



Migration, Mobility and the Embedding Process: The Nusantara Islam Experience

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ABSTRACT

Analysis of Islam, migration, mobility and cultural diversity in Nusantara covers Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, and Southern Kampuchea. It tends to be highly empirical in orientation, providing rich, detailed narratives, especially those offered by anthropologists. However, researchers are less interested in developing a conceptual umbrella or analytical tools such as the ‘knowledge-baseline’ and the ‘embedded thesis’ and accessing the macro landscape of cultural diversity in the region. This brief presentation begins with a conceptual framework. It argues that the region is heir to Hindu and Buddhist traditions and three European colonial government and administration systems (Portuguese, Dutch, and British). Islam is but one among all these. In some aspects, the Islam practised in the region has been transformed and reformulated by historical-structural realities. Thus, to understand Islam in Nusantara, one must begin with data from the area rather than some Middle Eastern and theological formulation of Islam. However, we must recognize Islam as a universalist theology originating from the Arabic Middle East. Therefore, a more informed analysis and understanding of Islam and Muslims in Nusantara and their contemporary articulations must be ‘embedded’ in the historical reality based on a ‘knowledge baseline,’ or timeline from ‘plurality to plural society to diversity, each representing a component of the generic sociological concept of “pluralism.” Generated by a complex process of migration. Similarly, to understand contemporary Islam and Muslims in the context of cultural diversity within Nusantara, its ‘embedization processes’, both in terms of breadth and depth and migration-based, must be understood historically and sociologically.

Keywords: knowledge-baseline, pluralism, plurality, plural society, diversity, migration, European colonial rule, embeddedness, ‘embedization process.’

INTRODUCTION

This exploratory discussion on knowledge baseline attempts to explain the embedization process of Islam in Nusantara. It holds firm that the practice of Islam in Nusantara has undergone a series of embedization of earlier elements, namely animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, before Islam found its home in the Malay archipelago. Though the embedization process flourishes and transforms society, the infuse components of embedization create a baseline for the society to accept the organic change from pluralism to plurality later turns into diversity with relatively little hesitation.

MIGRATION AND THE FORMATION OF A 'KNOWLEDGE-BASELINE' IN NUSANTARA

What is a knowledge baseline? It is a continuous and inter-related intellectual-cum-conceptual basis, which emerged from its history and has, in turn, inspired the construction, organization, and consumption process of this knowledge (Shamsul 2001, 2002, 2003, 2007, 2018). Migration is at the heart of this knowledge baseline. Conceptually, the three concepts, namely, 'plurality,' 'plural society', and 'diversity', are articulations and variants of a sociological phenomenon called 'pluralism' generated by different forms of migration in the Nusantara region. The 'pluralism continuum' is a critical 'knowledge baseline' to make sense of Nusantara as both an abstraction, a form of knowledge, and a social reality, a continuum generated by migration, overlooked mainly by analysts of Southeast Asia.¹

In historical terms, plurality characterized Southeast Asia before Europeans came. Plurality here signifies a free-flowing, natural process not only articulated through the process of

¹ Shamsul (2001, 2003, 2004, 2018) coined the term and introduced the concept of "knowledge baseline" to explain the concept, nature and version of "pluralism" found over the last 600 years in Southeast Asia. "Knowledge baseline" initially dealt with the "plurality and plural society continuum". This particular form of knowledge baseline has been expanded and elaborated on in the doctoral thesis by Dr Azmi Azizi (2011). In the present essay, Shamsul included the term 'diversity'. Hence, the 'knowledge baseline' now has three concepts or variations of 'pluralism', becoming a 'plurality-plural society-diversity continuum'. So, the concept of 'diversity' is relevant to a post-colonial variant/version of 'pluralism'. The post-colonial state is 'united' through the notion of the state – it exists in a territory, has citizenship, and the rule of law – but remains diversified and divided hence 'unity in diversity'. The concept of 'diversity' comes from this phrase.

migration but also through cultural borrowings and adaptations. Politically speaking, the polity was the society's political order of the day, a flexible, non-bureaucratic style focusing on management and ceremony by a demonstrative ruler. States, governments, and nation-states, which constitute an elaborate system of bureaucratic institutions, only existed once Europeans came and dismantled the traditional polities of Nusantara and subsequently installed their governance systems, using 'colonial knowledge', which gave rise to the plural society complex.

