

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Malaysia, Introduction of Islam into

Contributed by Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

Sandwiched between the island of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the Strait of Malacca is the artery for commerce between China, Japan, India, Arabia and East Africa. In the Middle Ages, these Straits were the hub for trade and commerce just as much as they are today. Riding on the monsoons, ships from as far away as Canton, China visited Malacca from January to May. From July onwards, the monsoons reversed the flow of winds, facilitating the return of ships to India and Sri Lanka. The monsoon patterns in the Arabian Sea similarly allowed ships from Aden and East Africa to trade with Gujrat and the Malabar Coast of India.

The interior of the Malay Peninsula is endowed with bountiful resources. Lush forests, coconut groves, a rich soil, an abundant supply of rain and a population endowed with perseverance, hard work and hospitality make this land an idyllic tropical resort. Through the ages, ships have used the coast of this peninsula to dock and transact business. If one were to visit this area around the year 1400, one would find Chinese, Indians, Omanis, Yemenis, Persians and Africans intermingling with traders from Sumatra, Java, Bali and Canton, exchanging goods and establishing trade relations. China exported silk, brocades, porcelain and perfumes. India offered hardwoods, carvings, precious stones, cotton, sugar, livestock and weapons. From the interior of Malaya came tin, camphor, ebony and gold. Sumatra provided rice, gold, black pepper and mace. Java was the source of dyes, spices and perfumes. Cloves were exported from the Malaccas and sandalwood came from Timor.

Muslim merchants dominated international trade in the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal and the East China Sea. A common religion, impeccable business integrity and universal transaction laws based on the *Shariah* had enabled the Muslims to establish a trade network linking the coastlines of East Africa, southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf and the Malabar coast with the islands of Indonesia and the southern coast of China. As early as the 8th century, there was a Muslim trading post in Canton. The coastline of Malaya was cosmopolitan wherein merchants from Malabar, Arabia and Africa lived and interacted with the indigenous Malay population and Chinese mandarins.

It was into this universe that providence injected a prince. Around the year 1390, a prince from Java, Parameswara, was forced to flee his homeland. Landing on the west coast of Malaya with a loyal following of about a thousand young men, the prince lived off piracy for almost ten years. At that time, Siam (modern Thailand) was the imperial power in the area. Parameswara drove out the Siamese and established the town of Malacca in 1403. The name Malacca derives from the Arabic word *Malakut*-meaning market place. The Arabs had maintained a trading colony there since the 8th century.

Once settled, the prince encouraged peaceful trade. The fame and fortune of the trading post grew until it attracted international attention. The Muslims dominated the trade in the Indian Ocean. Arabic had become the lingua franca of traders in this region. Islam was gaining a following in the islands of Indonesia. Across the Straits from Malacca, the powerful Muslim kingdom of Aceh was emerging. Local folklore has it that around the year 1405, Prince Parameswara fell in love with a princess from the court of Pasai, accepted Islam, married her and changed his name to Sultan Iskander Shah.

Thus it was love that brought Islam to Malaya. The bride brought with her good fortune for Malacca. The following year, the Emperor of China, Chu Tin (1403-24) sent a delegation under admiral Yin Ching, offering trade and friendship. The offer was gladly accepted as the Sultan was under increasing military pressure from the Siamese to the north. More courtly transactions followed. In 1409, the great Chinese admiral Zheng Yi (commonly known as Admiral Ho) visited Malacca at the head of a large flotilla of great ships. Admiral Zheng Yi was the greatest seaman of the 15th century. He was a Muslim. The Emperor of China, realizing the importance of Islam in the Indian Ocean region, had appointed him as Admiral of the great voyage. Zheng Yi continued with his flotilla to Aceh, Sri Lanka, Calicut, Bijapur, Hormuz, Aden, Jeddah, Zanj (East Africa), Zanzibar, Shofala and then southwards, crossing what is today the Cape of Good Hope to the west coast of Africa. Admiral Zheng Yi brought an invitation for Sultan Iskander Shah to visit Peking.

In 1411 Sultan Iskander Shah visited China, was warmly received and was given presents of silk, gems, horses, gold and silver. Malacca also received a "most favored nation status" from China and entered into mutual defense agreements to ward off further Thai encroachments into the Malay Peninsula. Upon his return, Sultan Iskander Shah ruled as a benevolent monarch. He invited Muslim scholars from as far away as Mecca, honored them and encouraged the spread of Islam. Malacca became not only the hub of international trade but also a center for Islamic learning and a rich prize that was to be fought over in succeeding centuries by emerging European Empires.

Sultan Iskander Shah died in 1424. His grave is not to be found because the Portuguese, when they captured Malacca in 1510, dug up the graves of all of the Sultans of Malaya and destroyed the tombstones. But the legacy of Sultan Iskander Shah lives. He was a prince who brought Islam to Malayasia for the love of a beautiful princess.

Comments are closed.

[Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.](#)