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The spread of Islam in Asia through trade and Sufism (ninth–nineteenth centuries)

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This chapter deals with the spread of Islam in Asia from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. In order to restrict somewhat the huge geographical area and timeframe covered here, we have decided to exclude the places where Islam spread through military conquest in the seventh and eighth centuries, i.e. the Middle East, Iran, Sindh and the southwestern regions of Central Asia.[1] We thus focus on three broad regions where the spread of Islam mainly followed major trade routes: Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. In these three regions, Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, figured prominently in the early diffusion of the new religion and was almost universally practiced by local Muslims until the late nineteenth century. As opposed to the central lands of Islam, in these eastern regions, Islam generally spread peacefully through trade rather than through military conquest and these shared Islamisation patterns form the main thread of this chapter. First, we deal with the general trends common to the three regions. Second, we detail the particular political and social chronology of Islamisation along the continental and maritime branches of the Silk Road.

The general trends of the spread of Islam in Asia

In the eastern regions of Asia, Islam first spread in merchant and court circles. In order to understand this phenomenon, we first examine what was the appeal of Islam for traders, before turning to the appeal of Islam for rulers.

Islam and trade

Unlike in many other religious traditions, there has generally been no negative attitude in Islam towards trade and traders (Goitein 2010). Trade was not considered as a parasitic activity extorting wealth from both the producer and the consumer. The prophet Muhammad himself engaged in trade early in his life and his example explains the generally very favourable attitude of this religion towards commercial activities. There is no condemnation of capital accumulation, as long as part of one's wealth is redistributed to society. This can be done through alms-giving (*zakat*) or through a religious foundation (*waqf*), and the more a trader redistributes his wealth, the more religious merit he acquires. Another important factor is that Islam is a movable religion,

which values travel and can be practiced while travelling. In the regions under study, this contrasts most with the worship of land spirits, which requires attendance in specific places, and with Hinduism, because sea travel carries with it religious impurity. For many traders along the continental and maritime Silk Road, Islam was the first religion instituted by one of them and giving due consideration to their profession.

Islam and rulers: the legitimizing tools of Islam

Islam was not only attractive for traders, it also had a distinctive appeal among rulers. Islam carried with it new legitimacy tools that were quickly used by Asian rulers. These include the habit of striking coinage bearing the name of the ruler, the use of royal seals and of royal letters written on luxurious paper with elaborate floral designs. Muslim rulers also liked to present themselves as patrons of the arts by sponsoring royal literature. An especially famed genre was the mirrors for princes, books designed to educate young princes on the matters of kingship.[2] Islam was instrumentalised in many other ways to enhance the ruler's standing. The Friday prayer, the most important prayer of the week, is read in the name of the ruler and it was often the occasion of luxurious parades to the mosque. Everything was done to stage the ruler as his kingdom's leading Muslim, sometimes by presenting him as the shadow of God upon Earth, sometimes as the kingdom's leading mystic receiving direct inspiration from God. Some Muslim kings claimed to have a divine right to rule, in the image of the prophets Daud, Sulayman or Yusuf. In Persian literature, the figure of Alexander the Great was turned into a universal ruler appointed by God to spread Islam all over the world with the help of the Muslim prophet Khidr. This story of Alexander the Great became extremely popular and many rulers took inspiration from it, ordering rewritings of this work or even being named after its hero. Rulers were selective in their adoption of Muslim elements, since there are powerful egalitarian discourses in some Muslim traditions, while others clearly deny any legitimacy to anyone but God. They thus only retained the Muslim practices that could be used for legitimacy purposes. One very important aspect is that there is no objection in Islam towards merchant kings. In contrast, trade has generally not been deemed compatible with kingship in South Asia, where kings usually belong to the second caste and traders to the third. Popular among both merchants and kings, Islam was thus most successful among merchant kings, in particular in Southeast Asia.

The importance of Sufism

Among those who were neither traders nor rulers, what usually made Islam popular was Sufism, the mystical path in Islam. Between the eleventh and nineteenth centuries, most Muslims were Sufis in one way or another, sometimes because they were formally affiliated to a brotherhood, more often because they participated in the worship of mystical saints. Sufism is usually spread and practiced in brotherhoods called *tariqas*. Today, it is more common to find people with an exclusive affiliation to only one *tariqa* and each brotherhood claims to have a specific doctrine. However, the evidence suggests that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. Before the nineteenth century, many famous scholars had multiple affiliations and they were proud of it. In fact, the Sufis of that time seem to have collected brotherhood affiliations in the way some people today would boast of their club memberships. This fact explains why, although Sufism was very widespread, it is sometimes hard to point out the role of a particular *tariqa* in the spread of Islam. It was not the proselytism of these organised brotherhoods that made Sufism popular, but rather the colourful celebrations carried out around Sufi shrines, in particular on the tombstones of powerful deceased Sufi saints. These festivals were generally open to the general public and it was

