

SHEIKH ABDULLAH AL-QUMAIRI AL-YAMANI'S ROLE IN THE ISLAMIZATION OF KEDAH AND HIS CONNECTION TO THE TRANS-INDIANICA MARITIME NETWORK TRADITION

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Abstract

The advent of Islam to Southeast Asia led to the emergence of Malaysia as a Muslim nation, as we know it today. In the Malaysian context, while Kelantan is considered as the most Islamic state having an Islamic party (PAS) as the ruling government for a relatively long time and strong attachment to Islam among its population, Kedah, a northern state in the Malay Peninsula was the first to receive Islam, in the 10th century CE. The actual process of Islamization of Kedah however, occurred only two centuries later following the conversion of the Kedah ruler, Maharaja Derbar Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa to Islam in the hands of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi Al-Yamani. Previously a Hindu kingdom, Kedah consequently became an Islamic Kingdom under the rule of the Sultan, with Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi as the Advisor. Applying content analysis and library research methods, this study seeks to highlight the role of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi in the Islamization of Kedah and his connection with the trans-Indianica maritime networks tradition i.e., trade and the role of Kedah as the stopping point for traders coming from the Middle East. Additionally, there will be a discussion on the socio-cultural, political and economic changes in Kedah as a result of the Islamization process. While the whole Islamization process of Kedah may be less impactful than the effects of the Islamization of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th century, the former can arguably be said to have provided the foundation for the later susceptibility to Islam among the people of the Malay Peninsula.

Keywords: *Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi, Kedah, Malay Peninsula, Islamization of Malaya, Trans-Indianica Maritime Networks*

Introduction

While much has been written on the Islamization of the Malay Peninsula, it was only recently that an archeologist found the tomb of Syeikh Abdul Kadir Ibnu Hussein SyahAlirah who died in the year 904 CE in Kampung TanjungInggeris, Langgar, Kedah, hence attesting to Islam

reaching the shores of the Malay Peninsula in the 10th century. This is a remarkable discovery since the existing theories on the arrival of Islam to the Peninsula before the 10th century have been so far without concrete physical evidence.

Situated in the northern part of the Malay Peninsula, the Kingdom of Kedah, according to *HikayatMerongMahawangsa* (also known as *Kedah Annals*) is said to have been established by MerongMahawangsa around 7th century BC.^[1] Nevertheless, *At-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* maintains that Raja Derbar I who originated from the Middle East (Persia) and a descendant of Alexander the Great was the one who founded the kingdom by first establishing Kota Langkasuka in Mukim Sok, located in Sik district of Kedah where he instituted a ministerial post around 7th century BC.^[2] Regardless of these different views, the rise of Kedah was undoubtedly due to a great extent the trading activity which connected Kedah with the Middle East, South Asia and the rest of Asia via the trans-Indianica maritime networks. Strategically located at the northern entrance of the Strait of Malacca, Kedah naturally served as a transit port for trading vessels sailing back and forth from the East (Far East and Southeast Asia) and the West (South Asia, Middle East and Africa).

According to Abdul Rahman (1990), Islam arrived in the state of Kedah in the 10th century based on the discovery of a tombstone dated 903 CE in Langgar, and soon after came Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi Al-Yamani in 1136 CE who converted Maharaja DerbarPhra Ong Mahawangsa to Islam. With the conversion, Kedah which was originally a Hindu kingdom became a Muslim Sultanate under the Maharaja DerbarPhra Ong Mahawangsa who now known as Sultan MuazaffarSyah.^[3] That said, there is a view that Islam spread to the Malay Peninsula in the 9th century CE either through Sumatra or directly from Arabia long before the emergence of the Malacca Kingdom.^[4] In the meantime, many historians such as Hamka(1997) in *Sejarah Umat Islam*^[5] opined that the Islamization mainly began with the rise of Malacca. This is due to the lack of evidence pointing to the development of Islam in Kedah in the centuries before 16th century Malacca era. Despite the divergent views, majority of scholars are of the same view that trade was the main means through which Islam reached the Malay Peninsula as Muslim da'i or preachers who accompanied Muslim traders in their trading missions to the East were largely responsible in disseminating da'wah activities among local Malay population.

This study analyzes Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi's role in the Islamization of the Kingdom of Kedah and the socio-cultural and political changes that entailed. Unlike other preachers who came before him, his success in converting the ruler of Kedah was of paramount importance as this led to a mass conversion of the people, hence, making Islamization a smooth process across the kingdom. Equally interesting, is the connection between the trans-Indianica maritime trade with the da'wah endeavor of Sheikh Abdullah, which further attest to the significant role of trade in the Islamization of the Malay Peninsula.

