Institute for Islamic Studies produces new graduates with the zeal of liberal thought. These graduates later join Paramadina Institute, a centre for Liberal Islam founded by Nurcholis Madjid (Solihin, 2009). Liberal Islam recognises the importance of liberal thinking as an ideology that attempts to portray Islam as a progressive, moderate and forward looking religion. Non-government organizations such as Libforall and Jaringan Liberal Islam are actively promoting different brands of religious teachings to the people. The most disturbing aspect of these ideologies is its inclination towards western liberalism and the overwhelming emphasis on human rights.

### **Malaysia:**

In Malaysia, the Malays/Muslims constitute almost 60% of the population and account for more than 16 million of the total population. According to Article 160 of the Federation Constitution of Malaysia, all ethnic Malays are Muslims. Islam is the official religion of Malaysia and the Shafi'i school of thought is the official and legal form of practice. Malaysia is one of the most religious Muslim nations in the world. The *azan* (call for prayers) is heard five times a day from minarets of mosques and *sura* (small praying houses) throughout the country. The country has other Islamic institutions like universities, financial institutions, hospitals, clinics, colleges and schools throughout the 14 states. Muslim women in Malaysia generally wear *tudung* (headscarf) over their heads but there is no penalty for those who do not.

Malaysia has pioneered a simple saving scheme institution called *Lembaga Urusan dan Tabung Haji* or Pilgrim's Fund Board (PFB) in 1963 to help Muslims save money to perform pilgrimage to Mecca. Today, PFB has widened its function into three core businesses; savings, investment and pilgrimage. PFB now has 5 million depositors and total deposits of more than RM24 billion (Tabung Haji Annual Report, 2009). Another important Islamic institution is the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Established in 1983, IIUM aims to become a premier Islamic university in the world. IIUM offers various Bachelor's, Master's and PhD degrees at its 13 faculties. To date, IIUM has produced 28,065 and 10,767 graduates at all levels. IIUM is recognised by the OIC countries as an institution that produces graduates from more than 100 countries (Moten, 2009).

Malaysia is also advancing into a comprehensive Islamic financial system which encompasses the establishment of local and foreign Islamic banks, the provision of a wide range of financial products within the *Shariah* (Islamic law) legislation and the establishment of Islamic finance training centres such as INCEIF, IBFIM and ICLIF. It began with the incorporation of Bank Islam Malaysia in 1983. Today, Islamic financial institutions include local and foreign Islamic banks, Islamic finance companies, Islamic merchant banks and Islamic discount houses (Ghani et al., 2006).

In recent years, Malaysia has faced a few sensitive religious issues that threaten to divide the Muslim community. The issues of apostasy, the banning of former Perlis Mufti Dr. Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin and the controversy in the use of *Kalimah Allah* by the Christians are set to widen the split. The UMNO-led government is currently challenged by the daunting task of handling these delicate issues without allowing them to be turned into religious conflicts. There is an urgent need for effective political manoeuvring to please the Malay community while at the same time hold on to the support of the Christian community, the majority in Sabah and Sarawak. Historically, with the exception of the May 13, 1969 and the Kampong Medan, 2001 racial riots which slightly dented the country's image, the people have been living in harmony. Generally speaking, Malaysia is considered a moderate and progressive Muslim nation.

### **Philippines:**

Islam came to the Islands of the Philippines as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is considered the oldest recorded monotheistic religion. The early centuries of Islam were marked by the gradual spread of the faith to the Southern islands of Mindanao, Palawan and Sulu. Unfortunately, the position of Islam was somewhat affected by the intrusion of colonisation by Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These two periods were characterised by expeditions of colonisation and Christianisation (Majul, 1985). The long periods of colonisation and struggle have had radical effects on the character of the Muslims in the Philippines. Today, there are almost 4.7 million Muslims which constitute 5% of the total population.

The Muslims in the Philippines are known as *Bangsamoro* (Moro race), a borrowing of the old Malay-Spanish language word *Moro* inherited from Al-Andalus in Spain (Kreuzer, 2007). Upon the withdrawal of the USA in 1946, the government realised that there was a need for an agency to deal with the minority Muslims. An agency called the Commission for National Integration was set up in 1957 which was later replaced by the Office of Muslim Affairs and Cultural Committee (Majul, 1985).