not necessary to abandon entirely one's former religion to participate in the cult of a particular Sufi saint. The reputation of miracle making of these mystical figures gained them many new followers. 'Artistic' factors were important as well. Sufi festivals could include scenic performances of devotees walking on burning coals or piercing their flesh with swords, mystical litanies could be accompanied by music, the mystical experience inspired a particularly prolific poetic production, and the lives of Sufi saints were written down into beautiful stories. One must note that in the three regions under consideration, literatures in vernacular languages started to emerge around the fourteenth century and in each case, Sufi poems and Sufi stories were among the first texts of these new traditions. In Central, South and Southeast Asia, the religious landscape preceding the arrival of Islam was marked by either polytheism or the worship of numerous powerful spirits. Sufi saints easily found a place in this framework as additional religious figures, even among people who did not abandon their former gods and spirits. Sufism also quickly became popular in South and Southeast Asia because of its similarities with the Indian mystical traditions. It was possibly the most familiar aspect of the new religion for those who shared a Hindu or Buddhist background, and local books elaborating on the parallels between Indian mysticism and Muslim mysticism can be found from Bengal to Java.

The three phases of Islamisation

Islam went through three broad successive phases in the process of its adoption by local populations: early contact, localisation and reform. During the first phase of early contact, conversions were limited to small numbers, but there was little to no distortion of Islamic ideas and practices. During the second phase of localisation, more local people converted, but they also slowly transformed the religion to fit local needs and perceptions. For instance, because Mecca was too far away and the trip too expensive for most newly converted Muslims, they created closer and more affordable local pilgrimages, most of the time to the graves of Sufi saints. In the same way, earlier religious concepts or practices remained and some were incorporated into the new local definition of Islam. In Southeast Asia, the most important local rites were prayers on the graves of ancestors performed to obtain blessings and prosperity. Although funerary rites are present in the Islamic tradition, they came to take a much greater importance in Muslim practice in the region. During the third phase of reform, some members of the Islamic community came to perceive the gap between localised Islam and the origins of the Islamic tradition. In Southeast Asia, the reformers started to criticise the very elaborate local funerary rites, pointing that asking blessings from an ancestor amounted to a denial of the absolute power and transcendence of God. In the regions concerned by our study, the early contact phase extended from the seventh century to the sixteenth century. The localisation phase during which massive conversions occurred went from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The phase of reform started in the late nineteenth century and is still in full swing today. That is why it remains outside the scope of this chapter, except for a few early exceptions.

The social and political chronology of Islamisation in Asia

After having examined the common trends of the spread of Islam in Central, South and Southeast Asia, we will now turn to the specific chronology of Islamisation in these regions. In each case, we first give a summary of the political situation: where and when did rulers adopt Islam? Then, we detail the social chronology of Islamisation: why and in which order did given social groups convert to Islam? Our summary is divided into two parts: first, the spread of Islam through the continental Silk Road, from Central Asia to China; second, the spread of Islam through the

maritime Silk Road, from South Asia to Southeast Asia and South China. This division corresponds to two different currents of Sunni Islamic influences in Asia.[3] Along the continental Silk Road, Islam was mostly associated with the Persian language and culture, with dynasties of Turkish origins and with the Hanafi school of law.[4] Along the maritime Silk Road, Islam was mostly associated with the Arabic language and with the Shafi'i school of law.

The spread of Islam through the continental Silk Road, from Central Asia to China (ninth–nineteenth centuries)

The early Muslim dynasties of Central Asia (ninth–thirteenth centuries)

After the end of the early Muslim conquests in Central Asia in the first part of the eighth century, which brought Muslim rulers to parts of present-day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, several Muslim dynasties established their control over the region before the Mongol conquest (Dani and Masson 1992). The Persian Muslim Samanid Empire ruled most of present-day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kirghizstan and Afghanistan in the ninth and tenth centuries. They were later replaced by a series of states led by Turkish military elites, most of which adopted Islam and the Persianate Muslim administrative culture the Samanids had contributed to create. These Turkish dynasties are:

- The Ghaznavids, which conquered Afghanistan and Northern India in the eleventh century, and were replaced by the Ghurids in the twelfth century.
- The Karakhanids, which conquered the other Central Asian possessions of the Samanids in the tenth and eleventh centuries and were replaced by the Khwarizm-shahs in the twelfth century. The Karakhanids had also been the first Muslim rulers of Eastern Turkestan, their homeland, but the non-Muslim dynasty of the Kara-khitans took it over in the twelfth century.

