



Dr R. Michael Feener delivering his lecture at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah

Main photo and inset by Rizalde Cayanan, courtesy of DAI

## CULTURE AT THE CORNERS ... ISLAM AT THE CORE

# Waves of providence

Continued from Page 11

the inscriptions, shows that one of the earliest things that was being shipped across the southern seas was not just a religious item but religious item made to make more which demonstrates the ability to expand the material culture at the end of the first millennium of the common era.

Around the second millennium, Feener describes that a major shift occurred in the sailing connections between China and the Arabian peninsula. "By that time single sailings between one end of the trade route and the other seemed to have stopped and instead we begin to get a series of shorter itineraries, within a series of bounded but interlinked circulations. By the 10th century CE, instead of going all the way from Arabia to China, we have clear evidence of a breakup with a circle in the western part of the Indian Ocean that covered places like Malabar or Kerala and the Gulf, then the other section going across the Bay of Bengal and then another going up monsoon cycles of the South China Sea."

One factor in this transformation was the rise of the Chola dynasty in Tamil Nadu, India. This expanding empire started to create a very powerful network of trading guilds that began to dominate this maritime landscape. "We know of them because of a number of very important Tamil language inscriptions that go all the way around the Indian Ocean until the South China Sea as well as other material remains", he shared.

With the rise of the Cholas, one particular trade guild supported by the Cholas, the Anjuvannam, allowed participation of Christian, Jewish and Muslim merchants. "Anjuvannam inscriptions are remarkable, one found in Sumatra mentions practices of dealing with interest in a way that looks remarkably Islamic even though it appears in the Tamil language trade guild inscription from the 11th century."

He informed that the real rise of the prominence of Muslim merchants happens in the 11th and 12th centuries. "It is in the 12th century that we see the Indian ocean being not just a place they stopped on their way to go somewhere else but we begin to see the establishment of Muslim communities and the emergence of the first Muslim states."

One of the most striking examples of this comes from the Maldives from a remarkable set of inscriptions known as the Loamafaanu, inscriptions on copper plate written in the local language. "The Isdhoo Loamafaanu was found on the island of Isdhoo which we know is the site of a major Buddhist complex because we have not only the remains of a Buddhist artificial temple mound but we have also recovered a number of Buddhist statues that have now been moved to the National Museum in Male. But that copperplate inscription is about a 150m away from the mound and it was traditionally believed to have been housed in a mosque in Isdhoo. They tell a remarkable story about the dismantling of the Buddhist religious institutions around the temple site and the reallocation of the resources and land to go into the building of the new mosque."

Feener shared that after the Islamization of the Maldives, similar patterns of accelerated Islamization have been seen all over the coast through the Malabar coast of India and further into South East Asia. Places in maritime Southern Asia by the 13th century that were becoming Muslim were also expressing that Islam in very explicitly local terms. He pointed to examples in India and a tradition of wooden multi-storied mosques that many early visitors mistook for a reused Hindu temple. "It is very clear what we have here is actually local artists building a specifically purposely built Muslim space of worship but doing so with reference to local aesthetic preferences. If we continue across Southern India, we find a popular Muslim pilgrimage site of Nagore Dargah, just outside of Chennai that has inspired mini replicas in Singapore and Penang."

Feener shared that the spread of Islam across the maritime world wasn't the idea of taking over new land, establishing a new tax regulation and a big state, but instead more of a religious entrepreneurship with branch offices associated with different Sufi orders or scholarly lineages that began to create networks that continued to stitch an expanding Muslim world together even as it's frontiers expand geographically.

Moving to Sumatra – and to one of the very first Islamic sultanate in Southeast Asia, Feener discussed the Sultanate of Pasai. "Pasai is remarkable because what at that time would've been seen as a frontier outpost of Islam was stitched so closely into developments what many considered the central lands of the Muslim world."

He shared that the study of the epigraphy of the Arabic tombstones in Pasai showed that this place received some of the last fleeing emigrants from the

Abbasid house after the Mongol conquest. "So you have a place on the far end of the trading routes across the Indian Ocean being home to emigrants from Baghdad and adopting symbols of royal rule from India but also from the Arab lands further west."

Small port colonies like Pasai started adopting in the language of court chronicles a lot of the symbols of what defined Islamic rulership on a much wider scale. These were not local courtly communities but places thoroughly invested in establishing their credentials as Islamic states. Each of these small ports adopted very distinctively local forms of expression of what Islam should look like to them, from Pasai, continuing the trade route going up towards China.

He touched on the 15th century voyages of the Chinese fleets under General Zheng He during the Ming dynasty. Zheng He made offerings and prayers at Lingshan Muslim cemetery in Quanzhou before he set off for his voyages. As his armada moved across Asia, he met with other Chinese Muslims in many of the other ports.

Moving his focus to Malaysia, Feener shared that one of the early centres of Islam in the state of Melaka was also profoundly linked in both its conversion to Islam and its involvement with the Chinese maritime fleets of the early 15th century. A Chinese chronicler reports that in 1405, the Emperor personally inscribed a Stella that endorsed Melaka's aspirations to become the premier trading point. General Zheng He touched at Melaka on every voyage that he made. "It is really interesting that you have this combination of Ming Imperial support, the visit of a fleet with largely Muslim crew and just a few years later in 1414, the local ruler of Melaka himself converts to Islam. It is a very different model from what we understand today in contemporary Malaysian politics and social debates. Islam and being Chinese is often seen as opposite but if we look back at the 15th century, the Chinese had a lot in bringing in and converting the Malaysian peninsula to Islam."

