

## ISLAM: A WORLDWIDE RELIGION AND ITS IMPACT IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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**References:** Anthony Reid, "Islamization and Christianization in Southeast Asia: the Critical Phase, 1550-1650". IN *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, ed. Anthony Reid. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp.151-79.



### **Islamic Mosque - Davao City, Philippines**

#### **Introduction of Islam to Southeast Asia:**

The actual timing and introduction of Islamic religion and religious practice to Southeast Asia is somewhat of a **debate**. European historians have argued that it came through trading contacts with India, whereas some Southeast Asian Muslim scholars claim it was brought to the region directly from Arabia in the Middle East. Other scholars claim that Muslim Chinese who were engaged in trade introduced it.

Whatever the source, scholars acknowledge that Muslim influence in Southeast Asia is at least six centuries old, or was present by 1400 A.D. Some argue for origins to at least 1100 A.D. in the earliest areas of Islamic influence, such as in Aceh, northern Sumatra in Indonesia.

Whatever exact dates and sources one chooses to support, there is no doubt that Islamization of many peoples in present-day Malaysia, southern Thailand, Indonesia, Brunei, and the southern Philippines occurred within a few hundred years. The process of religious conversion absorbed many pre-existing Southeast Asian beliefs (often referred to

as '**animism**', or the belief in the power of invisible spirits of people's ancestors and the spirits of nature to influence the fortunes of humans on earth).

The scholar Anthony Reid, Professor of History at the University of California, Los Angeles, argues that this process of Islamization (and Christianization in the Philippines) occurred rapidly in Southeast Asia, especially during the period of 1550-1650.

For example, Islam became strong in eastern Indonesia, especially coastal kingdoms of Sulawesi, Lombok, Kalimantan, Sumbawa, Makassar, and in Sulu and Magindanao (Cotabato Province) in the southern Philippines from 1603-1612. This does not mean that rulers and their subjects in these areas were totally devoted to upholding all of the basic rules of Islam. It means that Islamic influence was present, as evidenced through ruling elites' obligation to renounce the consumption of pork and to pronounce the daily five prayers. Some also practiced circumcision during this period.

### **Islamic Religious and Ritual Doctrine:**

**Origin:** Islam began in the northwest part of Arabia in the 7th century and spread into Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and eventually Spain and Portugal.

**Popularity:** The most populous Islamic country in the world is Indonesia in Southeast Asia. Other principal countries of Islamic belief are Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India.

**The Prophet Muhammad:** Muhammad is the founder of Islamic religion. He was born in Mecca in the 6th century A.D. Orphaned while young, he married a well-to-do widow who employed him in trade. In the year 610 A.D., he began his religious quest. He believed himself a 'messenger' of Allah, the one true God. He attacked polytheism and proposed a religion of equality. By the year 624, he became the leader of Mecca, the sacred city that houses the holy building of the Ka'bah. The Ka'bah is the focus of annual pilgrimages by Muslims from all over the world.

Muhammad died in 632 A.D., but he is considered by Muslims to be the final prophet, the one whom God (or Allah) gave his final revelations, long after the beginning of Christianity in Europe.

Muhammad is not considered a 'god'; he is an ideal figure, a model, but Islam is more conservative than Christianity in that it accepts no sacred or holy figures other than the one god, Allah. Whereas Christianity accepts, in various religious denominations, the holiness of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Islam views such figures as ordinary mortals. Only Allah is sacred and holy in Islamic belief.

**The Koran (Qur'an):** The Koran is a holy book; it is scripture to Muslims. While most

Christians view the Bible as a holy book, the Koran is considered to contain the holy words of Allah. It is not written by mortals, and in that sense it has a deeper meaning than the Bible to Muslims. The words and meaning of Allah can best be understood in Arabic; hence, Muslims all over the world learn to recite portions of the Koran in its original language--again, very different from the Christian effort to translate the Bible into as many languages as possible for missionary purposes.

***Islamic Ritual Requirements:***

- a. Muslims must pray five times daily, facing toward the Ka'bah in Saudi Arabia; these five times are before sunrise, early afternoon, late afternoon, right after sunset, and right before sleeping.
- b. Muslims maintain the fast during the holy month of *Ramadan*, or the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. During this month, Muslims do not eat or drink between dawn and sunset.
- c. Muslim who can afford it should strive to make a pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.
- d. Muslims are expected to cite in public the message and affirmation of faith: 'There is no god but God (Allah) and Muhammad is his messenger (prophet)'.
- e. Devout Muslims must tithe, or pay a tax of 10 percent or so, for the poorer people in the community.
- f. Friday is the holy day in Islamic religion, and a special day of prayer and worship in the mosque, or Islamic temple.

***Ethical Dimensions of Islam:***

For devout Muslims, it is necessary to strive to achieve an Islamic society, or one that meets the expectations of Allah. In this sense, they have an Islamic legal code, or *shari'a*, the law of Allah. By this legal code, all people are equal before Allah, even though the specific rights of men and women differ. For example, men should inherit twice as much as women, a traditional practice in the Middle East. In turn, men must care for and protect and support their wives, sisters, and daughters. Similarly, polygyny, or the right for a man to marry and support as many as four wives, is allowed. In practice, polygyny is not widely practiced owing to the extra expense involved. Usually, only the wealthiest Muslim landowners, traders, or businessmen can afford more than one wife.