The area corresponding to modern Kazakhstan was ruled by a succession of coalitions of non-Muslim Turkish nomads during this period, most notably the Oghuz Turks, the Cuman and the Kipchak. In the early thirteenth century, the non-Muslim Mongol empire quickly conquered all Central Asia and replaced all the aforementioned Turkish dynasties.

The conversion of the successor states of the Mongol Empire (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries)

Although the first Mongol emperors were not Muslims themselves, they integrated many Muslim Turkish soldiers in their armies and resorted to Central Asian Muslims to administer their domains. This was because the rapid Mongol conquest of all Central Asia soon led to administrative problems. In order to rule the huge territories that had fallen under their domination, especially the settled urban areas along the Silk Road, the Mongol rulers employed Central Asian people of diverse origins for the daily administration of their domains. Most of these Central Asians were Muslim, used Perso-Arabic alphabets and had a Persianate political culture inherited from the Samanid Empire. They were not the conquerors, but they were among the main beneficiaries of the Mongol conquest. When the Mongol Empire split into four different states, the Yuan dynasty ruling China and Mongolia, the Chagatai khanate ruling Central Asia, the Ilkhan state ruling Iran and the Golden Horde ruling the steppes of Southern Russia, all four were staffed by a Central Asian Muslim bureaucracy and the rulers themselves soon converted to Islam in the Ilkhan state, the Chagatai Khanate and the Golden Horde.

The Muslim states of the Timurid period (fifteenth–eighteenth centuries)

The Turkish general Tamerlane took over the Ilkhanid state and conquered Iran, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Kirghizstan in the late fourteenth century. Although his empire was quickly divided into numerous rival khanates, famous rulers of Central Asia after him claimed to be his descendants. This is why the period following his conquests is called the Timurid period. Central Asia became politically divided between the Kazakh Khanates in the north, the Uzbek Khanates in the south, and several independent oases in eastern Turkestan, but all these states had adopted Islam. Eastern Turkestan was even ruled for a time by the Sufi dynasty of the Afaq Khoja in the seventeenth century, before it was replaced by the non-Muslim Zungar Khanate in the late seventeenth century, the last big nomad empire of the region.

The end of Muslim rule in Central Asia (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries)

With the spread of gunpowder and firearms, nomad horsemen slowly lost much of their former military advantages, and the politically divided Muslim states of Central Asia lost their independence one after the other. The Kazakh and later Uzbek Khanates were conquered by the Russian Empire in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while eastern Turkestan was integrated in the Manchu Qing Empire in 1759 under the name Xinjiang. Only the Muslim Barakzai dynasty of Afghanistan remained in power, but with strong interferences from the British and Russian empires.

The social history of Islamisation in Central Asia

After the end of the early Muslim conquests in Central Asia in the first part of the eighth century, Islam started to spread in a more peaceful manner along the major trade routes from the ninth century onwards. One must note that Islam was one of many religions circulating along the Silk Road, next to Buddhism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Islam first spread from the lands of the Samanid Empire, in present-day Uzbekistan, through the major trade oases of eastern Turkestan. The movement probably started among individual traders even before the Karakhanid rulers adopted Islam. The most important factor in the later diffusion of Islam in the region was the diffusion of a Persianate Muslim administrative culture among the traders and urban centers of Central Asia. The Sogdians, the ancient people of present-day Uzbekistan, speaking an Indo-European language related to Persian, were the earliest transmitters of this culture, which was later adopted by the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs of present-day Xinjiang (northwest China). As we have seen, the Mongol empire and its successor states soon resorted to Muslim Central Asian administrators to rule their newly conquered domains. These Muslim administrators were for instance responsible for the adoption of alphabets derived from Arabic and Persian, first the Uyghur Arabic alphabet that appeared in the tenth century, and then the Mongol alphabet that developed from the Uyghur alphabet in the thirteenth century. Although its rulers did not convert to Islam, the Yuan dynasty ruling Mongolia and China decided to create military colonies on its newly conquered western marshes, in particular in the present-day Chinese provinces of Yunnan, Gansu and Ningxia. These colonies were staffed by Central Asian Muslims who are the ancestors of the Hui, the Muslim communities of China today. It was in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest that Central Asia became overwhelmingly Turkic speaking and Muslim. The earlier inhabitants of Central Asia, who used to speak Indo-European languages related for instance to Sogdian and Persian, assimilated to the wave of Turkic speaking people that definitely swept the region after the Mongol conquest. Many

Turkic nomadic tribes became Muslim after the fourteenth century through processes of mass tribal conversion. From this moment on, Muslims were not only found in the settled oases of the Silk Road but also among the nomads. Both urban dwellers and nomads came to share the same Muslim Persianate political culture and the same Turkic languages. As Sufism gained in popularity, the region became dotted with Sufi shrines, and Muslim mystics even temporarily gained political power in eastern Turkestan in the seventeenth century. By the time the Russian Empire and the Manchu Qing Empire took control of Central Asia, its population had become overwhelmingly Turkic and Muslim, as it still is today.