Methodology of Study

The content-analysis or qualitative approach adopted in this study involves the scrutiny of classical sources of local history, namely *Kedah Annals*, also known as *HikayatMerongMahawangsa* and *At-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah*, as well as secondary sources, printed and online. Also useful are translation works of Arab and Persian travelers, which contain their first-hand experience handling the people of Kedah during their journey to the Malay Archipelago or further East.

Literature Review

The extensive available primary and secondary sources indicates that the study of the Trans-Indianica maritime networks tradition has been well researched. However, information on Syeikh Abdullah Qumairi was found to very scarce, with only the information on his migration to Kedah depicted in several existing sources.

Amelia Hashim's book, *KalbuQalha*, which depicted on the culture of Kedah in ancient times, mentioned about Tunku Anum bin Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was the grandson of Tunku Muhammad Jiwa, the 19th Sultan of Qalha (the ancient name of Kedah). A timeline depicts Qalha as wealthy in gold, iron, and spice plants. In the 19th century, the Siamese collaborated with the British to colonize Qalha, which was earlier invaded by the Chola dynasty of India. The tale also depicts the Malays' resistance to the Siamese conquest of the state of Qalha, describing the supremacy of the Malays through the character of Tunku Anum. Thus, this book helps examine the condition of Kedah society before its Islamization.

MaziarMozaffariFalarti's book, *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society* (2013) discussed the politics of Kedah during the reign of Maharaja Derbar I right until the colonization in Siamese on Kedah.^[6] Falarti's account on the many conversions which took place with the advent of Islam to Kedah is enthralling. The first account was on the Emperor MerongMahawangsa. MerongMahawangsa was known as a degenerate, alcoholic, and descendant of kings who engaged in a variety of abnormal behaviors, including cannibalism. In fact, it was said that he was transported around the world with Satan. Remarkably, through the supernatural intervention of Sheikh Abdullah of Baghdad, he became a totally transformed emperor and man, who subsequently converted his whole kingdom to Islam. Falarti's account of such occurrence casts new light on our understanding of the *HikayatMerongMahawangsa*. The tale is also likely a reference to the old Tantric practices of the Kedah's Hindu-Buddhist rulers, aside from the Hindu-Buddhist monarchs. Hence, the arrival of Sheikh Abdullah to Kedah was anomalous to Western scholars, notwithstanding the process of the assimilation of Islam in Kedah.

In addition, Hamka's *Sejarah Umat Islam* (1997) recounts on the coming of Islam in the Southeast Asia region.^[7] The book reveals the onset of the Arab teachers and traders arriving at the Malay Peninsula through the Indian sea. It highlighted on the history and development

of numerous Islamic kingdoms after the death of the Prophet, ranging from Arabia to the East including Persia, India, Afghanistan, as well as the archipelago in Southeast Asia. The book not only shed light on the existence and origins of each of these kingdoms, but also the assimilation of the Islamic culture in the Southeast Asia region through the maritime trade between the Arab and the other region along the Indian routes. The active commercial activities led the Arabs to migrate to the Malay region, ultimately increasing their influence, i.e., in the social milieu through marriage with the locals, i.e., the Malays. Nevertheless, this book is a useful preliminary reference on the Islamic establishments and the history of Muslims in the Malay Archipelago.

On the other hand, *Al-Idrisica 1100-1166: India and the Neighboring Territories* edited by Magbul Ahmad (1960) relays the commentary on passages from the renowned Idrisi's twelfth-century geographical book about India, Pakistan, Ceylon, parts of Afghanistan, and the Andaman, Nicobar, and Maldives Islands.^[8] The report from al-Idrisi is an invaluable resource and corpus of knowledge on the Indian subcontinent in the Middle Ages. Magbul Ahmad's translation of Al-Idrisi is thorough and is enriched by illustrations from Oriental and European literature. It contains a well-produced recollection of the 7th, 8th, and 9th sections of the second edition of Al-Idrisi's *Chronicles* which includes maps of Ceylon, Sind and the whole subcontinent including names which Idrisi gave to places he visited. Idrisi's chronicle also shed light on the Indian routes frequent by traders in Southeast Asia before Islam. Although this chronicle did not explicitly provide information on Syekh Abdullah Al-Qumairi's arrival in the Malay Archipelago, nevertheless, it provides evidence on the trade and maritime activities which transpired between the Arab and the Malay World.

