Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era

Trade, Power, and Belief

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Islamization and Christianization in Southeast Asia: The Critical Phase, 1550–1650

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The extensive debate about the Islamization of Southeast Asia has focused principally on the presumed earliest manifestation of Islam in various places and how and from where it became established. European scholarship accepted until recently that Islam came to Southeast Asia through the filter of India, beginning with the small port-states of thirteenth-century Sumatra. Southeast Asian Muslim scholars have generally preferred to see Arabs as the mediators and have attempted to push the dates for Islamization back as far as the evidence could bear—and sometimes farther.

This excessive emphasis on the "first steps" has given rise to a healthy reaction stressing the extreme gradualness of the process of conversion. Merle Ricklefs's "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java" makes the forceful point that the process that began in the fourteenth century is still continuing,¹ and A. C. Milner argues that the Malay state absorbed and used Islam on its own terms rather than being transformed by it.² No one with Southeast Asian experience can doubt

the continuing importance of compromises with pre-Islamic beliefs, which literal Muslims still regard as in need of conversion.

Similarly in the Philippines the coexistence of Catholic and animistic practices and rituals in what is often called folk Catholicism is frequently remarked. The prayers of both the scriptural religions have been widely incorporated into rituals of propitiation of spirits; Islamic and Catholic leaders tactfully leave important ceremonies after having said their prayers, so as not to witness rituals they could not approve.

From these phenomena the inference should not be drawn that conversion to scriptural religion never really occurred, or that the process of religious change has been a slow, almost imperceptible, progression whereby ever greater numbers grafted ever more elements of the new religions onto their existing belief system. On the contrary, religious change is by its nature discontinuous. In certain periods dramatic conversions occur on a large scale, whereas others witness an everyday process of disillusion, backsliding, skepticism, or apathy. There is no doubt that many individual Southeast Asians entered Islam and Christianity passively through marriage, conquest, or the cultural example of their leaders. The crucial turning points for whole societies, however, were of relatively short duration and should be described not simply as adhesion but conversion—which I define as a conscious repudiation of a past identified as evil in favor of an externally defined new ideal. Such conversion is typically associated with profound disruption of the social order. Clifford Geertz summarized Max Weber’s arguments about the advances of the world’s major religions: “This sense . . . that the traditional conglomerate of rituals and beliefs was no longer adequate, and the rise to consciousness of the problems of meaning in an explicit form, seems to have been part, in each case, of a much wider dislocation in the pattern of traditional life. . . . The process of religious rationalization seems everywhere to have been accompanied by a thorough shaking of the foundations of social order.”

I argue that the period 1550–1650 was such a period of dislocation in Southeast Asia as a whole (though shorter periods were critical in specific areas), one that stimulated a remarkable period of conversion toward both Sunni Islam and Catholic Christianity. It is helpful to look at both religions in this context, to separate more clearly the underlying processes from the cultural specifics. Despite the lead in this respect

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given by historians of Africa, it is surprising that Southeast Asianists have not attempted to analyze Islamization and Christianization as part of a similar process. In addition to these advantages of perspective, the relative richness of the sources for Christian conversion helps greatly to shed light on the poorly documented passage into Islam.

The importance of this period is not difficult to demonstrate for Christianity. Virtually nothing was achieved among the indigenous population until the 1540s, when Antonio Galvão impressed many eastern Indonesians during his period as captain of Ternate (1537–40), Antonio de Paiva converted several Bugis-Makassar rulers, and Saint Francis Xavier preached effectively in Ternate and Amboina. The Je-

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suits claimed up to 70,000 converts in the Ambon region in the period 1540–65;7 the Dominicans about 50,000 in the Solor-Flores region from 1559 to 1605;8 Spanish Franciscans and Jesuits about 10,000 in Siau and Sangihe Besar (northeast of Sulawesi) from 1613 to 1665. In the half-century after the Spanish capture of Muslim Manila (1571), virtually the whole of the lowland population of Luzon accepted Christianity, with the process complete in the Visayas by 1650. The rapidity of this Christianization has been hailed as unparalleled before the late nineteenth century.9 In Vietnam in the period 1625–40, Alexandre de Rhodes and his (mainly Jesuit) colleagues claimed 39,000 converts in the southern (Nguyen) state and 82,000 in Tonkin.10

The gains of Islam in this period are generally thought of in terms of eastern Indonesia only. Islam was adopted by the rulers of southwest Sulawesi (1603–12), Kaili, Gorontalo, and other coastal states of central and northern Sulawesi, Butung, Lombok, Sumbawa, Magindanao, and eastern Borneo. Less frequently considered is the high tide of political Islam on the Mainland, with the Cham king (already tributary to Vietnam) becoming Muslim sometime between 1607 and 1676.11 Cambodia having a Muslim king in the years 1643–58, and Muslims enjoying a peak of influence in the Thai capital at the same period. Unlike many of the shadowy earlier acceptances of Islam, those of this period tended to be self-conscious conversions involving a decisive abandonment of one kind of lifestyle and value system for another. The sources are explicit about the exact moment in 1605 when the rulers of Tallo and Goa (the two royal lineages of Makassar) pronounced the shahada (confession of faith) and became Muslims, and about the seriousness with which they took up the new faith. The unusually matter-of-fact Makassar chronicle recorded this of "the first Muslim" (Sultan Awwal-al-Islam), Karaeng Matoaya:

He was adept at reading and writing Arabic [script] and well-read in Islamic literature; from the time he embraced Islam until his death he never once missed the ritual prayer; only at the time he had a swollen foot and an Englishman treated him by giving him liquor did he omit to pray. . . . [one of his widows] said he performed at least two and at most ten raka‘ each night. He performed the supererogatory tasbih on the eve of each Friday and in the month of Ramadan each night.12

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Within a generation of this solemn initial entry into Islam, the old (transvestite) ritual specialists were driven out of the Makassarese realm and habits of dress, devotion, literature, and sexual behavior had completely changed. The new faith provided the ideological basis for an unprecedented intervention by Makassar in the Bugis states of Wajo, Soppeng, and Bone, all of whose ruling elites, at the minimum, were obliged to pronounce the shahada and renounce pork. Though force was clearly necessary to push them over the brink, the ruler of commercially inclined Wajo had already moved intellectually toward monotheism, and the new ruler of Bone embraced Islam so enthusiastically (if perhaps selectively) that he insisted that all Muslim slaves be freed immediately. Another indication of the effectiveness of Islam in abruptly changing lifestyles in southwest Sulawesi is the absence of buried ceramics from grave sites after about 1620, contrasting sharply with burial practice in the two previous centuries.