The spread of Islam through the maritime Silk Road

The rise and fall of Muslim dynasties in South Asia (eighth–nineteenth centuries)

Sindh, the southwestern coastal province of Pakistan, was conquered by Muslim armies in the beginning of the eighth century (Kulke and Rothermund 2004). From the ninth century onwards, it was ruled independently by the Arabian dynasty of the Habbarids. It was the only South Asian region ruled by Muslims until the eleventh century.

The Muslim Turkish dynasty of the Ghaznavids, originally ruling present-day Afghanistan, successfully invaded northern South Asia in the early eleventh century. They were overthrown in the middle of the twelfth century by the Ghurid dynasty, which took control of most of their former territory and furthered their South Asian conquests in the Indo-Gangetic plain. After the death of Muhammad Ghuri in 1206, the Turkish governor Qutbuddin Aibak started to rule the former Ghurid South Asian domains from the new capital of Delhi. This was the beginning of the sultanate of Delhi, which ruled north India for more than three centuries. In the middle of the fourteenth century, two independent states were formed by Muslim adventurers coming from the lands of the Delhi sultanate: the Kashmir sultanate and the Bengal sultanate. Both were conquered by the Mughals in the end of the sixteenth century. The Delhi sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq (1325–1351) launched a series of successful military campaigns towards the south central Indian region of the Deccan, bringing Muslim rule to whole new areas. However, most of his southern conquests were soon taken over by the Bahmani sultanate, founded in 1347, which ruled over present-day Maharashtra and its immediate south. At the turn of the sixteenth century, the Bahmani state progressively broke into five separate Islamic states collectively known as the Deccan sultanates.

The sultanate of Delhi was conquered in 1526 by a Muslim Turkish dynasty of Central Asian origins, the Mughal dynasty. After the conquest of the Indo-Gangetic plain in the sixteenth century, in the seventeenth century, the Mughals conquered the Deccan sultanates and extended Muslim rule to most of south India, except Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Their power started to collapse in the eighteenth century under the attacks of the Hindu Maratha Empire, later followed by the extension of the British Empire.

The Afghan Durrani Empire ruled over most of present-day Pakistan in the second half of the eighteenth century, but was deprived of Punjab and Kashmir by the Sikh Empire in the early nineteenth century. In the east, the Nawabs of Bengal and the Nawabs of Awadh (present-day Uttar Pradesh) declared independence from the Mughals in the early eighteenth century and ruled parts of these regions until they were integrated in the British Empire in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Nizams of Hyderabad ruled over what is now the province of Andhra Pradesh and parts of its neighbours until they became a princely state of the British Empire in the early nineteenth century. Two other states were ruled by Muslims in the far south

at the end of the eighteenth century before their integration in the British Empire, the Carnatic state and the Kingdom of Mysore. Thus, at the eve of the British conquest, only a handful of regions of South Asia remained ruled by Muslims, most of the rest was part of the Hindu Maratha Empire.

The social history of Islam in South Asia

The trade between Arabia and the coastal regions of India predates Islam by several centuries. Therefore, individual Muslim traders were already present in these areas in the seventh century. By marrying local women, often by using temporary marriage, the Arab and Persian sailors gave rise to mestizo Muslim communities all along the west coast (Wink 1990). With the growth of trade with Arabia, contacts between Arab traders and local groups became more frequent. At that time, Hinduism set barriers to commensality and marriage with foreigners, since they did not belong to the caste system. Hinduism also frowned upon professions requiring either maritime travel either the killing of wildlife (including fish), because these activities were supposed to carry religious impurity. Some of their business partners, the local traders, also converted to Islam because this religion valued their profession more than Hinduism. For maritime traders, sailors and fishermen, conversion to Islam could be used as a strategy to ease contacts with foreigners and remove the blame associated with their professions. However, this did not mean that these groups could escape the caste system. As a general rule, former Hindu groups retained the same ascribed social status after their conversion. As we have seen earlier, all these early coastal communities adhere to the Shafi'i school of law, while most of the Muslims of inland South Asia adhere to the Hanafi school of law, which was spread by the Turkish dynasties of north India from the eleventh century onwards. The communities established in Sindh, Gujarat and the Konkan later merged with the northern Muslims who conquered these regions, while the communities of the far south of India have retained their identity to this day. They are the Nawayath of Karnataka, the Mappilas of Kerala and the Maraikayyar of Tamil Nadu.