Historically, 'plural society' signifies both 'coercion' and 'difference'. It also signifies the introduction of colonial knowledge (Cohn, 1969), the creation of social constructs, vocabulary, idioms, and institutions hitherto unknown to the indigenous population (such as maps, census, museums, and ethnic categories), the introduction of market-oriented economy, and systematized hegemonic politics, and most importantly the census (Shamsul A.B 1999; 2001). Modern nation-states or state-nations in Nusantara have emerged from this plural society context.

Once the countries of Nusantara achieved independence, they came to terms with and accepted the reality of the cultural, social, economic, and political divide inherited from colonial rule. The post-colonial era for these countries became a struggle of a constructed 'unity in diversity' – 'politically one state but with diverse demography components or ethnic groups'.

In other words, 'diversity' signifies an inherited dividedness and difference that has created distance, distrust, stable tension, and agree-to-agree and agree-to-disagree situations among the diverse ethnic, social, and cultural groups populating the country. Conflicts in various forms, including violent ones, have constantly threatened the peace and harmony of the newfound independence that they very much desired. To manage this diversity generated by migration, some prefer an 'assimilationist approach,' like Indonesia and Burma, or even Thailand, such as name-changes and a singular medium of national education. Due to demographic reasons, Malaysia adopted an 'integrationist approach' by creating 'integration platforms' as a strategy to create convergences, top-down as well as bottom-up, to make things work, underpinned by the process of 'bargaining, negotiation, and mediation.'

Therefore, the ‘pluralism continuum’ of “plurality-to-plural society-to-cultural diversity” is not only a ‘knowledge-baseline’ or timeline but also a real-life social construct endowed with a set of ideas and vocabulary within which people exist day-to-day in Nusantara. The plurality continuum is both authority-defined and everyday-defined (Shamsul A.B 2001).

EVOLUTION OF ISLAM’S PRESENCE IN NUSANTARA

The overall understanding of Islam, its introduction and evolution, in Nusantara must be in this pluralism continuum. Hooker (1983), a prominent legal scholar on Islamic law, reaffirmed this when he argued that Islam in the Nusantara region is heir to Hindu and Buddhist traditions and three European colonial systems of government and administration; British, Dutch and French.

As such, many scholars have argued that Islam has not escaped the influence of others (Geertz, 1968; Roff, 1985). Indeed, in some aspects of life among Muslims or in their Islamic practices, the practice of Islam has been considerably reformulated because it had to embed itself in a pre-Islamic metaphysical milieu and undergo a process of reshaping by the rational-scientific logic of the European technology of rule underpinning its colonialism (Shamsul, 2001, pp. 355-366). Therefore, in order to understand the role of contemporary pluralism and cultural diversity in the understanding and practice of Islam, Muslims and Islamic Studies in Nusantara, one must begin with materials and data from the region rather than with some Middle Eastern and theological formulation of Islam – while at the same time not denying that Islam is a universalist theology originating in the Arabic Middle East.

To make sense of Islam’s place in the pluralism continuum, we wish to introduce ‘the embedded thesis’, which means that before Islam came to the region, other religions existed, all external to the region. The one indigenous to the region was often called by orientalist mistakenly ‘animism.’ It is a form of spirituality based on indigenous cosmology, which has its intellectual tradition and social order like any other belief system. This indigenous spirituality system became the mould within which subsequent religions got layered and embedded. Based on this thesis, the cultural practice of Islam often includes elements of indigenous beliefs, Hinduism, and Buddhism. How this happened to Islam, we shall turn to now.

THE EMBEDDED THESIS: HOW ISLAM FOUND A HOME IN CULTURALLY DIVERSE NUSANTARA

An argument has heavily informed discourse about the ontology of Islam in the Nusantara region within Southeast Asian studies initiated in the 1960s by Clifford Geertz, the American cultural anthropologist, and William Roff, a historian of the Malay world of Scottish origin who, in the 1970s took issue with Geertz's argument. Both came to create their niche in producing knowledge about Islam and Muslims in the Nusantara.

- a) Geertz (1968) made famous the phrase "Islam observed," which he articulated in a book of the same title comparing Islam and Muslims in Indonesia with those in Morocco. Ontologically, Geertz's emphasis is on "Islamic praxis" or "Islam as a lived reality amongst Javanese Muslims". Perhaps his most famous cultural reading and observation was the *abangan-priyayi-santri* continuum, his typology of Muslims in Java. His many writings on Islam as cultural practice in the Sukarno era of Indonesia have been widely read and influential beyond academia (1986).
- b) Roff (1985), in an article in the French journal *Archipel* almost two decades later, introduces the phrase "Islam Obscured". Although not a direct reaction to Geertz's "Islam Observed", the article nonetheless serves well as a general response to an analytical trend that had become popular amongst Southeast Asianists both within and outside the region, which privileges a culturalist perspective in the representation of Islam in the region. Roff argues that one must not over-emphasize the cultural face of Islam to the extent of obscuring its significant political role in shaping the social life of Muslims at both the structural and agency levels. In his elaboration on the political role of Islam in the Malay World, Roff describes the nature of 'political Islam', or 'Islam as a political system', in the form of the Malay *KERAJAAN*,² The pre-colonial Malay feudal polity. Roff thus provides us with an alternative meaning and form of the notion of 'political Islam' (1985).