He also presented a brief history of the economic system that supported the creation of an incredible diversity of Islamic art forms. A part of this involved the connection of spice routes that came across the Indian Ocean and interlinked with Indonesian trade cycles that linked the newly Islamised port of Melaka in the 15th century with the port of the North Java coast and with the spice islands of Maluku out in the far Eastern reaches. "Maluku is one of the few places in the world where spices like nutmeg and cloves grow naturally and access to this incredibly rare commodity in the 15th and 16th centuries was not only what brought Muslim traders there and accelerated the Islamisation of the island but the symbols are also ingrained in the conception of local Islam."

A famous early mosque of Sendadur off the North coast of Java gives a sense of how even within Indonesia, Islam was not just localised but done so in a remarkable diversity of forms.

"The grave complexes of the Wali have remarkably thick layering of different cultures that have passed through Java and all of these pieces are taken apart and put together in a new, distinctive Islamic idiom. So we've got tombstones inscribed in Arabic, the gate done in a very Hindu-Buddhist Javanese architectural form and embedded in the wall are a number of porcelain plates, mostly from China and a number of them have Arabic script on them."

Inside the shrines of Muslim saints, artifacts associated with the early period of Islam are found that reflected the pre-Islamic pasts of these places and cast them into a new Islamic view. He presented the example of a wooden sculpture of 'kalapataru', that has intricately detailed carvings of a mountain scene in Java with caves and pavilions where holy men or early Sufis would meditate demonstrating the connection with early, pre-Islamic practices of ascetics meditating in the forest that got woven into the ways in which Sufi notions were being re-examined in Islamic Java.

The culture of Javanese Islam as it developed across the north coast was remarkable in its ability to fold elements of pre-Islamic culture into the new culture of the Sultanate, Feener remarked, providing many examples of the visual language of this period.

Feener discussed in details mosques of this time. He presented examples of mosque complexes with prominent features of tiered roof structure. Similar structures are also found in Aceh. The Sultanate of Aceh is perhaps most known today as a bastion against imperialism. The Dutch fought the most costly war of their entire colonial experience in the late 19th and 20th century Java but before that in the 16th century, Aceh first fended off the Portuguese. While Aceh became very famous for this high profile anti-Portuguese campaigns, it was

only one of many Sultanates in the 17th century that began to really prosper and spent a lot of money in promoting new visions of Islamic art.

The Sultanate of Mataram was led by a remarkable ruler in the 17th century who took the local name of Sultan Abdul, known for the mystic synthesis i.e. a remarkable blending together or a strong sense of Islamic identity, a real affirmation of the key aspects of Islamic duty-like prayer and fasting with pre-Islamic forms. All around the courts of Mataram in Central Java, an extensive ritual complex that both integrates itself as a centre for Islamic meditation and also recognises a special relationship to Ratu Kidul, the pre-Islamic goddess of the Southern Ocean who is believed to have been the mystical consort of the Sultans of Java right up until the 19th century.

"The Sultanates of Java do present this case in which things like the gateway to the great water palace which was for a long time just thought of as a pleasure garden, but in the centre of this pool is a subterranean underwater mosque built specifically for practices of Sufi meditation. So we have this remarkable combination of a deep sense of engagement with the spiritual tradition of Islam and quite a bit of leeway for designing very worldly spaces as well," he added.

He informed that forms of performance art in Java of dance, music and puppet shows that people often think of as pre-Islamic leftovers were patronised by Islamic Sultans for at least 500 years. He shared that even in cases of shadow puppets, the repertoire of stories come out of the Ramayana and Mahabharata but with Islamised endings, preserving older cultural styles but giving new Islamic meanings in the process.

He shared that the Islamisation of the archipelago has inspired an immense literary production in dozens of languages that not only created texts but entire performative genres to go with them. All of the textual traditions are rooted in the text of the Quran through which local languages themselves changed in remarkable ways. Many languages of the Indian Ocean from Swahili to Urdu, adopted a lot of Arabic loan words, so did languages like Malay, Javanese, but you also find ways in which the scripts of these languages themselves were Islamised. Textiles with familiar Arab motifs but in local batik, and Islamic symbols are seen in metalwork, porcelain and in woodwork, he shared.

Not many mosques of the pre-modern Asian world had minarets, and when they did have minarets they were square towers, built out of prototypes of other temples, and infinite variations on the mihrab. Feener emphasised that the mosques were defined in terms of function and not form, providing a proper place to pray but in a broad range of aesthetic forms.

But this world changed dramatically in the 19th century with the opening of the Suez Canal, innovations of steam ship travel, the telegraph and print. Muslims, now connected to each other with a new kind of intensity, in a way they never had before. "It also began to create conversations not only between Muslims about what Islam should be, but it was also done within the broader context of many Muslims around the world who were feeling threatened by the onslaught of Westernization and colonisation. The impact of that introduced a new form of Islamic art."

By the end of the 19th century the traditional mosques began to be replaced by mosques with domes and minarets. These new ideas of mosques with minarets incorporated into the structure using domes and all kinds of crenellated finials, became mosques in a part of the world where the mosque had never looked like it before.

The Baiturrahman Mosque in Aceh was designed by an Irishman and the Sultan Mosque in Singapore was designed by an Italian. "In Southeast Asia, colonial architects were being commissioned by European colonial governments to build new mosques in the colonies but when they built these mosques they didn't look to what local communities have for mosques but at European-language translations of Ali Baba. They got an orientalist fantasy of what a mosque should look like."

Concluding his lecture, Feener shared, "The idea of Islamic art is in constant motion, rather than a static model of a checklist. We have to think of Islamic art as a living thing, as something that over diverse times and places manifested itself in an astounding way. The marked changes in the aesthetics of the new mosques in this region, although they might have been brought in by colonial powers, they reflected a new vision of Islam with significant shifts in the imaginations of how local Muslim communities all across the maritime world of Southern Asia have come to see themselves as connected to a broader world of Islam by the seven seas."