***Symbolic Dimensions of Islam:***

It is forbidden in Islamic religion to make graven images or statues or other representations of God, or Allah. Islamic architecture, whether of temples or other

buildings, are major works of religious and cultural artistic splendor. Such art forms are well represented in Malaysia and Indonesia.

***Historical Dimensions of Islam's Influence and Conversion in Southeast Asia:***

In the year 1500, Anthony Reid notes that Islamic influence was present in coastal ports of Sumatra, Java, and Malaysia. During this period, Muslim rulers tried to balance their patronage of Islam with international traders, urban mosques, and basic adherence to the Muslim doctrine of avoiding pork with their need to sustain rural peoples' beliefs in animism.

In the year 1590, Islamic writing appears in both Malay and Javanese scripts. This indicates a period of activity by Muslim scholars in select areas who were promoting Islamic beliefs.

The period of 1550-1650 was unique in terms of both Muslim and Christian influence in Southeast Asia. This was a time of:

***a. Rapid commercialization*** - increased global trade that involved Southeast Asians in a lot of travel outside their home areas. Animism, or the belief in spirits, is an intensely 'local' religious form. It is difficult to perform rituals outside of one's own home area, since spirits (ancestral or otherwise) are not 'portable'. The increased global trade influenced indigenous Southeast Asian traders in two ways: 1) they were attracted to new religious forms that were not tied to specific places; and 2) they were impressed by the wealth and apparent materialistic power and talents of foreign traders. Wealth and power, by indigenous animistic beliefs, signaled enhanced spiritual power. In other words, traders began to contemplate Islam and Christianity as alternative, in some cases superior, forms of religious belief. The success of European traders and Arabic traders during this period provided the basis of attraction to new ritual practices. In many cases, new religious practices were absorbed into the existing Southeast Asian ritual practices--a classic case of 'religious syncretism'.

***b. In the case of Islam***, Southeast Asian peoples came into direct contact with Muslim traders who had been not just to India, but also to Arabia. Arabic scholars also came to Malaysia and Indonesia, facilitating information about the new religion. *In the Philippines*, in contrast, Spanish missionary priests were directly involved in spreading Christian beliefs among the local populations.

***c. Crusades***: The Crusades influenced Southeast Asia in terms of bringing European biases to the region. The Spanish had warred against Muslims in Spain, and so set out to conquer Muslims in the Philippines from the beginning. The Portuguese, in Indonesia, desired to control the 'spice trade' in eastern Indonesia. They identified Muslims as the enemy, and attacked them in the war for control of these valuable commodities. Southeast Asian Muslims opposed all forms of foreign European control, and so identification and conversion to Islam increased in 'spice rich' Indonesia, while it polarized Muslims and Christians in the Philippines.

**d. Sufism:** 'Suf' means the coarse wool clothing worn by religious ascetics. Sufi also refers to the Muslim movements in Indonesia and Malaysia whereby religious ascetics, known for their mystical talents and scriptural interpretations, helped spread Islamic belief. Each Sufi movement in Southeast Asia had a leader, or sheik, who acted as spiritual teacher. They were an important part of the spread of Islam into the region, as all Southeast Asians respected the words of 'holy men' or ascetics. In Indonesia, Sufis were the source of early indigenous movements to purify Islam from indigenous animism. Muhammadiyah, for example, was a 1912 Muslim movement in central Java, Indonesia, that pursued the goal of purifying Islam from indigenous folk elements of Javanese religion, which had earlier incorporated many Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. Eventually, Muhammadiyah became a widespread political movement.

**e. Holy books:** the successful spread of Islam in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (both in terms of Christianity and Islam) owed much to the fact that each religion had a 'holy book', with words and doctrines written down. Animistic beliefs, or those indigenous to Southeast Asia prior to the impact of Hindu or Theravada Buddhist beliefs, had no such written legacies. Written doctrines enable religions to establish durability and long-lasting impacts on people; oral religious traditions easily change and adapt to new circumstances. While these great new religious traditions took a toll on local beliefs, and in that sense were intrusions of foreign influence in Southeast Asia, they also left great impacts. The role of Catholic missionary priests in the Philippines left a legacy of Spanish words in many dialects, even though the average Filipino never knew the Spanish language. In Indonesian and Malaysian languages and dialects, Islam left a legacy of Arabic words as well. Finally, both Catholic and Islamic religions promised an eternal, satisfying afterlife for their faithful adherents--something indigenous religious traditions in Southeast Asia scarcely emphasized, since they focused on the benefits that ancestors and gods or goddesses would bestow on their descendants for correct propitiation and ritual performance *in this life*.

Today, 90% of Indonesians are Islamic, while over half of Malaysia's population is Muslim. In the Philippines, where the Spanish (and later Americans) won the war for religious converts, only 5% of the population is Muslim.