M. Reda Bhacker's book, *The cultural unity of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean: A Longue Duree historical perspective* depicts on the diversity of people in the Gulf and Indian Oceans. It reflects on how the millennia of migrations between maritime cultures spread out over the region's borders as far as Africa and the South China Sea. The more recent migration of expatriates, particularly from the Asian subcontinent, during the oil boom serves merely to highlight the historical continuity of relationships between Gulf and Indian Ocean rim nations. Overland trade routes flowed into Indian Ocean trading ports, while maritime trade routes stretched from China down through the Malacca Strait to Ceylon, India, Arabia, and as far east as the east coast of Africa, south of Zanzibar, to the gold mines inland of Sofala in present-day Mozambique. As a valuable commodity for trade, gold, enticed traders to make an attempt for the region and enthused the relationship between the Middle East and the Malay region, paving the way for the preachers to expand their Islamic expedition in the region. Syekh Abdullah was a member of such expedition to Kedah during the era of Abbasid Caliphate.

As indicated previously, the development of trade and maritime activities encouraged preachers from the Middle East to embark on journeys to the Malay Archipelago. The close connection between trade and the spread of Islam is explained in *Trade and Civilization in The*

Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750 by K. N. Chaudhuri(1983)attesting the widely accepted view of how maritime activities engaged by Muslims increased greatly after the rise of Islam. The lengthy network of oceanic trade that spanned from the South China Sea to the eastern Mediterranean, passing through a series of affluent urban emporia, is examined in this book as one of the driving factors of that historical time. The strength of the trade in the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf stretched out in the east to the Malabar Coast in India, to Ceylon, to the Malayan archipelago and to China. It invigorated with the arrival of Arabs from the Persian Gulf to the Malay Peninsula. Accordingly, the masses of maritime activities within the Indian Ocean witness an influx of voyagers and seafarers from the Middle Eastern countries.

Who is Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi?

Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi or his real name Sheikh Abdullah bin Sheikh Ahmad bin Sheikh Jaafar al-Qumairi originated from the city of Syahir, Yemen. His teacher, Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077-1166), who was born in Gilani, Iran, was a famous Sufi scholar during the caliphate of the Abbasids under the reign of four caliphs, namely Caliph Al Mustarshid (1118 -1135), Caliph Ar Rashid (1135 -1136), Caliph Al Muqtafi (1136 -1160) and Al Mustanjid (1160 -1170). During the reign Al Muqtafi, Sufism grew rapidly. It instilled the spirit of jihad in the Muslim soldiers in combating the enemies and perversions of the creed that took place inside and outside the empire. His teachings were embraced by many and began to flourish within establishments, institutions, and scholars in the archipelago. Consequently, 12 ardent scholars from Yemen led by Sheikh Abdullah Yemeni, sailed across the Indian Ocean from Yemen to Kedah. Arab sailors were skilled in the sciences of navigation in the Indian Ocean even before Christ. Their impeccable navigation skills prepared them to sail during the monsoon season and allowed them to swiftly arrive in the archipelago.¹ Upon landing at the foot of Serai Island (Pulau Serai at Dungun, Terengganu in the modern time), they ascended to the top of the mountain facing the sea. It was then and there when the call to prayer was first chanted at noon on a plain. Successively, they cunningly strategized their approach to King Phra Ong Mahawangsa at the palace.

Apparently, there was a confusion with regards to the presence of Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi in Kedah. A few scholars had initially confused Sheikh Abdullah Arif, the compiler of *Kitab Bahr Al-Lahut* who spent some time in Aceh, to be Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi of Kedah. They were assumed to be the same scholar. This claim, however, has since been refuted and proven otherwise by Wan MohdSaghir Abdullah (2007). Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi reached Kedah in 1136/1137 CE, while Sheikh Abdullah Arif^[9] arrived in Aceh in 1165 CE.^[10] Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi is known to have sailed to Southeast Asia with eleven friends in the early 12th century with a mission to spread Islam to the world.^[11] Unfortunately, details of his personal life and achievements are yet to be established due to the lack of

¹Bhacker, M. R, *The cultural unity of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean: A Longue Duree historical perspective*. In *The Persian Gulf in History*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York,2009), p. 163-164

resources which provide narrative or comprehensive information about him. A few significant classical sources, which have recorded his name, such as the *At-Tarikh Salasilah Negeri Kedah* by Wan Yahya (1991), *HikayatMerongMahawangsa* and *Sejarah Umat Islam* by Hamka (1997) substantiates his existence. This is further supported, albeit minimally, by an archeological discovery in the form of a tomb of his student, known as Ibnu Sirdan.^[12]