After the formation of Muslim states in the Indo-Gangetic plain, a number of administrators, state servants or generals converted to Islam in order to keep or improve their position in the state apparatus. The early Muslim dynasties of South Asia did not at first employ Hindus in their administration. After the fourteenth century, they started to employ Hindus on a large scale. Nevertheless, even after that date, some administrators felt that following the religion of the sultan might bring them closer to the centre of power and help their career. This movement, which started in the eleventh century in the Indo-Gangetic plain, was still under way in the far south in the eighteenth century. In spite of this movement, Hindu administrators who had no intention to convert remained very numerous all over the subcontinent.

Among the rural population of South Asia, conversions started at a much later date. Eventually, they led to overwhelming Muslim majorities in the regions of Baluchistan, Sindh, Punjab and Kashmir, which today form the state of Pakistan, as well as in Bengal, where present-day Bangladesh is found. Some peasants were initially attracted to Islam by the spread of Sufi shrines (*dargahs*) in the countryside. As we have seen, the festivals organised in honour of powerful Sufi saints were colourful and open to the general public. In the beginning, peasants could participate in the festival of a Sufi saint without renouncing Hinduism. A syncretic culture mixing Hindu gods and Muslim saints slowly gained ground. What tipped the balance in favour of Islam in the aforementioned regions was the fact that the opening of their agricultural frontiers was associated with the expansion of Sufi shrines (Ansari 1992; Eaton 1993). Nomadic tribes living on these fringes of the Indo-Gangetic plain settled and became peasants in large numbers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while the demographic expansion of formerly settled

areas led to the cultivation of new land near Sufi *dargahs*. Everywhere else in South Asia, partial peasant conversions and the growth of the groups of Muslim traders and administrators led to a Muslim population averaging 20 per cent in the nineteenth century.

The rise of Muslim dynasties in Southeast Asia (thirteenth–nineteenth centuries)

Although small permanent communities of Arab or Persian traders were already established in Southeast Asia since at least the ninth century (Tibbetts 1957), there is no trace of local conversions before the thirteenth century.[5] The beginning of the Islamisation of Southeast Asia thus rather corresponded to the localisation of foreign Muslims, as it did on most of the western coast of India. Since the pattern of the monsoon winds made very difficult the direct crossing of the Malacca Strait, Muslims coming from the Arab and Persian lands had to wait at least three months in the Malay ports to wait for the winds to change and resume their travels to China or take the road back to India. They often established unions with local women during their stay, and their mestizo children thus became the first local Southeast Asian Muslims. The earliest datable conversions to Islam started in court and merchant circles, among the social elite of Malay ports. The earliest evidence of a Muslim ruler is the tombstone of Malik al-Salih, a ruler of the sultanate of Pasai, in the northwest of Sumatra. It states that the king died in 1297, but we do not know when this king started to rule or when he converted to his new religion.

How can we explain the timing of this conversion, around five centuries after the establishment of the first Muslim communities? It is important to consider the broader Indian Ocean context to understand what it meant for a ruler to convert to Islam in the late thirteenth century.

Islam around the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea until the late thirteenth century

Although the heartlands of Islam were then being occupied by the Mongol Empire, the coastal regions of the Indian Ocean had then never counted more Muslim rulers or Muslim traders. Starting from the tenth century, Muslim traders and rulers established themselves all along the East African coastline (Pouwels 2000). This development led to the emergence of a new language, Swahili, with a Bantu grammar and an important proportion of Arabic vocabulary. In the same way, as stated earlier, increasing numbers of South Asian coastal communities were converting to Islam since the ninth century, even though the first Muslim rulers only appeared there in the fourteenth century. This Islamisation movement was not restricted to East Africa and South Asia, it extended as far as southeast China. An important number of sea traders from South China started to convert to Islam after the Mongol conquest, which was achieved in 1279. Conversion to Islam was a means for these merchants to rise higher in the racial hierarchy of the newly established Yuan dynasty (So 2000). This hierarchy had four categories: the first was the Mongols, the second was composed of Central Asian Muslims, found in great numbers in the administration of the empire. They were called in Chinese, *Semuren* 色目人, that is people with coloured eyes. The third category was the inhabitants of north China, who were already subjects of the Mongol empire in its very early years. The fourth and lowest category was the people of South China, which were suspected of having sympathies for the former Song dynasty (Tanner 2009). By converting to Islam, the South China merchants were thus able to join the prestigious Semuren category and some were even allowed to manage part of the important fortune of the Mongolian ruling family. It must be added that in China, the Confucian ideology considered trade as a parasitic activity, while real wealth was thought to originate from agriculture (Li 2010). These ideological factors also explain the attraction of Islam for some of the South China Sea