How deeply Islam penetrated society before what I call the critical period is difficult to establish. The evidence of Islamic tombstones, coins, chronicles of later date, and the reports of external visitors demonstrates that there was a substantial group of Muslims speaking Malay or Javanese in the port cities on the major trade routes; among their number were the most important port rulers of Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, northern Java, and Maluku. In Java around 1500 there was constant warfare between these Muslim beachheads and the remaining Hindu states of the interior. As late as 1596 the first Dutch visitors to Java were told that the Muslims were only on the north coast, while the interior was "heathen." Elsewhere there appears to have been a complex interplay between Muslim ports and animist hinterlands. Rulers often played a mediating role, patronizing the mosque of the city traders, abandoning pork, adopting a Muslim name and dress, but not renouncing the supernatural attributes that gave them power with their interior peoples.

Christian sources frequently point out that Islam was a minority affair in Maluku and the eastern Archipelago in general, and that even that minority had little but the name of Muslims. Tomé Pires reckoned

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only one in ten Malukans was a Muslim, and Xavier added that “the Moros of these regions do not practice the doctrines of the sect of Mahomed; they have no alfaquis, and those they have know very little and are all foreigners.” Early Spanish observers of Muslims in the Manila area, Mindanao, and Ternate pointed out that beyond circumcision and avoidance of pork they knew virtually nothing of Islam.

Arab visitors of this period were in a better position to make such judgments, but some of them did not differ greatly in their assessments. The famous Arab pilot Ahmad ibn Majid was not flattering about the people of Melaka in the late fifteenth century: “You do not know whether they are Muslims or not.” Although this may be less than fair, Pires confirmed the frequent intermarriage of Muslims with non-Muslims in Melaka. The Melaka chronicle itself gives the impression that Melaka Malays were more relaxed than Arabs about such matters as alcohol; it makes fun of a judgmental Arab scholar, Maulana Sadar Johan, who lost a verbal duel with a drunken Malay nobleman.

The Patani chronicle is one of the few Malay sources to describe Islamization in terms of a progression. It relates that the first Muslim ruler gave up eating pork and worshiping idols, “but apart from that he did not alter a single one of his kafir habits.” It was only in the reign of Sultan Muzaffar (d. 1564) that the first mosque was built (“because without a mosque there is no [visible] sign of Islam”) and “the Islamic religion was more widespread in all the rural areas [dusun] and reached as far as Kota Maligai”—still only 14 kilometers from the coast. Even then the people only gave up eating pork and worshiping idols; “heathen practices such as making offerings to trees, stones and spirits were not abandoned by them.”

Finally it must be noted that no Islamic texts in Southeast Asian languages which date from before 1590 have come to light. At about that time, Hamzah Fansuri began writing about the mystical path in Malay, explaining that he did so “in order that all servants of God who do not understand the Arabic and Persian languages may reflect upon

20G. R. Tibbetts, A Study of the Arabic Texts Containing Material of Southeast Asia (Leiden, 1979), p. 206; for fuller quotation, see L. F. Thomaz, Chapter 3 in this volume.
21Pires, 1944, 2:249.
it." He may not have been the first to do so; what is clear is that there is a sudden abundance of Islamic writing in both Malay and Javanese at about the turn of the century, some sublime, some prosaic, and much explicitly propagandistic. Only at this point can we say with confidence that there was a community of Muslim scholars consciously translating Islamic concepts into vernacular texts. If earlier missionaries wrote only in Arabic and Persian, this would be the strongest evidence that their interaction with the bulk of the local population was extremely limited. Within only a half-century, however, Islamic writing in Malay reached its greatest heights in the work of Hamzah Fansuri, Syamsu’d-din as-Samatrani, Nuru’d-din ar-Raniri, and Abdur-rauf as-Singkili. Javanese Islamic texts go back to the same period. This development was strikingly contemporary with the appearance of Christian devotional literature in Malay (beginning with Xavier in the 1540s), Tagalog (from the 1580s), and Vietnamese (from the 1620s).

In the second half of the sixteenth century the boundaries of the "House of Islam" (Dar al-Islam) began to be much more sharply drawn. The established Islamic states, notably Aceh, Johor, Patani, Banten, Demak-Pajang-Mataram, and Ternate, extended their authority to their rural hinterlands, together with their demands for minimal Islamic conformity. In their conflicts with neighboring kingdoms the concept of jihad (holy war) became prominent as Islam began to assume a major role in their self-perception.

Can we identify some of the conditions that made the period 1550–1650 unique in the religious history of the region? One factor on the Christian side would certainly be the Counter-Reformation mentality, carried to Asia preeminently by the Jesuits immediately after their foundation in 1540. This influence made the character of the Spanish operation in the Philippines after 1565 utterly different from the bloody conquest of Central and South America, or from early Portuguese activity in Asia. Conversion of the inhabitants was from the beginning the most prominent item on the agenda of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and Fr. Urdaneta. The number of missionary priests in the Philippines grew spectacularly, from 13 in 1576 to 94 in 1586 and 267 in 1594—a striking contrast to the handful the Portuguese sent to Southeast Asia even in the wake of Francis Xavier. Beginning with Xavier, the Jesuits set a high standard of learning the languages of Asia; Christianity was translated into Malay, Tagalog, Visayan, and Vietnamese in the period 1550–1650.

Nevertheless, the more important factors had to do with developments in Asia itself, which profoundly transformed the lives of Southeast Asians as well as the way the scriptural religions affected them. Of these, I focus on three.

Rapid Commercialization

What European historians call the "long sixteenth century," beginning sometime in the fifteenth and ending about 1630, was a period of expansion and rising prices in the whole global trade system. Both Europe and China certainly grew rapidly in population in this period, and their demand for imported luxuries grew even more strongly. Since Southeast Asian cloves, nutmeg, mace, pepper, sandalwood, sappanwood, and camphor were among the most valued articles in the long-distance trade in this period, the region was necessarily drawn into a rapid expansion of cash cropping for export. Southeast Asian pepper exports, in particular, grew from almost nothing around 1400 to about 8,000 tons in the middle of the seventeenth century. The production of this crop alone must have required the labor of about 200,000 people, and the trade in this and other export items supported far more.

