

CULTURE AT THE CORNERS ... ISLAM AT THE CORE

Waves of providence

دار الأثر الإسلامي

Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait

By Cinatra Alvares
Arab Times Staff

Dr R. Michael Feener presented a lecture on the topic, 'Muslim Cultures of a Maritime World: Art and Architecture of the Indian Ocean', drawing on examples and exploring some of the complex processes through which Islam took root in diverse societies across this interconnected region. The lecture was held at the Yarmouk Cultural Centre on Monday evening as part of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah's 25th cultural season.

Dr Feener is the Sultan of Oman Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies and an Islamic Centre lecturer in the History Faculty at the University of Oxford. He is also the head of the Maldives Heritage Survey. Feener was formerly associated with the Asia Research Institute and the National University of Singapore. He has published extensively in the fields of Islamic studies and Southeast Asian history, as well as on post-disaster reconstruction, religion and development.

Within the first century of Islamic history Muslims, already active in expanding networks of maritime commerce across the Indian Ocean, were establishing settlements of sojourning merchants on the western coast of India, and opening up sea routes further east to southern China. These travels were facilitated with rapid advances in technologies of navigation that were made during the early centuries of Islamic history.

Feener shared that as early Muslim mariners sailed out of the Gulf and into the Indian Ocean and beyond to the South China Sea, Islam in the process came to take root in diverse societies all along this interconnected region over the medieval and early modern periods.

In presenting an introductory overview into the range of vernacular traditions that have formed across the watery parts of the world of Islam over more than thousands of years, Feener shared that these Muslim societies had been sidelined in the mainstream of Islamic art history in favour of the more lavish centres of cultural production of the great Agrarian empires of the Eurasian mainland. He expressed his hope that the lecture – a brief introduction into the constellation of relatively more modest traditions, would both broaden appreciation for the internal diversity of Islamic art and whet the appetite for further work to be done in this still underdeveloped field of scholarship.

Feener noted that the history of connections and circulations across this broad sweep of maritime Southern Asia from the Arabian peninsula to China actually precedes the history of Islam itself. "Going back to the 5th century CE, while traders had dominated the overland trade routes across Eurasia, the maritime routes were largely in the hands of Persian

mariners sailing both east and west past the Strait of Hormuz and by the lifetime of The Prophet, the coastal towns of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean ports of Oman and Hadhramaut were thoroughly under Persian control. Chinese chronicles report however that already in the early 7th century CE Middle Eastern merchants were established at the Sumatra trading hub of Srivajaya and by the 8th century communities of Muslim merchants had established themselves all along this watery way to southern China's coast to settle especially at Quanzhou, which was at that time a major trade port having overseas trade with Southeast Asia and ports further west."

Feener showed the audience a photo of a rather modest mausoleum, out of step with the traditional Arabic historiography of early Islam, by Chinese Muslims who claim that this is the final resting place of Sa'd ibn abi Waqqas, who is held to be the founding father of Islam in China.

Feener stated that one of the first Arabic accounts that deals with Islam in China is from the 9th century and the text describes the course for an itinerary for long sailings connecting the Gulf to that of Quanzhou. This direct trade appears to have peaked already by the 10th Century CE with increasingly regular notice then of Muslim envoys arriving at the Chinese court via the Indonesian archipelago and traces of this longstanding connection between Arabia and China can be glimpsed through the work of marine archaeologists who have done some remarkable work over recent decades at shipwrecks all across the waters of South East Asia.

"What is remarkable about this project or this cargo is that we have all of these objects with Kufic inscriptions and talismanic stars but in the same cargo we also have dozens of similar pots with Indic inscriptions in the back and several hundred pots where Chinese is inscribed at the bottom. There is this remarkable cargo coming out of Vietnam in the 9th century in which goods moving across are labeled in three of the major linguistic traditions of southern Asia," Feener exclaimed.

After describing the cargo of several shipwrecks, he focused his attention on the Cirebon shipwreck, off the coast of Java that he shared yielded some of the most interesting specific religious materials from any shipwrecks in the region. This includes both Buddhist images and Islamic paraphernalia in the form of a nearly complete set of prayers beads with the 99 names of God written on them. Another item, a jewellery mould for making very small talismans bearing

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Sendang Duwur
Mosque,
East Java

Slides from Dr R. Michael Feener's lecture: Sultan Mosque, Singapore.
Inset: Sendang Duwur Mosque, East Java.

editor's choice