Although it failed to eradicate Islam in the Philippines, the long period of arm struggle left the Muslim community almost entirely without economic development. While most of the country concentrated on

economic activities, the Muslims spent much of their time and effort to fight to preserve their way of life. The four centuries of bloody confrontation demonstrated the Muslims' insistence for fair and just policies. The government realised that it was important to maintain peace and stability in the southern regions and embarked on peaceful efforts to bring the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to the negotiating table. The history of failures in negotiations in the past tend to give false hopes, but a significant development in the early 1990s was the establishment of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, which gave the Muslims the control of the region in certain aspects of governance, excluding matters concerning national security and foreign affairs. Social developments began to show some progress through industrial programmes, provision of new educational needs and new roles created for Muslim women. Though Muslims and Christians remain distinctively at odds, the changes in turn have led to greater assimilation of Muslims into the society and, to a certain extent; intermarriages among them have helped to bridge the differences.

#### **Singapore:**

There are about 723,000 Muslims in Singapore which constitute almost 15% of the total population. With the exception of one mosque, Masjid Temenggong Daeng Ibrahim, the other 68 mosques are administered by the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Singapore Islamic Religious Authority) (Sukaini, 1982). There are six full-time *madrasah*. The majority of the Muslims in Singapore follow the Shafi'i school of thought. Muslim and Malay in Singapore are two indistinguishable and interchangeable terms.

Despite the fact that the constitution recognises the Malays as the indigenous people of Singapore, decades of discriminatory policies and the pro-Chinese preference have left the Malays a deprived society with low education and low income. The PAP (People Action Party) government initiated state programmes that promote the Chinese culture and language as official government policies. Discrimination is rife particularly in the private sector dominated by the Chinese against Muslims, especially Muslim women wearing headscarves. The Chinese, thus, have the control of everything including the politics and high echelon official government functions.

The Muslim leaders are aware of the numerous problems faced by the community. Besides tackling educational and spiritual development, the community is conscious of the fact that it must solve problems of high divorce rates, drug abuse, poor parenting and unwed mothers (Ibrahim, 1994). Thus, the Muslim leaders never tire of reminding the community that material development can and must go along with spiritual development; that to be an engineer, a doctor or hold other professional positions is part and parcel of the process of becoming a good Muslim and an effective citizen as well.

#### **Thailand:**

The majority of the Muslim population of Thailand lives in three Southern-most provinces of Yala, Pattani and Naratiwat. There are over 3 million Muslims in Thailand which account for 4.5% of the total population, of which two-thirds are ethnically Malays. The remaining comprises of people from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma and China. Thailand has about 3,500 mosques and maintains several hundred Islamic schools at primary and secondary levels (Yusuf, 2007). It also has Islamic banks in Bangkok and Pattanakarn as well as other institutions elsewhere. Packaged food in Thailand is tested and labelled *halal* (permissible), regardless of who consumes it. The people in the three southern-most provinces speak *Yawi*, a Malay dialect that is not mutually understood by Thai native speakers. The Thai-Malays have similar cultural resemblance to the Malays in Kelantan, Perlis and Kedah, the three northern states of Malaysia.

Though Thailand has witnessed peace and harmony, the country has also seen turbulent times. Before the appointment of the present government, the period was characterised by coups, coup attempts and popular protests. Since 2001, Thailand has been facing renewed violence in the Southern provinces. Much of the blame has been put on the insurgency of Thai Muslim separatist terrorist groups (Malek, 1993). However, activities remain limited despite the recent increase in episodes of violence which have claimed thousands of lives from the group and the government. Historically, the Southern provinces are the dumping ground for corrupt and incompetent civil and military officials. These regions are often plagued not only by government incompetency and inefficiency but also of high level banditry and other illegal activities (Melvin, 2007).

The hard measures taken by former Prime Minister Taksin Shinawatra had further widened the gap between the discontented Muslim populations with the government authorities (McCargo, 2007). Since 2004, the government has imposed an emergency rule in the troubled south. The insurgents in the impoverished south are wary of the government's efforts to impose the Buddhist culture on the predominantly Muslim provinces. Another problematic area is the damaging culture of impunity for the alleged abuse of power of the military over the Muslim community.