The peak of the commercial boom for Southeast Asia occurred at the climax of this global period of trade expansion, about 1570–1630. The most clear-cut indicator was the flow of silver into the region. New methods of mercury extraction greatly increased the output of silver mines in both the New World and Japan around 1570. Some of this greatly increased production was carried by Europeans to buy Southeast Asian spices and to boost the prices for them. Most of the Japanese silver, and a substantial proportion of the American, ended up in China (where it helped fuel the "late Ming boom"), but it had to pass through Southeast Asia. The Ming court forbade direct trade with Japan, so Chinese traded their goods for Japanese silver at such Southeast Asian ports as Hoi An (Faifo), Ayutthaya, Cambodia, Patani, Manila, and Banten. American silver was carried on the annual galleon from Acapulco to Manila, where it was sold for Chinese and Southeast Asian wares. The flow of silver to and through Southeast Asia reached a peak in the 1620s. Thereafter, the output of the mines slowed, the Japanese ceased coming to Southeast Asia, the Chinese were ruinously impoverished by the mid-century crisis that brought down the Ming
dynasty (1644), and the Dutch progressively established a monopoly over the key Southeast Asian exports.26

During the period of rapid commercialization, large trading cities developed and in turn became the centers of states of unprecedented wealth and power. From the most remote parts of the region forest products, deer hides, and cash crops flowed onto the world market, while in return Indian cottons and Chinese manufactures reached the remotest Southeast Asian markets. All of this must have done much to shake the foundations of social order in a general sense. Intense commercial interaction presented particular problems, however, for traditional Southeast Asian spirit worship.

As Robin Horton points out for Africa, Richard O’Connor for northern Tai-speakers, and Janet Hoskins for modern Sumba, animism was not readily portable.27 Once away from his own familiar landscape, the traveler was at the mercy of unknown spirits manipulated by his enemies. He had to return frequently to his own village to attend to his ancestors. Those who left the village world for trade, warfare, cash cropping, or service to a new lord were in need of universally valid values and identity. In a pattern similar to that sketched by Horton for Africa,28 there was a tendency for the earliest and most thorough converts to Islam to be found in the merchant communities of every port in the region. One of the earliest Javanese Muslim texts even gives support to an Islamic “Protestant ethic,” with its emphasis on asceticism, hard work and little sleep, almsgiving, and not minding being considered stingier after conversion.29 Since the port cities were also the dominant political and cultural centers of the period, their Islamic character eventually influenced all who lived within their economic orbit.

Because the first Muslims and Christians encountered by Southeast Asians were traders and warriors, they appeared both wealthy and powerful. In terms of traditional Southeast Asian religion, this could only mean that they had some advantages in invoking the help of the spirit world. As has been remarked about contemporary Ngadju Dayak religion, “if one man is richer than another they say it is because he must have sponsored the correct rituals at the right time and was

careful in his selection of spirits. . . . The more a man knows about ritual, the more he can do for his own and his family's welfare." Missionaries in the seventeenth century sometimes complained that in their approach to religion Southeast Asians (in this case Filipinos) "seemed to have no heart or understanding for anything except the gaining of money." The process of religious change, therefore, was in part the natural attraction of the ritual practices of those who seemed most successful in the new world of commerce. Observing Islamization at an early stage in the Manila area, a Spaniard wrote: "some are Moros [Muslims], and they obtain much gold, which they worship as a God. . . . They believe that paradise and successful enterprises are reserved for those who submit to the religion of the Moros of Brunei, of which they make much account. . . . These are a richer people, because they are merchants, and with their slaves, cultivate the land." Apparently even without any Islamic proselytism some Filipinos who had dealings with Muslim traders imitated their tabu on pork, presumably believing it to be the ritual key to their success.

Direct Contact with the Heartland

In the case of Christianity, the importance of direct contact is so apparent as to need no emphasis. The Catholic Christianity of the Counter-Reformation depended on a disciplined priesthood for its expansion. The religious orders made priests available in Europe, and much of the success of Christianization depended on how many of these could be put to work in Southeast Asia. The number of indigenous priests was insignificant until the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when the French Society of Foreign Missions succeeded in ordaining Vietnamese, in small numbers and under great difficulties. With this limited exception, conversion to a wholly different lifestyle and value system was the work of foreign priests trained in Europe. Without them, Catholic communities tended to be reabsorbed into the dominant value system of their surroundings.

31 Diego Duarte, "Historia de la Provincia del Sancto Rosario . . . en Philipinas" [1640], in Blair and Robertson, 1903–9, 30.238.
32 Francisco de Sande, "Relation of the Filipinas Islands" [1576], in ibid., 4:67–68; see also Guido de Lavezaris, "Reply to Rada's Opinion" [1574], in ibid., 3:267.
Partly because of the booming economic conditions of the period 1550–1630, the Portuguese and Spanish crowns were able to send relatively large numbers of priests to the East. Political factors soon intervened. When the Dutch captured Portuguese Melaka in 1641, and the remaining Spanish strongholds in Maluku and Sangihe-Talaud were withdrawn in 1666, Catholic priests were excluded from the Indonesian Archipelago except on the most clandestine and occasional basis. The Dutch were not interested in missionary work themselves, and they arrested any Catholic priest they encountered. From 1645 onward, each of the Vietnamese states periodically banished foreign priests and attempted to suppress Christianity, notably during the purges of 1664–65. Thereafter it was only in the Philippines that Catholic priests were present in any large number. Even there, in the view of the Jesuit historian John Schumacher, there was a relapse toward folk Catholicism:

Rather than an intensification of what was accomplished in the Christianization of the 16th and early 17th centuries... there was... growing stagnation from the end of the 17th century. Far from the number of priests increasing so as to make possible a fuller penetration of Catholicism, the number remained stable, for there was a failure to develop a native clergy. Even worse, the proportion of priests to people probably decreased in the face of a growing population on the one hand, and increasing difficulty in getting missionaries to come from Spain on the other.  

Islam has no such priesthood, and one of its great strengths has been the capacity of individual travelers—traders, soldiers, mystics, and teachers—to begin viable Islamic communities. Nevertheless, the redirection of trading routes in the period 1550–1620 and the intensity of commercial activity during this period brought the “lands below the winds” into more intense contact with the Middle East than at any time before the nineteenth century.