² The word *KERAJAAN*, written in capital letters in this essay, refers to a traditional Malay polity. The root word is Sanskrit, which refers to 'RAJA'. When prefixed with 'KE' and suffixed with 'AN', it becomes *KERAJAAN*, which means "the polity of the RAJA". All letters in *KERAJAAN* are capitalized to indicate its pre-colonial form, where religion and state were fused.

Useful as they may be in their analyses of Islam in Nusantara, Geertz (1968) and Roff (1985), they narrate only part of the story. As is the case with Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam's original home is not Nusantara. Islam migrated and was brought to the region by people of foreign origins, including merchants and Sufis. When it arrived in Nusantara, Islam encountered a vibrant Malay civilization that had experienced a history of at least a thousand years, with indigenous so-called animistic beliefs providing the anchor. Anthropologically speaking, it is unthinkable that Islam could have transformed this civilization overnight. It took Islam centuries to find a comfortable home in Nusantara, or the Malay world (Hooker, 1983).

The sociological process of settling into this new home through migration involved complicated, indeed dialectical, interactions between these foreigners bringing the religion of Islam and the locals who eventually embraced the faith. Even amongst the locals, the 'Islamic spread' was uneven. Just as Hinduism and Buddhism had to contend with indigenous beliefs and cultural practices, accepting and accommodating them into their ontology, Islam had to contend with all the pre-existing social phenomena when it first arrived. Whether or not we wish to label this whole diffusionist process as 'syncretism' (if we are structuralists) or hybridization (if we are post-structuralists), one relatively deceptively decide which of the simple fact remains. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all had to go through, for better terms, a continuous process of 'embedding' and 're-embedding' (Shamsul, 2018, p. 97).

The Islam that Geertz 'observed' and the Islam that Roff felt was 'obscured' was the Islam that had been genuinely embedded into the historical and sociological contours of the Nusantaracivilizational landscape. However, the Islam that foreigners brought through migration to the Nusantara world from the Arabian Peninsula, India, or China had previously undergone a complicated 'embedding process' in these regions. In other words, empirically, the Islam that came to this region was the 'embedded form' and not the 'pristine form'. How do we otherwise explain the many shapes and patterns of mosques found in the Malay world? How do we account for the contrast in Mecca during the Hajj season of white garments on Muslims from Nusantara with black ones on those from other parts of the world?

Therefore, although there existed a set of Islamic theological universals accepted by all Muslims – such as the five articles of faith that promise to bind all Muslims together as brothers and sisters – in a lived material reality, these universals have been remoulded by local ontological and sociological conventions. The ‘embedding’ process was, in fact, more complicated than this. An oscillation between ‘dis-embedding’ and ‘re-embedding’ occurred when new social forces arrived in Malay after Islam. The most significant of these was European colonialism.

As practised in the region, Islam and European colonialism became reconfigured in a fluctuating social, political, and economic scenario. In the context of the European rationalist epistemology that informed the colonial process, Islam and other religions were perceived as non-rationalist and even anti-rationalist entities. In the British Empire, they became ‘traditionalist’, marginalized, or side-lined by applying the technology of rule and official procedures that constitute modern bureaucracy. As a result, Hindus became separated from Hinduism and Muslims from Islam. This separation was supported and legitimized by the construction of ‘colonial forms of knowledge’ (Cohn, 1969). Among these was the field of ‘Malay Studies’ which focused on the Malay *ethnicity* as a unit of analysis and consisted of a corpus of material that detailed and elaborated exotic, non-scientific, and yet aesthetically laden “traditional” Malay conventions and material culture (Shamsul 1999, 2001, 2003). This study is one of many examples of what we may call the process of ‘de-embedding’ and ‘re-embedding’ – the shifting of the arrangement in the layering of different cultural influences – that affected Islam in the Nusantara.

