

A PROFILE :

Relations between Arabs & People of South-East Asia

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The subject of the relations between the Arabs and the peoples of South-East Asia is both exciting and so vast that it cannot be tackled in a haste. However, this paper intends to throw some light on the historical relations that began with the commercial trips between the two peoples before the birth of Christ, especially the marine movement in Yemen during the Sheba mon-

archy in the first millennium before Christ.

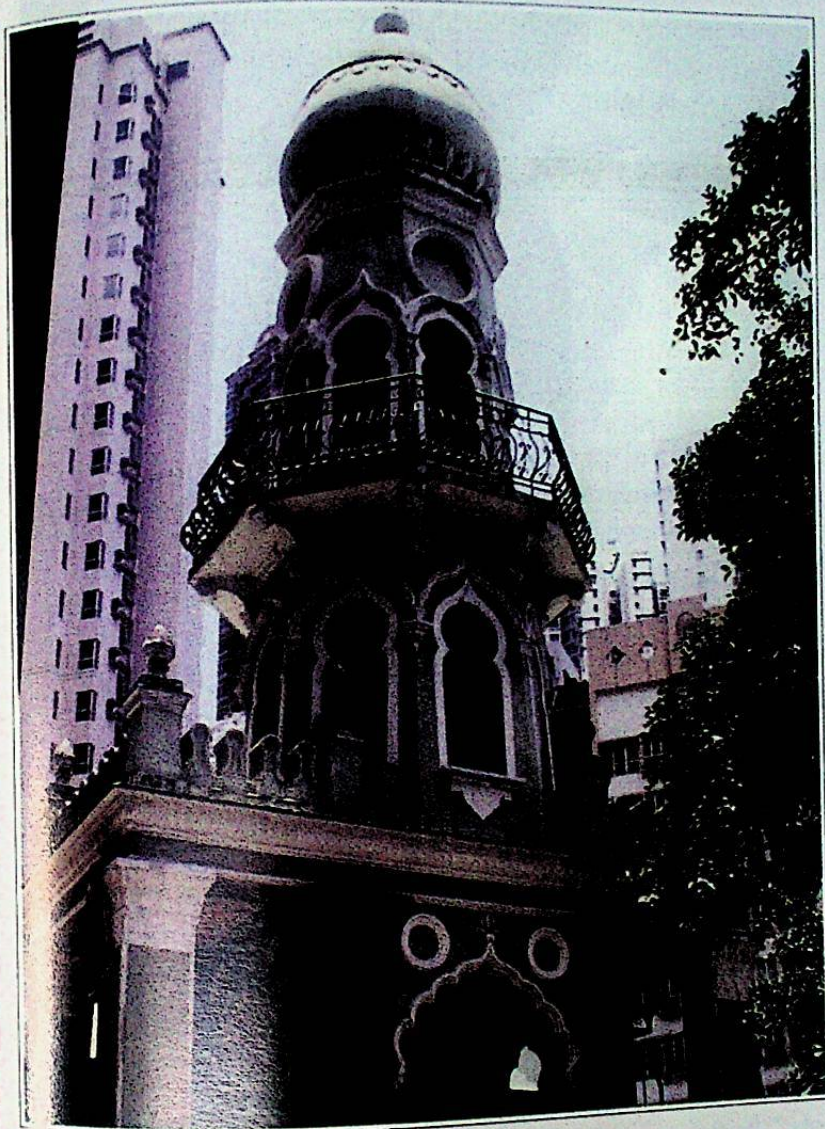
These early Arab voyages brought Arab presence upto the shores of India, Sinf Malacca and China. According to historical studies and archaeological discoveries, the Arabs were in the ports of India, China and Sumatra even before the advent of Islam. According to Dr. Van Leur, the Arabs were in Canton during the

fourth century A.D. The Nesturians from Syria arrived in the ancient Chinese capital Chamgan through the "silk route" and it was from them that the Uighurs learned the Aramite alphabet which was adopted by the Manchurians and is still being used by the Moghuls.

The Chinese commander Pan Chao reached the northern parts of the Arabian peninsula during



Muslim leaders at a community gathering in Kerala, South India. The Malabar Coast was the first to come in contact with Islam and Arab traders.



Jama Mosque in Hong Kong, which happens to be the oldest on the island.

the 1st century A.D., and these voyages resulted in the development of close relations between the Arabs and the peoples of south east Asia.

Beginnings of Islam in South-East Asia

With the advent of Islam in the Arabian peninsula, the message of Islam was diffused by the

Arab Muslims in various parts of the world, and during the era Caliph Othman bin Affan, may Allah be pleased with him, the first Arab Islamic delegation arrived in China in the year 32 A.H./ 651 A.D.

Moreover, within the span of 147 years 39 Islamic delegations visited China according to Prof. Zhang Who, i.e., between 651

798 A.D, not only by sea but also by land, although most of the commercial caravans went to China by sea especially to the port of Hanfu where the estimated two hundred thousand Muslim residents were exposed to a massacre during the era of the Chinese emperor Hi Tsung in the year 264 A.H. (878-889 A.D.) as a result of a peasant revolt.

In India, however, the Arbas first came to the south west coast which they named Malabar long before Muhammad al-Qasim, and a Muslim tomb dating back to the year 50 A.D. (670 A.H. was found there.