Before about 1490 most Moluccan spices and almost all Indonesian pepper had been exported to China. The pull of the European market changed both the quantity and direction of Indonesian exports during the sixteenth century. By 1620 more than 60 percent of the much increased Indonesian pepper crop was being taken to Europe. Some of this increase was taken by the Portuguese. From the 1530s, however,
Muslim traders based in Aceh began sending their own ships to the Red Sea, probably by way of India. By the 1550s they were sailing directly across the Indian Ocean to Arabia, avoiding the dangerous centers of Portuguese power on the west coast of India as well as the Straits of Malacca. This put Aceh in direct contact with the Hejaz, Yemen, and Egypt, as well as with its older trading partners in Gujarat and Malabar.35

This direct contact was short-lived but important. In the second half of the sixteenth century about a thousand metric tons of pepper were being carried from Sumatra to the Red Sea each year, with four or five ships making the annual voyages. As much pepper was flowing along this route toward Alexandria as the Portuguese were taking to Lisbon.36 When the first Dutch, English, and French ships arrived in the Archipelago around 1600, they found traders whom they called Turks or “Rumes” (people from the Malay Rum, an amalgam of Rome, Byzantium, and Istanbul) established in Aceh, Banten, Banda, and Ternate. When Frederick de Houtman wanted an example for his wonderful dictionary of the way foreign traders were received in Aceh, he used the reception at court of a nakhoda from Mecca who, as part of the preliminaries for trade, offered the sultan of Aceh military assistance from his country.37

Whereas earlier Muslim apostles and scholars had come “below the winds” primarily from India, this shift in the trade routes made the Malay world directly accessible from Arabia. Hence in the 1570s and 1580s Arab scholars such as Muhammad Azhari and Syeikh Abu’l-kheir ibn Syeikh ibn Hajar of Mecca and Syeich Muhammad of Yemen journeyed to Aceh and made it their temporary home, preaching, teaching, and disputing with one another there.38 Portuguese and Spanish sources also refer to the large numbers of “Arabian and Persian false prophets” helping to strengthen Islam in the Archipelago in the second half of the sixteenth century.39 Similarly, Southeast Asian Muslims were able to board the pepper ships if they wished to travel to

Mecca and Madina for pilgrimage or study. Hamzah Fansuri seems to have done this around the 1580s, and Jamalud-din of Pasai, Syech Yusuf of Makassar, and Abdur-rauf of Singkel certainly did so in the first half of the seventeenth century. Each of the latter two spent about twenty years in the Hejaz, Abdur-rauf having recorded a list of the fifteen teachers he studied with during his time in Arabia, and Yusuf having left his name as the copyist in Mecca of several important Arabic manuscripts.

The Dutch and English after 1600, with far more resources of ships and money, completed what the Portuguese had only half achieved. By the 1620s there were no further shipments of Southeast Asian pepper and spice along the old Muslim route to the Red Sea, and Turkey itself had to import its needs from the western Europeans. Moreover, the Gujarati ships that had traded as far as Banten now went no farther than Aceh, and in decreasing numbers. A Dutch blockade excluded Gujarati ships from Aceh for several years in the 1650s and removed the supplies of tin and pepper that had made Aceh's port attractive. In the overall pattern of world trade, pepper and other Southeast Asian products were in any case less important after 1650, and long-distance shipping was shifting to other directions.

The last Gujarati ships seem to have visited Aceh in the 1690s. After the collapse of direct Acehnese shipping, these had still enabled Southeast Asians to travel in Muslim ships as far as Gujarat, where they could join the large pilgrim ships for Jidda organized by the Mughal emperors. In the eighteenth century Muslim shipping was predominantly local, and Aceh, Surat, and Jidda all became less important as commercial centers. Hence the aspiring pilgrim would have had to transship several times, and put up with considerable discomfort, to reach his goal.

Political Crusades

The arrival of the Portuguese in 1509 via India, and of the Spanish via the Americas twelve years later, gave a new political character to reli-

gious identity. The Iberians had warred for several centuries against the Muslims in their homeland, so that the crusade against the “Moors” (Moors) had become part of their national mythology and culture. In addition, the Portuguese were out to take over the spice trade from the Muslims who had shipped pepper and spices to the Red Sea and thence to Alexandria for sale to Venice. Ideology and self-interest converged to make the Portuguese (and to a lesser extent the Spanish) identify the wealthy Muslim traders and the rulers who supported them as the enemy to be attacked and plundered at every opportunity.

In return, the Muslims of Southeast Asia, particularly those involved in the spice trade, tended to regroup around explicitly Islamic centers prepared to counterattack the Portuguese. The rise of Aceh is the clearest example. Portuguese high-handed intervention in Pasai and Pidie, not to mention the taking of Melaka across the Straits, drove all the more Islamic, commercial, or simply patriotic elements to support Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah in his drive to unite the north Sumatran coast during the 1520s into a new and explicitly anti-Portuguese kingdom. For more than a century Aceh remained the most consistent enemy of Portuguese Melaka, mirroring its coincidence of ideological and economic interests as the new center of the Islamic spice route. Banten in western Java was established as an Islamic kingdom at the same time and for somewhat similar reasons, after the Portuguese had sought to ally with the Hindu port of Sunda Kelapa there.

The Ottoman expansion to Egypt, Syria, and the Hejaz in 1516–17 and to Iraq in 1534–38 provided for the first time a first-class military power with an interest in defending the Muslim spice-trading route in the Indian Ocean. The attacks of sultans Sulaiman and Selim II on the Christian powers led by Spain seem to have had a galvanizing effect even as far away as Southeast Asia. The first Turkish fleet to combat the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean was launched by the governor of Egypt in 1537–38. Though it failed dismally, some of its members must have found their way to Aceh. Sultan Ala’ad-din Ri’ayat Syah al-Kahar was assisted in his wars against the Bataks in 1538 by “the hundred and threescore Turks, that a little before were come to him from the Strait of Mecca, with two hundred Saracens, Malabars, and some Abassins, which were the best men he had.”44 The establishment of direct commercial and diplomatic relations between Turkey and Aceh in the 1560s gave a much clearer impetus to the concept of a pan-Islamic counter crusade against the Portuguese in Southeast Asia. A 1566 petition from

Sultan Ala’ad-din Ri’ayat Syah al-Kahar of Aceh to the Ottoman sultan pleaded with him as khalifa of universal Islam to aid the oppressed Muslims of the Indian Ocean: “The sultan [of Aceh] says that he is left alone to face the unbelievers. They have seized some islands and have taken Muslims captive. Merchant and pilgrim ships going from these islands toward Mecca were captured one night [by the Portuguese] and the ships that were not captured were fired on and sunk, causing many Muslims to drown.”

Turkey responded to repeated Acehnese requests by sending gunsmiths and artillerymen on at least two occasions, in 1564 and 1568. This short-lived Turkish intervention further stimulated the spirit of pan-Islamic solidarity in the Indian Ocean. The Muslim states of the Deccan, led by Bijapur, for the first time were able to cooperate in a 1564–65 jihad that overthrew the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar. Aceh, Japara, and (less enthusiastically) Johor in Southeast Asia concerted action with Bijapur and the Muslim community of Calicut in India to launch a series of jihad against the Portuguese in Melaka (1568 and 1570) and Goa (1570). Even in the neutral entrepôt of Ayutthaya, two Dominican missionaries who arrived in the 1560s were set upon by a mob of rioting Muslims, with the result that one Dominican was killed and the other badly injured, and several Muslims were sentenced to be trampled to death by elephants for their unruliness.