#### **Vietnam:**

The Muslims in Vietnam are descendants of the Champ-Malays who migrated from Cambodia and settled in the Mekong River Delta region in the mid-nineteenth century. After the formation of the Socialist Republic of

Vietnam, a big number of Muslims migrated to Malaysia. Today, the population of Muslim community is slightly over 89,000, which constitutes less than 1% of the total population. The Muslim community is mainly ethnic Champ-Malay and some ethnic Vietnamese and migrants from Malaysia, Indonesia and India. Malay is the spoken language of the Champs and Friday sermons are delivered in the Malay language. Some students from the ethnic Champ even go to Malaysia to attend *madrrasah* (Islamic school) education.

Approximately 50% of Muslims practise Bani Islam, a type of Islam unique to the ethnic Champs who live on the central coast of the country. Bani clerics fast during *Ramadhan* (Muslim fasting month); ordinary Bani followers do not. The Bani Qur'an is an abridged version of the Qur'an with approximately 20 pages written in Champ language. The Bani followers also continue to participate in certain traditional Champ festivals, which include prayers to Hindu gods and traditional Champ 'mother goddesses'. These practices continue as they have limited contact with Muslims from other countries (Crysta, 1995).

Poverty is the most serious problem faced by the Muslim community. In view of this, their illiteracy rate is the highest compared to other ethnic groups in Vietnam. Out of the total 71,000 people in the Muslim community, 27% of them never attend school compared to 10% of the general population in Vietnam. Less than 1% of the Muslims have attended some higher institutions of learning (Fry, 2004). The Muslim community remains relatively isolated from mainstream Islam. Due to this, the practice of Islam is somewhat similarly different. They consider Allah as the All-Mighty God but at the same time recognise other forms of deities. The use of Arabic is not widespread even among the religious clerics. Combined with the lack of religious schools, the practice of Islam in Vietnam is increasingly becoming syncretism.

### **Conclusion:**

The arrival of Islam to the Malay world was a result of the dedication and commitment of Muslim merchants, traders and teachers who did much of the real work of propagating and spreading Islam. The tenet of equality in Islam was a dynamic force that appealed to the Malays as opposed to the Hindu caste system which existed prior to the advent of Islam. The simplest rudiments of Islam were introduced which the Malays readily accepted. Islam had become a significant factor in the lives of the Malays and had acquired the valuable status of being accepted as part and parcel of their culture. The process of Islamization was also facilitated by the social aspect of intermarriage among the local population, paving the way for natural development of the religion.

Islam came in a peaceful manner and it absorbed pre-Islamic beliefs and practices such as Hinduism, Buddhism, animism and the local customs to gain the adherence of the Malays. This is supported by the fact that the Malays followed certain customs and practices that were alien to or even opposed the orthodoxy of Sunni Islam teachings. There were regions and areas of the Malay world where the main teachings of Islam could not penetrate, particularly in the daily lives of the Malays. Nevertheless, the Malays continue to be devoted to the religion and strongly resist any efforts to change. It is true that there is a prevailing element of syncretism and mysticism in the Malay world, but above all, the Malays believe that Allah is the sole, personal and transcendent God. A substratum of pre-Islamic beliefs and cultural heritage has remained constant among the Malays partly due to the natural inclination of the people and partly to their own heritage. This explains the complexity of Islam in the region as the Islamic Malay culture in the Malay world is formed by the process of Islamization from many different directions.

While the great majority of the Malays in the Malay world live peacefully with the non-Muslim communities, there is also a long history of localized religious tensions and occasional violent conflicts. There are religious conflicts between Muslims-Christians in Indonesia and the Philippines while in Thailand and Cambodia, the religious violence has been predominantly between Muslims and Buddhists. Where the Malay-Muslims are a minority, there seems to be more concern to develop localized expressions of Islam. Thailand insists that its citizens adopt local names to reflect national identity while Singapore prohibits its school children from wearing headscarves. Other Malay-Muslim minorities in Cambodia and Vietnam strive with the more acute problem of poverty. Indonesia, with its huge population spread in a diversified geographical area, faces poverty, the many forms of religious practices and the more alarming threat of liberalism. The Malay-Muslims in Malaysia appear to be more faithful to their Islamic practice but face the growing influence of Christianisation and secularism. Brunei seems to have fewer problems due to the smaller size of population and the government has also increasingly exerted the official ideology of "Malay, Islam and Monarchy."

While there are many divisions and practices among the Malay-Muslims in the Malay world, the concept of the *ummah* (Muslim community) as an encompassing community of all who follow Islam is a powerful and spiritually laden one. Regardless of the exact nature of their relationships, the interaction has played a powerful role in shaping the diversity, religiosity and political and social life of the Malays.

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