traders. In the late thirteenth century, the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were thus in the process of becoming a Muslim lake, with Muslim traders, Muslim rulers or both everywhere from Southeast Africa to Southeast China. The first Malay ruler who converted to Islam thus followed a contemporary trend that promised to bring him many potential allies as well as the sympathies of the majority of the traders of the South Seas. The names of the first rulers of Pasai (Malik al-Salih and Malik al-Zahir) correspond to the names of famous sultans of Mamluk Egypt, suggesting that it was important for Malay rulers to emulate their distant commercial partners of the heartlands of Islam.

After the conversion of the North Sumatran sultanate of Samudra-Pasai in the late thirteenth century, the spread of Islam generally followed the main trade routes west to east. Most of the ports of the Malacca Strait before the fourteenth century had merchant kings using a mix of Hinduism and Buddhism as a legitimizing discourse and had at some time been under the rule of the Malay Srivijaya empire (seventh–fourteenth centuries). When the Javanese kingdom of Mojopahit (thirteenth–sixteenth centuries) invaded Srivijaya's capital, Palembang, and all its former tributary ports in the second half of the fourteenth century, it insisted on the necessary separation between kings and merchants, as they did not belong to the same caste. When the mix of Hinduism and Buddhism they had used for centuries was monopolised and aggressively used against them by the Mojopahit empire, the rulers of the Malay ports turned to Islam as another legitimising tool allowing kings to be merchants. Islam provided not only a new legitimacy discourse but also the promise of powerful allies among the rulers and traders of the Indian Ocean.

The sultanate of Malacca was founded around 1400 by the royal family of the ancient Srivijaya Empire (Wolters 1970), and became the new major crossroads of the maritime Silk Road until it was conquered by the Portuguese in 1511. During the fifteenth century, many port-cities of north Java became Muslim sultanates and asserted their independence from the Mojopahit empire, which ruled from the demographic and agricultural heartland of Java (De Graaf and Pigeaud 1976). At that time, Islam also spread to the twin sultanates of Ternate and Tidore and to the Banda Archipelago in the Moluccas (De Graaf 1970), from which cloves and nutmeg originated. The only major port of the Spice route that had not yet converted to the new religion was Makasar, in south Sulawesi, whose rulers only converted in 1605. Islam also spread at a very early stage to Brunei and the coastal Philippines, during the fourteenth century. In Brunei, the earliest tombstones suggest that the first Muslim converts came from South China (Wade 2012). By the time the Spaniards reached the Philippines, there were Muslim sultanates in Manila, the Sulu archipelago and on the west coast of Mindanao. This Islamisation movement had not yet reached the interior Visayas islands, but it is quite probable that the Philippines would have become a Muslim country like Indonesia and Malaysia if the Spaniards had not set foot on these remote islands.

The heyday of Muslim sultanates and the colonial period

After Malacca fell to the Portuguese in 1511, it was soon replaced by the sultanates of Aceh (northwest Sumatra), Banten (northwest Java) and Makasar (southwest Sulawesi) as the main emporia of the spice trade. Meanwhile, the area that had harboured the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Mojopahit, the agricultural and demographic heartland of Java, turned into the powerful Muslim sultanate of Mataram and took its revenge on the Muslim coastal sultanates by conquering and razing most in the first half of the seventeenth century (Tarling 1999). The Dutch started to challenge the Muslim sultanates in the seventeenth century by founding Batavia in 1619, taking Makasar in 1667 and Banten in 1684. During the eighteenth century, the Dutch gained control of the whole north coast of Java and several trade ports all over the region, but many Muslim sultanates retained their independence, such as the sultanate of Aceh or the sultanate of

Johor, in the archipelago near Singapore. In the areas controlled by the Dutch, there was little to no Christian proselytism, and the population remained Muslim everywhere except in Manado and Ambon. In the Philippines, the Spaniards had successfully taken control over Luzon and the Visayas islands in the end of the sixteenth century and converted the local population to Catholicism. Nevertheless, Muslim sultanates remained independent in the South, in the Sulu Archipelago and on the west coast of Mindanao. After having established beachheads in Penang (1786), Malacca (1795) and Singapore (1819), the British established protectorates over all the Muslim sultanates of the Malay Peninsula in the end of the nineteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the Dutch achieved the military conquest of the interior of most Indonesian islands, putting an end to the existence of erstwhile powerful sultanates such as Aceh. In the Philippines, the Spaniards conquered the Muslim sultanates of Sulu and Mindanao between 1851 and 1878, but they had to cede their colony to the US soon thereafter in 1898.