As a result of this new-found Islamic cooperation along the spice trading route, the period 1560–80 was a high point not only for the Islamic military success in Southeast Asia, but also for Muslim-Christian polarization.

In eastern Indonesia by the middle of the sixteenth century the Portuguese had established an unstable modus vivendi with the Sultanate of Ternate in the clove trade which allowed Christian as well as Muslim missionaries to make some headway among the still largely animist Malukans. In the 1560s, Sultan Hairun of Ternate proved extremely irritating to the Portuguese by his ability to manipulate them to advance his own authority and that of Islam, and in 1570 they treacherously murdered him. Hairun’s son, Babullah, used the outrage against this act to drive the Portuguese out of Ternate and to compel most of their Christian supporters throughout Maluku to adopt Islam.

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46Fernandus de Sancta Maria, Letter from Goa, 26 Dec. 1569, in Exemplar Literarum ex Indiis (Rome, 1571).
47Reid, 1969, p. 408.
as a sign of loyalty. Babullah had already been an effective propagandist for Islam during his father's day, but now he was able to spread it through much of the Ambon area, to Butung, Salayar, and some of the coastal kingdoms of eastern and northern Sulawesi, and southern Mindanao. According to Arghensola he sent envoys to Aceh and Brunei to try to form an Islamic coalition against the Portuguese. During Babullah's reign, and up to the time the Dutch arrival complicated religious loyalties considerably, there was a stronger sense than before or since that acceptance of Islam was an essential part of loyalty to the ruler of Ternate.

Portuguese and Spanish sources in the second half of the sixteenth century are redolent with hostility to Islam, but they also suggest strongly that the feeling was reciprocated. Fernand Mendez Pinto, for example, puts anti-Christian speeches into the mouths of the kings of Aceh and Demak and claims that Pahang would not allow Portuguese to be buried ashore because otherwise "their country should remain accursed, and incapable of nourishing anything, because the deceased were not purged from the hog's flesh they had eaten." Spanish envoys reported that the sultan of Brunei had responded in 1578 to an arrogant letter from Manila by saying, "so this is the way that your people write to me, who am king; while the Castilians are kafir . . . who have no souls, who are consumed by fire when they die, and that, too, because they eat pork." What little is written in Muslim sources about the Christian infidels in this period tends to confirm that a holy war mentality was prominent on both sides.

Southeast Asians, undergoing a profound social transformation themselves, were thus confronted with two scriptural religions both at a high point of aggressive expansion, each competing consciously with the other to convince them that they had to choose one side rather than the other, right rather than wrong. The intense competition between the two sides certainly sharpened the boundary, not only between themselves, but between each of them and the surrounding environment of traditional beliefs. Several features of the period show how much more seriously the religious character of the society within that boundary was emphasized than before or for some time thereafter; to these I now turn.

<sup>48</sup> Arghensola, 1708, p. 94.
<sup>49</sup> Pinto, 1653, p. 40.
<sup>50</sup> Blair and Robertson, 1903-9, 4:160-61.
The Use of Writing

The scriptural religions introduced writing for the first time to relatively few areas—at most Maluku, the southern Philippines, northern Sulawesi, some islands east of Lombok, and parts of Borneo. For the rest, Indic-derived scripts were already widespread. Where the new Arabic and Latin alphabets came to replace or coexist with the older alphabet, as in Luzon and the Visayas, coastal Sumatra and southwest Sulawesi, there seems little doubt that literacy was higher in the old alphabet than the new, and much higher for women.52

What carried weight was the sacred authority of a book. Except in Java, where sacred writings were numerous, and southwest Sulawesi, where writing was probably used primarily for preserving genealogies, the purposes of writing had been for the most part ephemeral—love poems and messages written on bamboo or palm leaf. Islam and Christianity each claimed that their authority rested on a book, and moreover a book written in an alien language that carried the extra sacral weight of impenetrability. William Marsden tells of a Sumatran spirit worshiper who challenged a Muslim fellow countryman to show how his God was any more demonstrably real than the spirits. The apparently persuasive answer was that the truths of Islam were written in a book.53 Some ethnographers note a similar persuasiveness in modern times.54

Both Muslim and Christian proselytists based their own authority on their ability to read and explicate sacred texts. At the point of most rapid religious change, moreover, they generated new texts, designed to convey the essential truths of the new religion in forms that could be memorized and understood by their proselytes, in Southeast Asian languages. But these texts were for the specialists. The new religious ideas were invariably conveyed orally to new converts, with writing serving only to assist the teacher. Prayers and articles of faith were learned by group recitation, usually in a poetic or melodic form.

Saint Francis Xavier was the first of the Christian evangelists to compose in Malay a version of Christianity that could be memorized:

54 Hoskins, 1987, p. 146.
I taught the children and native people a "declaration" I had written on each article of the faith, in a language that all could understand, adapting myself . . . to what the people of the country newly converted could understand. This declaration I taught instead of prayers, in Melaka as I had in Maluku, to establish in them a basis to believe well and truly in Jesus Christ, ceasing to believe in vain idols. This declaration could be learned in one year, if one taught each day a little, that is, about twenty words that they could easily learn by heart.\footnote{Francis Xavier, Letter from Cochin 1548, in Schurhammer and Wicki, 1944–45, 1:389. None of Xavier's Malay writings appears to have survived; see ibid., 2:590–94; Documenta Malacensis (1542–1577), ed. Hubert Jacobs (Rome, 1974), 1:14, 35. A Portuguese text of the rhyming catechism referred to here, composed in Turante, is reproduced in Schurhammer and Wicki, I:355–67. It probably had both Portuguese and Malay versions.}

The Spanish had a similar compendium of the essentials of the faith, the 
Doctrina Christiana 
originally compiled in Mexico but translated into Tagalog and printed in Manila in 1593. Later versions adapted into Tagalog the popular 
Doctrina Cristiana 
of the Jesuit cardinal Bellarmine (1597). So that this whole document could be memorized by new Christians, question-and-answer sessions were held after masses, with the correct responses preferably being chanted by the whole congregation.\footnote{Vicente Rafael, Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), pp. 39–54; Phelan, 1959, pp. 57–58; Schumacher, 1984, p. 235.}