The ancient Kedah which was historically known as *Qalha*, *Kalah* or *Kalah Bar*, and *Qaqullah* was a destination frequent by Arab-Persian or Middle Eastern traders since the 2nd century CE due its strategic location between the Indian Ocean and China Sea.^[13] Kedah was referred to as *Kalagam*, *Kataha*, *Kadaram* and *Khedda* in the Indian Sanskrit and *Chiehcha* by Chinese traders.^[14] Observing the active participation of Arab-Persian traders in maritime trade in the trans-Indianica networks, it is highly plausible that many other Muslim preachers have arrived in Kedah before Syeikh Abdullah Qumairi. Driven by a desire to spread Islam, the preachers accompanied the traders on their journey to the East, casually disseminating the religion as they made contacts with the local people of various places that they visited. Notwithstanding, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi and his entourage.

Regarding his contact with the local authority of Kedah, it is noteworthy that Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairimaintained a close relationship with Maharaja DerbarPhra Ong Mahawangsa.^[15] It is no wonderthat he had such an impactful role in the Islamization of Kedah. His rapport with the king assisted in attracting more local people to convert to Islam. In 1136, he successfully Islamized Kedah following the conversion of the emperor. Maharaja DerbarPhra Ong Mahawangsachanged his title and name to Sultan Muzaffar Shahand replaced the name *Qalha* to Kedah. Subsequently, he taught the Qur'an to the locals with the assistance of his students with whom he traveled together to Kedah. Sheikh Abdullah Qumairiwas not blessed with a long life and was buried at the foot of GunungJerai at Padang Tok Sheikh, Kedah. Perhaps this death occurred about six or seven years after his arrival in Kedah (around 1142 M).^[16]

The trans-Indianica routes that linked the Middle East to the Far East, enabled the Malay Peninsula to become a part of an important trading network with Kedah and Malacca respectively serving as strategic transit ports from 788 BCE-1136 CE and 1400-1511 CE. Notwithstanding, the advent of Islam yielded the Malay Peninsula as a major stopping trade port, which is referred to *Kalah Bar* in the Arab-Persian sources^[17] The Arab-Persian people have retained an active role in trade and maritime activities since the ancient time, and were responsible during the Golden Age of Islam, in connecting the Arab world to Malay world.^[18] The Silk Road is evident to the commercial activities which flourished during the Golden Age of Islam in the period of the UthmaniyahKhilafah.^[19] Trade has always been a crucial activityeven during the ancient civilization of Mesopotamian and Egyptian. The spread of Islam encouraged trade around the world. This is evident in the chronicles of both Western and Muslim scholars. Ibnu Batutta, who was the greatest traveler in history, had already passed by

the Silk Road, which connected the Middle East to the European countries. Muslim traders were known for their engagement in commercial activities. Subsequently, connections and linkages across the Arab countries, Europe and the East were established even before the western colonialization. The Malay Peninsula's geographical location, which was in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea was strategic for trade and linkages. The Arab traders had to pass through the Malay Peninsula to reach Europe and the East. Contributing to the widespread and acceptance of Islam among the Malay community in the Malay Peninsula, in contrast to the other religions, such as Hinduism.

We learned through the history of Kedah, that Islam set foot in the Malay peninsula since 7th century during which the Malay kingship was still under the influence of Hinduism. The conversion of the Maharaja Derbar Phra Ong Mahawangsa by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi in the 12th century transformed Kedah.^[20] Nevertheless, the arrival of Islam in the Malay peninsula encouraged the massive migration of preachers and traders to Kedah which consequently led to mixed marriages to locals. Chronologically, the connection between the Arab and the Malay grew closer and stronger.