The social history of Islamisation in Southeast Asia

In merchant circles, Islam represented the religion of cosmopolitanism. It was adopted even before the conversion of rulers by many traders of Makasar and of the north Javanese coast. Islam was very successful among rulers from the thirteenth century onwards because it carried with it new legitimacy tools. In Southeast Asia, the new trend of striking coinage in the name of the ruler began in Pasai and was followed by all the later Muslim sultanates. In Malay, royal seals are called '*cap*', a word of Persian origin showing from where this practice was adopted. Royal letters written on luxurious paper with elaborate floral designs were also integrated in the legitimizing apparatus of Malay courts from Muslim lands further west, especially from the later Ottoman and Mughal dynasties. For the rulers of Southeast Asian sultanates, being Muslim meant belonging to the club of these powerful states. Islam was instrumentalised in many other ways to enhance the ruler's standing. For instance, the ruler of the sultanate of Aceh in the seventeenth century led a sumptuous parade of horses and elephants every Friday to the mosque for the Friday prayer, and he himself, rather than the imam, gave the signal for the beginning of the ceremony. He, instead of the imam, also sacrificed the first animal on the Aid al-Kabir, where Muslims reenact Ibrahim's sacrifice of his son Ismail (Takeshi 1984). Everything was done to stage the ruler as the leading Muslim of his kingdom. The routine attacks the coastal polities periodically launched against the mountainous interior regions were rebranded as a *jihad*, a holy war for the propagation of the faith, after their conversion to Islam. With the possible exception of the Gayo Highlands of northern Sumatra, none of these holy wars brought about the conversion of the people of the interior. The fact that these raids were already very common before for economic reasons casts doubt on the sincerity of their religious motives. The word *jihad* added an Islamic legitimacy to raids that had always been practiced for other reasons.

We must note that, since Islam is a very diverse tradition, the adoption of Islamic elements by Southeast Asian rulers was quite selective. The strong preventions against interest loans and usury were usually overlooked, because debt slavery was an important means of consolidating a king's manpower. One must also note that debt slavery contradicted the prohibition of enslaving fellow Muslims. Early Malay law codes show that although the recommendations of Muslim jurisprudence were known, they were not usually followed in practice and what often prevailed was *adat*, that is the local customary law (Milner 1985). Many sultans are known to have kept a leading *ulama* or religious scholar at court and we may ask ourselves why this did not change the dominance of customary law. A look at the situation in the earlier Indianised period provides some clues. A leading Brahmin was kept at court to perform major legitimizing rituals, although the percentage of the local population converted to Hinduism is unknown and may have been

quite low. We can thus see the presence of a leading Muslim religious scholar at court not as a proof of deep Islamisation but as a sign of structural continuity with the Indianised period. Both the Brahmins and the *ulamas* were kept at court for ceremonial and legitimacy purposes, but often they were nothing more than employees who had to submit to the king's goodwill for fear of losing their position (Wormser 2012).

The formation of a localised Muslim tradition and the conversion of the countryside (seventeenth–nineteenth centuries)

In Java, a highly localised form of Islam appeared in court circles in the seventeenth century (Ricklefs 2006). Sultan Agung of Mataram (1613–1645) decided to combine Islam with earlier sources of royal legitimacy and is largely responsible for the flourishing of this enduring syncretic Indo-Javanese Muslim tradition. He was not the first Southeast Asian ruler to bear the title of sultan, but he was the first to ask in Mecca for the permission to bear this title. All the while, he claimed to be the spiritual consort of the Ratu Kidul, the Goddess of the South Seas, and maintained a lively cult for the kingdom's regalia, royal objects believed to possess spiritual powers. The royal graveyard complex he built for himself and his lineage was called Imogiri, a term derived from Sanskrit meaning mountain of snow. Despite its name pointing to Indian religious traditions and its function calling to mind the Austronesian tradition of ancestor worship, the place became for many Javanese a Muslim pilgrimage site that could replace the pilgrimage to Mecca. At court, Javanese elites started to elaborate a syncretic Muslim tradition, in which Sufi equivalents were found for the concepts of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. It is only in the seventeenth century that Islam really started to be practiced by the majority of the population. One important step was the adoption of Islam in the interior of Java, which is to this day the most densely settled area of Southeast Asia. One of the most important factors in the conversion of the general population was the transformation of former Hindu and Buddhist hermitages and places of learning into Sufi shrines and boarding schools. Many hermits saw striking continuities between Hindu-Buddhist mysticism and Islamic mysticism and came to see Sufism as a kind of update of the mystical tradition. The name the Javanese Muslim boarding schools have kept to this day is a testimony of this continuity: they are called *pesantren*, a word of Sanskrit origin meaning religious school.