Muslims also used the method of oral recitation to commit to memory the essential prayers (salat) as well as the Arabic Koran. Syamsu'd-din as-Samatrani (1601) wrote an Islamic creed in Malay, the 
Mi'ir al-Mu'ninin 
(1601), which used a question-and-answer form no doubt intended to be recited between a teacher and pupils and thus committed to memory. One of the most popular Persian works rendered into Malay was the "Thousand Questions" (Kitab Seribu Masalah), which provided crucial items of religious dogma and Islamic cosmology in the form of the questions a learned Jew put to the Prophet. Questions and answers were presented in a form that could be readily memorized.\footnote{G. F. Piiper, Het Bock der Duizend Vragen (Leiden, 1924), pp. 72–81; Sir Richard Winstedt, 
A History of Classical Malay Literature 
(Kuala Lumpur, 1977), pp. 148–52.}

Emphasis on a Predictable Moral Universe

Just as has been argued for the Christianization of the Roman empire, the religious change in Southeast Asia helped people cope with
the constant and unpredictable assaults of demons. The power of shamanistic possession presented the early missionaries with a considerable challenge. The Jesuit Pedro Chirino chronicled many contests with traditional healers and conceded that, though some were fakes, "there are also those who actually have a special pact with the devil, who aids and supports them with very special assistance, which Almighty God in his inscrutable judgement permits." For Iberian priests, these unfamiliar supernatural forces could only be categorized as in league with the devil. Alarming as the phenomena often were to them, the friars believed they had to do battle with these powers of darkness, armed with the cross and the sacraments. Presumably they sometimes failed, but in their pious narratives there are numerous stories of spectacular victories over demons:

Having planted this royal standard of our redemption [the cross] in an island greatly infested by demons, who were continually frightening the islanders with howls and cries, it imposed upon them perpetual silence, and freed all the other [neighboring] islands from an extraordinary tyranny. For the demons were crossing from island to island, in the sea, in the shape of serpents of enormous size . . . but this ceased, the demon taking flight at the sight of the cross."

The assimilation of Southeast Asian spirits to Islamic ones (jinn), both good and bad, presented fewer problems. Even learned ulama did not deny the existence of spirits, but the higher path of union with God offered protection against them. Like Christianity, Islam offered a refuge from the domination of these demanding spirits in a different vision of the cosmos. This was a predictable, moral world in which the devout would be protected by God from all that the spirits could do and would eventually be rewarded by an afterlife in paradise. The powerless too would be rewarded if they lived lives of personal virtue. "The high and the low; the rich and the poor; they will all appear the same," as a Tagalog devotional poem put it.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this new vision in providing a "tremendous increase in distance . . . between man and the sacred," a major step toward what Weber characterized as rationaliza-

60Pedro Murillo Velarde, "Jesuit Missions in the Seventeenth Century" [1749], in Blair and Robertson, 1903–9, 44:71.
61Pedro de Herrera [1645], quoted in Rafael, 1988, p. 176.
tion of religion. 63 For those who were making their way in a wider world of international trade, of large-scale state operations, of the exchange of ideas through literature and debate, this new worldview provided the necessary foundation.

This moral universe depended on a simple but consistent concept of eternal reward and punishment. The older view of the afterlife had been full of dangerous possibilities, against which there were no sure guarantees. By contrast, Islam and Christianity introduced the promise of a heaven that was forever safe and comfortable, "without death, only joy and happiness and life... There is nothing lacking there, every wish will be fulfilled... without sorrow and lament, no sadness, no tribulation, nothing that is not glorious," as a seventeenth-century Augustinian wrote in one of the first catechetical poems in Tagalog. 64

On the Muslim side, the Koran itself was the primary source of vivid imagery about heaven and hell, but these were also among the earliest concepts to be translated. The most effective work may have been the "Book of the Thousand Questions," probably reworked into Malay in Sumatra in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century but found as far away as Ambon by Valentijn. As Richard Winstedt put it, in this widely read work "the tortures of the damned are portrayed with the imagination and vivacity of Hieronymus Bosch." 65 Raniri also composed in Aceh in 1636 a popular Malay tract of over two hundred pages, the Akhbaru'l-akhirat, on death, judgment, heaven, hell, and the last days. 66

There were, of course, problems. At an early stage of Filipino grappling with the new concept of paradise, a local notable who had died soon after baptism reappeared to fellow villagers—whether in a shamanistic possession or a Christian vision is not clear. His account of the paradise to which baptism gave access persuaded many to seek baptism immediately, though others rejected it because they did not want to share eternity with Spanish soldiers. 67

Hell was even more persuasive. Chirino notes that Filipino fear of what evil spirits could do to man was such that "a well-painted picture of hell has converted a very great number of them." 68 Writers and preachers of both faiths dwelt on the torments in hell awaiting those

64Cited in Rafael, 1985, pp. 172–73.
Figure 5. The funeral of Sultan Iskandar Thani of Aceh, 1641, as fancifully depicted by a Dutch artist. From Reisen von Nicholaus de Graeff, ed. J. C. M. Warnsinck (The Hague, Linschoten-Vereniging, 1930).
foolish enough to prefer earthly pleasures to their eternal welfare and those who rejected the true faith (Islam or Christianity) for its rivals. Domesticating the Muslim hell in the Sumatran jungle, Raniri likened it to “a tiger with thirty thousand heads.”

Although the prominence of heaven and hell was new, the concepts may not have been. In their desire to find evocative terms to translate the Muslim and Christian heaven, proselytists made use of already localized words. Throughout Indonesia use was made of the Sanskrit swarga (the abode of Siva) and naraka for heaven and hell, respectively (Malay syorga and neraka). The Spanish used Tagalog langit (sky) or other terms implying profound peace and contentment when discussing the joys of heaven. When it came to hell, however, the shock of the unfamiliar infierno was evidently more effective.

Execution of Unbelievers

The establishment of the Inquisition on Asian soil, at Goa in 1561, was an indication on the Christian side of the desire to keep the boundary between belief and unbelief firm. Only eight Southeast Asian cases were in fact referred to it in the period 1561–80, and only two of these suffered “severe penalties.” The number of non-Christians spared death because they embraced Catholicism must have been far greater.

In Manila the first bishop, Domingo de Salazar, assumed the role of inquisitor in 1580. Among the cases he investigated was that of a Spanish soldier accused of going native with Muslims of Manila, wearing a sarung and eating, drinking, and dancing with Muslims. The Mexican tribunal of the Inquisition extended its functions to Manila in 1585 and endeavored to keep the boundaries of orthodoxy well defined by controlling the importation of books and the behavior and speech of Christians. The only executions of heretics, however, were of Dutch Protestants captured in Maluku in 1601, and these were technically condemned for rebellion against Spain rather than for heresy.