Therefore, the Islam that Geertz observed (1968) and the Islam that Roff found obscured (1985) had undergone a series of embedding processes within sociological contexts and historical circumstances that prevailed before and after the arrival of Islam. We wish thus to argue that it is necessary for scholars seeking to characterize or label Islam in Nusantara to take a closer look at ‘embedded Islam’ and at the complex process that contributed to that “embeddedness.” In our attempt to understand and explain the ontology of Islam in the Nusantara region, it will be helpful if we take cognizance of the “Islam embedded” thesis more seriously.

DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHT

Islam in Nusantara, like elsewhere in the world and especially in the Muslim-dominated maritime region called the Malay Archipelago, is an embedded form in the sense that it is not the pristine form that was practised in Mecca and Madinah during Muhammad's time or during the rule of the four Caliphs that followed Muhammad's demise. The embedding process is complex. Rapid migrations generated it from many world regions to Nusantara. The evolution of practice, when it first arrived around the 12th century, the indigenous peoples of the Malay world were already practitioners of animist belief systems, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Later, all became intertwined and hybridized, articulating the local Nusantara's features in tangible and intangible forms (such as architecture) (spoken in Malay). Therefore, Islam entered people's lives in the region and was inevitably shaped and reshaped by the extant historical-structural mould, articulating intense and deep pluralism, popularly and academically known as a situation of 'cultural diversity'.

The teaching of Islam at the initial stage of its introduction in most parts of the world has always been strongly dependent on the 'oral method' (reading aloud the Quran, memorizing, oral interpretation, and open discussion). Indeed, from day one, Muhammad taught Islam using the oral method when he could not read and write. Despite that, it was able to build a considerable number of followers in a short time. It could be said that Islam was best suited for the illiterate, who would subsequently learn to write and read Arabic alphabets to enable them to read the Quran and other Islamic texts. This Islamic progress and development created Persian, Urdu, and Malay texts that unified millions of followers using the same Arabic alphabets in those linguistic constituencies.

The *pondok* school tradition in the Nusantara, especially in Malaysia, is largely oral-based and teaches Islamic theology. Besides memorizing the Quran and becoming a hafiz (someone who memorized the entire Quran), students also learn *Jawi* (the Arabic script used for the Malay language). Eventually, they can read the Quran and other kitab (religious texts) that they will use to acquire converts and educate them in Islam using *Jawi* and *Jawi* texts.



The teaching of Islam in written form developed much later in the Nusantara. First, when there were enough teachers to establish madrasahs which initially taught Islamic theology, but eventually when instruction in modern science and mathematics was added. This blended Islamic theology syllabus took place during the colonial period. This combination of theological and modern subjects resulting from administrative and market demand during the colonial period was integrated into public services. Graduates from such schools were employed in public service and especially in the religious offices of every province/state. This infusion of knowledge of Islam and modern science served the colonial state and the Muslim population.

In Malaysia's post-colonial period, for instance, there was a massive expansion of Islamic education (which also teaches modern subjects), eventually leading to the establishment of Islamic Faculties in some local universities and the setting up of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in 1983. Islamic education and economics, banking, and financial systems became mainstream in the 1990s. Shariah lawyers serving the Syariah courts also increased in number. Today, those studying law in Malaysia specialize in Islamic laws are learnt irrespective of their religion. Islamic financial institutions have become viable alternatives to conventional ones. University College Islam was established in 1997 and later upgraded to a full-fledged university in 2007 (Solahuddin Ismail, 2016).

The re-embedding of Islam into the colonial mould following the migration of the British to Malaya was the turning point in the expansion and transformation of Islamic education in Malaysia, from one purely theological to one that has become modernized and mainstream in the post-colonial era. The student population's size and the number of schools and institutes of higher education specializing in Islamic education, have also expanded. More significant is that Islamic education's content and curriculum became rather pluralized, with graduates enjoying greater employability.

Finally, the effort to position authorized Nusantara Islam in the context of complex and multiple migrations has almost ignored the all-important and multiple layers of the ‘embedization process’ over the last ten centuries. The modern threshold of this embedization process, in ‘an entwined history’ (Aljunied, 2019), is the arrival of the Western colonial ruler and the influx of migrant workers framed through colonial knowledge and the process of ‘define and rule’ and then followed by ‘divide and rule’ (Mamdani, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The analysis tool of ‘knowledge baseline’ provides a foundation to understand better the result of the embedization process in Nusantara, which by default accentuate pluralism and moulds the society in the Malay archipelago, which is already rich in nature, resources and subethnic groups. Hence, the region lived organically in diversity even before the Western colonies introduced a coercive migration through an indentured labour system for mining, plantations, and paid soldiers in the name of white-men burdens.

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