One element that helped the spread of Sufism in Southeast Asia was the cults associated with the saints' graves. The indigenous religious traditions of Southeast Asia have very elaborate ancestors' cults that usually take place in front of big ancestors' stones. The most venerated ancestors are those who founded a settlement, because they are thought to have originated his descendants' way of life. One can easily understand how the tombstones of famous Sufi saints came to be viewed in the region as equivalent to powerful ancestors' stones. The tombstones of the Sufis thought to have brought Islam to a particular place are to this day popular pilgrimage destinations for the Muslims of Indonesia and the southern Philippines, the most famous being the Nine Saints of Java, the *Wali Songo* (Chambert-Loir and Guillot 1995). As the Javanese countryside became dotted with Sufi shrines, each village came to have its local Sufi master, the *kyai*, the central figure of religious authority. As in South and Central Asia, the colourful rituals and the reputation of miracle-making of the Sufis earned them the trust of the peasants.

Early reformers

From the seventeenth century onwards, some Muslim urban merchants started to criticise the localised tradition that was gaining ground in the countryside. One of the main drives of early

reform movements was the need for social distinction. In the regions examined here, Islam first spread in cosmopolitan urban centres along the main trade routes among merchants and rulers, which were part of the elite of local societies. In the early contact phase when conversions were very restricted, being Muslim was enough to set oneself apart from local society. In the localisation phase, however, as more and more people of all social classes started to convert, something more was needed for early Muslim converts who wanted to stress their own social standing. The fact of criticising localised Islam and calling for a purification of the faith thus first became popular in courts and urban and merchant circles. The critics of these early reformers concentrated on the excesses of popular exteriorised Sufism, as they advocated more sober forms of mysticism. Some stated that the exclusive popular reliance on miracle making saints amounted to idolatry, and that mystical devotion could be no excuse to neglect the basic precepts of the Muslim faith. Wealthy urban merchant circles connected with the heartlands of Islam were the most receptive to these discourses, as it gave them new means of social distinction in an increasingly Muslim environment. One must also note that contrary to post nineteenth-century reform movements, early reformers only criticised some aspects of Sufism, and while early reformers criticised certain aspects of Sufism, they still claimed to be true Sufis themselves.

Conclusion

The study of the spread of Islam in Central, South and Southeast Asia before the nineteenth century shows that there is no correlation between the establishment of Muslim rulers and the conversion of the local population. Conversions by the sword were always an exception, and we have to look elsewhere to explain the appeal of Islam in these regions. As we have seen, there is no single explanatory factor valid for all times, places and social groups, but some trends are noticeable. Islam spread early through trade routes among merchant circles because of its movability and positive attitude towards commerce. The earliest Muslims of the three regions considered here were always foreign traders and their mestizo children. In court circles, what made Islam most popular was its legitimacy tools, as well as the cultural and administrative models of Persian culture. For the majority of the population, the decisive factor was the appeal of Sufi festivals and associated art forms. In each of the three regions under study, Islam had become a highly localised mystical tradition. As more and more people converted, the urban merchant groups where the earliest Muslims had been found started to criticise popular Sufism in order to stress their distinct social standing. In the end of the nineteenth century, the critics of Sufism became much harsher and started to denounce the whole mystical tradition itself.

Notes

1 On the early history of Muslim conquests, see Hodgson (1974).
2 For South Asian examples of these practices, see Schimmel (2004).
3 Sunnism remains dominant to this day in Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. Minority Shia communities can be found in central Afghanistan, Tadjikistan and in some South Asian regions such as Gujarat and Kashmir.
4 There are four major schools of law in Sunni Islam: the Hanafi school, dominant in Turkey, Central Asia and South Asia; the Shafi'i school, dominant around the Indian Ocean, in East Africa and Southeast Asia; the Maliki school, dominant in North and West Africa; and the Hanbali school, dominant in the Arabian Peninsula.
5 Contemporary scholars have recently discovered that the eleventh-century Muslim tombstones discovered in Java and Champa, what is now central Vietnam, have no relation with the region and have been brought as ballast (Guillot and Kalus 2003, 2004).

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