The Islamic counterpart of this rigor is less known. The execution of

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71Rafael, 1988, pp. 171–81.
74Ibid., p. 280.
those held to be enemies of the state is a political act. But when such people are offered the choice of religious conversion or death, religion becomes defined as the essential test of political loyalty. The two issues are as difficult to disentangle in Muslim Aceh as in Protestant England in the same period. There are numerous cases throughout the period 1550–1650 of non-Muslims given the choice of accepting Islam or being executed after having been defined as enemies or criminals; it happened frequently in Aceh, and also in Banten, Mataram, Makassar, and Babullah's Ternate. This is of some importance in showing that these states did, to a greater extent than before or after, define themselves as necessarily Islamic, despite the presence of non-Muslim minorities in all of them. I believe there is also a tendency to accentuate the religious as against the political character of such executions as we move toward the middle of the seventeenth century.

One indication of this short-lived trend is Makassar, an exceptionally tolerant haven for all religions, especially Portuguese Catholicism. Yet here too, in 1658, two Portuguese were condemned to execution for murder but were offered a pardon if they became Muslim. One refused and was executed with a kris; the other was "so daunted at the sight" that he accepted Islam and was spared.75

Three cases where religious motives appeared to play a larger part, and about which we know more than usual, all occurred in seventeenth-century Aceh. Frederick de Houtman, leader of the first Dutch expedition to Aceh, was held captive on shore after a fight broke out between his men and the Acehnese in 1600. After some months of captivity he was told that Sultan Ala’ad-din had decided he would be killed unless he agreed to become a Muslim. When he refused, saying that one could not be forced to believe what one did not believe, the judicial officials of Aceh set about trying to convince him. They explained that Muhammad was the last of the prophets in the line of Moses, David, and Jesus and that it was as illogical not to acknowledge him as it would be to say that only the earlier kings of a dynasty were ordained by God and not the later. They asked him how Christians could worship stone idols as in Catholic Melaka, how they could believe that God had a son, and why they did not accept circumcision since Jesus himself was circumcised. All he need do was repeat the shahada—a greater understanding would come later. De Houtman's report declared that if he narrated the whole of the debate it would fill half a book.76 When he remained obdurate, they took him to the river for execution, waved a sword over his head shouting "mau Islam?" and

threatened to trample him with elephants. Nevertheless, the sultan clearly wanted him alive rather than dead, and eventually his release was negotiated.

Portuguese usually kept clear of Aceh because of the intense mutual hostility that had built up between themselves and the sultanate. In fact, one of the first references to non-Muslims being given the Islam-or-death alternative was to a group of Portuguese traders who visited Aceh during what they thought an interval of peace, in 1565, only to find an ambassador from Turkey there who successfully urged the sultan to have them all killed if they did not embrace Islam. After the death of Sultan Iskandar Muda and the accession of his son-in-law, Iskandar Thani, in 1637, however, the Portuguese viceroy sent a mission to Aceh from Goa in the hope of establishing peace, since Iskandar Thani was known to come from Pahang, a state often friendly to the Portuguese. The Portuguese were encouraged to come ashore and then were immediately imprisoned. All the sixty Europeans in the party were executed except the few who agreed to convert; the Indian Christians were evidently treated more leniently and returned to tell the story in Goa. The most detailed surviving accounts are in the pious literature about one of the two priests in the party, Denis of the Nativity (born a Frenchman, Pierre Berthelot), who was beatified by the church on account of his martyrdom. The Acehnese seem to have given particular attention to trying to convert the priest, who spoke Malay fluently. He was kept as a slave in a prominent household for a month and regularly punished and humiliated while being promised a good life and a wealthy wife if he converted. “By order of the king, one, two or several casis, who are their priests, were continually around him and his companions,” preaching and arguing with him about the merits of Islam. According to the hagiographic literature, the Acehnese were so impressed with his sanctity that none wished to be the one to kill him, so he was eventually krisseed by a Portuguese who had already convert- ed to Islam.

It is arguable that such events have nothing to do with Islamic norms, since there is nothing in the Shari’a that encourages such acts against Christian “people of the book” (ahl al-Kitab). Nevertheless, the theological effort put into trying to convert these unbelievers says something about the strength of Islamic ideas in the trading cities of Southeast Asia. It also contrasts markedly with the more relaxed mood

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only two decades later when Christian missionaries were allowed to operate in Aceh (though not among Muslims).

Much more unusual was the execution of a learned Muslim for heresy, presumably as an unrepentant apostate (murtad), for whom the obligatory death penalty had been copied into at least one Malay law code—that of Pahang in 1595.\textsuperscript{79} I am aware of only one such clearly documented case in Southeast Asia before the nineteenth century, if we set aside the semilegendary stories of the execution of Syeh Siti Jenar and other Javanese mystics for having revealed truths that ought to be hidden—rather a different thing. This case occurred in the reign of Iskandar Thani of Aceh (r. 1637–41), which should be regarded as the extreme point of the application of Islamic norms in Southeast Asia before the nineteenth century. The incident lends greater significance to the case of the executed Portuguese that occurred in the same short reign.

It is well known that with the death of the influential syeich Syamsu’d-din in 1630, and still more of his patron, Sultan Iskandar Muda, in 1636, the adherents of the monistic wujuddiya school in Aceh lost their dominance in the city. The Gujarati champion of orthodoxy, Nuru’d-din ar-Raniri, rushed back to Aceh as soon as Iskandar Thani was enthroned. He began attacking the pupils of Syamsu’d-din and Hamzah Fansuri and had the works of these popular figures burned in front of the great mosque in Aceh. Raniri himself explained in his Tabyan how he debated with these mystics in front of the sultan and showed that they equated themselves with God: “All the Muslims gave a fatwa that they were kafir and would be killed. And some of them accepted the fatwa that they were kafir, and some repented and some did not want to repent. And some of those who repented had also been apostates (murtad), they returned to their former faith. So all the principal legions of the unbelievers were killed.”\textsuperscript{80} From Dutch sources we know that the most prominent victim of this inquisition was one “Shaikh Maldin” (Jamalud-din?). After the death of Raniri’s protector, Iskandar Thani, one of this shaikh’s pupils, a popular Minangkabau sufi named Saifurrijal, returned to Aceh from Surat and recommenced a bitter debate with Raniri. Popular feeling in Aceh was evidently on the side of the wujuddiya, and Raniri was lucky to be able to escape Aceh with his life at the end of 1643.\textsuperscript{81}

This stern imposition of a particular view of orthodoxy was thus short-lived and certainly uncharacteristic of Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, its timing is significant in marking a turning point for Aceh and perhaps the whole region. What followed was in part a reaction against the excesses of Raniri, in part a reassertion of a more moderate but still popular mysticism under the Shattariya syeich, Abdur-rauf of Singkel and Yusuf of Makassar, in part a long-term decline in the influence of international, commercial, and urban elements in Southeast Asian Islam.