Muslim Communities & Their Growth

The early trips and contacts of Muslims with the Arab communities living in the coastal areas of South-East Asia have resulted in the growth of the Islamic presence in those far-flung areas, as the Islamic manners demonstrated by the newcomers encouraged the local inhabitants to embrace Islam.

In China. The Chinese came into contact with the Muslims on two different fronts. On the commercial and economic front the contacts developed at the Chinese ports, and in central Asia where the contract ranged from war to politics and commerce. Consequently, a Muslim community of Chinese extraction mixed with Arab, Persian and Turkish origins and known as Huizu, emerged constituting a distinct nationality



An Islamic conference held under the auspices of the Muslim World League, in Beijing, People's Republic of China: An effort to revive Islam's historical links with China.

ethnically and religiously.

This new nationality, which is officially estimated at eight million and universally believed to number about one hundred million, has played a distinct role in the history of China. In his book, Mr. Yusuf Lee Huain spoke about 48 prominent Islamic personalities in China, although the number of prominent Muslims, who held high ranking posts during the Mongolian empire, was estimated to be 30 personalities. Moreover, in a more recent history and precisely during the Japanese occupation in 1942, the name of Ma bin Chai, a commander of a Muslim brigade fea-

tures prominently.

In the field of Chinese civilization, the Muslims have made remarkable contributions. In his book "*The Relations between Arabs and China*" published in Cairo in 1370 (1950), Mr. Badruddeen He told about the political, commercial and religious contacts between the Arabs and China emphasizing the influence of the Chinese culture on the Islamic civilization, while in his paper on the "*Sino-Arab Relations in the Medieval Era*" which was submitted to a seminar on Omani studies in Muscat in the month of Dhul-hijjah 1400/ November 1980, he elaborated on

the contribution made by the Islamic civilization to China.

In India. The history of Islam in the Indian sub-continent is a long one and cannot be covered in this brief presentation. However, what concerns us here is the Mappilla community which is made up of a group of Arab people who have emerged as a result of inter-marriage between Arabs and Indians in Malabar southwest India. They are estimated at about seven million people mostly found in the state of Kerala and south Karnataka and west Tamil Nadu. The culture of the Mappillas is considered as part of the Malayalam civilization which has

Arab characteristics.

According to Islam Hussain Quraishi, Islam came to Kerala shortly after the emergence of the Noble Apostle of Islam Muhammad, peace be on him, hence the Mappil Muslims are regarded to be the first Muslim community in south east Asia. Of course the impact of the Arab-Islamic culture on the Indian civilization is not confined to the Mappillas alone, since it dates back to the Arab, Persian and Turkish immigrations, and the period of the Islamic rule in India.

In the Philippines. Arab travellers began to arrive in the Philippines in the ninth century A.D. It was known to them by the name of Selly Islands. They however settled there at a later period as a Muslim tomb in Jolo, dating back to the year 710 A.D. (1310 A.D.) confirms.

Although the majority of the Muslims in the Philippines belong to the Malay race, the Spaniards named them as Moro, after their Arab religious leaders, and their region was called Moro land.

The relations between the Arabs and the Moro Muslims continued, and with the passage of time many of them came to the Holland, including Shaikh Saleh Muhammad Badruddeen, the founder of the *Al-Nahdha* society in Maguindanao, and Mr. Abdur Rahman Abdul Rahim, who established the *Ar-Rasheediyah* school in Cotabato and many others.

In the Land of Sinf. It has been established that, in the sixteenth century A.D. there was an Islamic sultanate in Indo-Chinese peninsula, which was known to the Arabs as *Sinf* (an distortion of Champa). Although the number of the Champan Muslims has declined as a result of the massacres perpetrated by the Communists, and migration to neighbouring countries and the United States of America, the remaining Muslims are working hard to maintain their Islamic identity.

The Malay Archipelago. This comprises all the countries in south east Asia. The Arabs, however, named the islands that form this archipelago as the *Rang* or *Zang* islands. In fact, as was mentioned earlier, these areas were known to the Arabs before the advent of Islam.

As the spread of Islam led to the formation of distinct nationalities in India, China, the Philippines and Burma, it also made the people of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei into a nation, that has preserved its national identity through the religion of Islam. According to the summary of the seminar which was held in Medan, Indonesia, in March 1963, Islam gave Indonesia a sophisticated culture and civilization that contributed to the shaping of the Indonesian personality.

General Observations

Although the studies and books published about the Islamic

civilization in south-east Asia are scattered here and there, there are many other aspects that require to be studied, verified and determined. For example, Arab contacts with the countries of Indo-China and the history of Islam and Muslims. Besides multifaceted academic studies on the cultural as well as intellectual and scientific planes are still lacking, despite their importance in shaping the national personality and its international as well as regional relations.

Alas, this Islamic seminar may help lay down future plans in the field of Islamic studies for south-east Asia, and prepare an academic programme in co-ordination with universities, with the aim of researching and publishing scientific studies in various spheres. This may be in the shape of an encyclopedia that could help researchers, and encourage publication and writing in the Arab language, which, in turn, would help consolidate relations with the Arab-Islamic worlds.

Moreover, I would like to suggest the publication of a specialized periodical to promote the exchange of ideas and studies between scholars and intellectuals concerned with the questions of Islamic civilization in South-East Asia.

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