Kedah Before and After the Coming of Islam

Upon converting to Islam, Maharaja Derbar Phra Ong Mahawangsa assumed the title Sultan and accordingly became the supreme political leader. Incumbent to Islamic rulership, the Sultan was expected to maintain a close consort with religious scholars who, specifically in the Malay culture, are called 'the teacher of the Sultan' (*Guru Sultan*). Accordingly, Sheikh Abdullah assumed the position of Advisor to Sultan Muzaffar and was responsible of various ceremonial matters such as coronation, marriage, death of the sultan, as well as matters related to Islamic affairs. The political situation in Kedah after its Islamization did not change much. Sultan still reigned the country and the other political members such as Bendahara continued to carry out their respective roles and positions in the society. The "Sistem Beraja" which abides to the Dewi Maharaja system was not replaced during the Malay Islamic Sultanate. After Sheikh Abdullah Qumairi's demise, his students and disciples continued to spread the Islamic culture and teachings to the community across Kedah. In addition, the word 'kota' was observed to be frequently used to designate places or complexes such as palaces, huge halls or front halls (*balairong-seri*), mosques, walls or cities that operated as defensive fortifications. Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Abidin Muadzam Shah II (1710-1778) enlarged the Kedah province and took possession of Terang, Tongkah (Salang or Phuket), Takuapa, Ranong (Rundang), and Mergui on the Myanmar-Burma border. In 1735, he also founded Bandar Kota Setar (later known as Alor Setar).

From the cultural perspective, before the coming of Islam, Kedah had already enjoyed an affluent culture. Sailing and elephant hunting were among the notable activities in the Malay Kedah culture. As described by Amelia Hashim in her book:

“My grandmother said, there are locals who follow these traders to sail to the eastern and western states. Their journey lasted seasons. In addition, there are officers who are trained in handling elephants. Wild elephants were caught in the forest and brought back to the village to be tamed. These elephants were either thenceforth sold or used as transportation for war. Ivory was a choice of the traders.”^[22]

From the quotation above, elephants were considered by Kedahans as great animals to hunt during the Hindu rule. They entered the forests and hunted wild elephants to tame them. Domesticated elephants were sold at high price due to high demand, including from foreign traders. They were used as the royal vehicles and used in warfare, while elephants’ ivory was made into various goods such as hair combs, shirt buttons and head daggers. Dagger was very popular in Malay culture where it has been recorded in many Malay hikayats such as the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* where it was used to protect one’s self, and in war.^[23] Apart from elephant hunting, the local community is also involved in farming, producing spices for cooking, and making perfumes.^[24]

Under the religious perspective, before the islamization of Kedah, the Malay peninsula was once under the influence of Hinduism. Kedah before the coming of Islam was practicing the teachings of paganism - animism which is also influenced by Hindu-Buddhist teachings. The Malays believed in the existence of subtle beings such as ghosts in addition to humans in the world even after the arrival of Islam. They also think that if humans make mistakes or act arbitrarily without following certain norms, their actions would enrage the subtle beings, causing them to act threateningly toward humans, causing them to get ill. A taboo exists to establish a decent relationship between humans and subtle beings. The taboo was imposed to keep people from becoming ill or injuring themselves. This is one of the aspects of animism that the Malay society still practiced till today. After its islamization, Sultan Mudzaffar Shah ordered that all idols, including those on Mount Jerai destroyed and replaced with the construction of a tower for the call to prayer at PuncakJerai.

Following the Islamisation of Kedah, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi introduced Islamic jurisprudence to supplement or complement customary laws. Quranic verses were taught to the locals with the help of his students as well as Muslim traders. Islamic rules were incorporated into the local laws, hence drawing more Muslim traders from the Middle East to come to Kedah, having been attracted by a better treatment and fairer legal system. As examples, the obligatory to perform prayer five times a day and the pay of tax (Zakat). Sheikh Abdullah’s students had been inculcated with the teaching of Fiqh and Sufism and after his death, continued their master’s work in disseminating Islam to the Kedah population.^[25] As requested by Sheikh Abdullah, Sultan Muzaffar Shah wanted to build the mosque at the peak of GunungJerai as the landmark that Qalha as an Islamic country. However, it did not materialize

because of some circumstances including the untimely death of Sheikh Abdullah Al- Qumairi due to sickness.^[26]

Conclusion

Based on the findings above, there is no doubt that Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi Al-Yamani was one prominent figure in the spreading of Islam in the Malay Peninsula. His efforts to disseminate Islam indicates strong resolution best exemplified in his success in converting the ruler of Kedah, and his continuous role as advisor of the Sultan, making sure that transformation along Islamic line took place either in the government or society. Given such attitude, coupled with all the changes initiated by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Qumairi, this naturally can be argued to have made the people become more inclined towards Islam hence, making Islamisation process possible. Furthermore, the findings further enhance the viewpoint of the paramount importance of trade and the trans-Indian maritime networks in the Islamisation of The Kingdom of Kedah since Sheikh Abdullah's coming to the kingdom was related to the very economic activity and trading networks. Without trade and the networks, Islam may not have come sooner to Kedah as it did in the 10th century CE.

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