The Application of Shari’a Law

To test the application of Islamic law three types of source exist: law codes, Southeast Asian chronicles, and the observation of outsiders. All are problematic, but all tend to support the impression of a movement toward greater implementation of Islamic laws in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and a movement in the opposite direction thereafter.

The chronicles, of which Raniri’s Bustan as-Salatin is the most informative, record that some pious rulers imposed certain requirements of the Shari’a, though this may have meant no more than a token gesture if not backed up by legal institutions and codes. The law codes suggest that Islamic law was known by the compilers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though the Shari’a provisions are sometimes tacked on in what appears to be a learned footnote rather than a law expected to be followed. The Undang-undang Melaka, for example, sets out the rather lenient penalties for rape (marry the woman or pay a fine) and then adds, “But according to the law of God, if he is nuhsan [married], he shall be stoned.” As cosmopolitan communities identifying strongly with Islam grew in the commercial cities (of Arab, Indian, and Chinese as well as Southeast Asian origins), they must frequently have been given the option of using Islamic law among themselves (as was still the case in the kauman (Muslim quarter) of Javanese towns at much later dates). A Muslim writer in one of the coastal cities of sixteenth-century Java confirmed this kind of pluralism, in a nominally Muslim polity, by insisting, “It is unbelief when people involved in a lawsuit and invited to settle the dispute according to the law of Islam, refuse to do so and insist on taking it to an infidel judge.”

that apparently originated in this period, Islamic law was borrowed most fully in matters of commercial law, where there were presumably few local alternatives of any relevance to the cosmopolitan traders of the town. Muslim marriage, divorce, and inheritance law, laws of evidence, and laws relating to slaveholding were also widely incorporated into law codes of the period, though less widely applied in practice. Laws relating to royal prerogatives were entirely a Southeast Asian matter little affected by Islam.

The handling of what we call criminal offenses, especially theft, was perhaps the best index of change over time in the commitment of states to the Shari’a. Because Shafi’i law imposed the penalty of amputation of the right hand, left leg, left hand, and right leg for first, second, third, and fourth offenses, respectively, of theft of an item worth at least a quarter-dinar (about a gram of gold), it tended to be noticed by foreigners wherever it was applied. Hence we know from visitors to Aceh throughout the seventeenth century—François Martin and Wybrandt van Warwijk under Ala’ad-din Rı’ayat Syah al-Mukammil (r. 1588–1603),84 Augustin de Beaulieu under Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36),85 Thomas Bowrey under Iskandar Thani (r. 1636–41),86 and Peter Mundy and William Dampier under the queen87—that there was a system of chopping off alternate limbs which could only have been based on the Shari’a. They also note various other, crueller amputations, of noses, ears, lips, and vital organs, but these in most cases were for crimes held to touch the royal person, for which no punishment seemed too severe.88

Aceh was not alone in applying these Shari’a punishments. Brunei in the 1580s punished theft by cutting off the right hand, though in other respects its procedures were more traditional.89 Banten under Sultan Ageng (r. 1651–82) applied the same penalties, and Magindanao at least included them in its law code.90

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Sexual offenses were treated very differently in the Shari'a than in Malay tradition, but there are some cases among the urban elite, at least, where tough Islamic judgments were imposed. In Aceh three cases of zina (fornication) offenses for which the death penalty was imposed were witnessed by foreigners: in 1613 and twice in 1642. The men were painfully killed by flogging, and the women in some cases were strangled, as prescribed by Shafi'i law. In Patani two young aristocrats were killed for a zina offense around 1601, by Malay methods of krisssing for him and strangling for her. In Banten and Brunei the death penalty was also imposed in this period.

More important than these external signs that the Shari'a was being applied is evidence that properly constituted Islamic courts were set up and used. Here again we know most about Aceh, where there was at least one Shari'a court throughout the first half of the seventeenth century. Beaulieu in fact tells us there were two, one for offenses against the requirements of prayer, fasting, and religious orthodoxy and the other for matters of debt, marriage, divorce, and inheritance. In 1636 a Dutch observer noted specifically that “the great bishop” (Syamsu’ddin’s successor as judge, or kadi) presided over a weekly court in Aceh to judge theft, drunkenness, and offenses against royal etiquette. Other sources also note the importance of the kadi in Acehnese affairs as early as the 1580s. Takeshi Ito shows that, although Sultan Iskandar Muda may have set up some of these institutions, it was his two successors who for the first time allowed these courts to work without the constant interference of arbitrary royal decrees. Perhaps the clearest indication of the attempt to give real force to the spirit of the Shari’a was Iskandar Thani’s decree that the age-old Southeast Asian system of judging cases by ordeal (immersion in boiling oil or water was most common) be abolished in favor of the Islamic requirements for witnesses.

Elsewhere there are also frequent indications that a kadi played a role in state affairs. The only definite evidence I have for a functioning Shari’a court outside Aceh, however, is in Banten under Sultan Ageng. There a resident French missionary reported: “They have two principal

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91Ito, 1984, pp. 168–70.
94Beaulieu, 1666, pp. 100–102.
95Ito, 1984, pp. 155–60.
96Reid, 1988, pp. 139–44.
judges, of whom one is called the grand Chabandar [Syahbandar], who knows all commercial affairs; and the other carries the name of Thiaria [Shari’a], who extends his jurisdiction over all civil and criminal cases, and who among other crimes punishes theft and adultery rigorously.”

When colonial officials and the earliest ethnographers began to provide detailed information about the Muslims of Southeast Asia toward the end of the nineteenth century, they saw little evidence of Islamic law, of Shari’a courts, or of rulers publicly celebrating Islamic rituals. John Gullick’s reading of the British colonial evidence on late nineteenth-century Malaya, for example, was that there were “no kathis,” no evidence that the Shari’a was “effective law,” and “no public rituals of Islamic content.” Similarly, Snouck Hurgronje emphasized that Islamic law was very seldom applied in Aceh, that justice was effectively in the hands of secular authorities (ulëbalang), and that penalties for theft and zina such as those above were almost unheard of. We should not conclude, as they tended to, that it was ever so.

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97 Relation, 1680, p. 83.
98 Quoted in Milner, 1983, p. 23.